EMBODIED SOCIAL JUSTICE COUNSELING FOR INDIAN COMMUNITIES

Integrating Theory and Practice

AARATHI SELVAN AND SHOBA NAYAR

ROUTLEDGE

"Radical and holistic. Aarathi Selvan and Shoba Nayar reveal the body as a pathway to agency, healing, liberation, and resistance. Mending the harms caused by violence and 'power-over' social and economic systems, they show us how to rediscover interdependence and work for change that embodies freedom."

Staci Haines, *author of "The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing and Social Justice" and the co-founder of Generative Somatics*

"*Embodied Social Justice Counseling for Indian Communities* is an innovative contribution to counseling practice that redefines healing, power, and presence within and beyond the Indian diaspora. Rooted in contemplative and social justice traditions, Aarathi Selvan and Shoba Nayar skillfully weave together theory, ethics, and embodied practice to illuminate how liberation—both personal and collective—can be cultivated through the body. This text offers both depth and practicality by bridging academic insight with powerful tools for counselors, educators, and community practitioners."

Rae Johnson, *PhD, RSW, RSMT, BCC is a social worker, somatic movement therapist, and scholar/activist working at the intersections of embodiment and social justice*

Embodied Social Justice Counseling for Indian Communities

Embodied Social Justice Counseling for Indian Communities: Integrating Theory and Practice offers a comprehensive exploration of counseling microskills within a framework of social justice.

Addressing pressing needs in the global Indian community, this book bridges the gap between traditional counseling practices and the urgent demands of working with diverse communities. This book emphasizes Anti-Caste perspectives, Disability Justice, neurodiversity, and queer-affirmative approaches, reflecting a deep commitment to dismantling systemic oppression and promoting inclusivity. Chapters explore the role of mindfulness and somatic practice in social justice work through discussions of ethics; embodied awareness and experience; power dynamics; collective healing and resilience; and counseling for individuals, couples, and groups. This practical guide meets both the existing needs of counselors and therapists working with and within Indian communities as well as the evolving challenges of working in culturally and socially diverse environments. Filled with illustrative case studies and transcripts, reflection questions, and mindful exercises, this book empowers practitioners with the skills and knowledge to navigate the complexities of identity, power, and privilege with their clients.

This book is an essential guide for mental health professionals who work with clients in the Indian diaspora including counselors, psychologists, therapists, social workers, and psychiatrists, as well as practitioners working across ethnic and cultural communities.

Aarathi Selvan, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, founder of Pause for Perspective, and educator integrating mindfulness and social justice into counseling psychology through community practice, teaching, and research in India.

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Embodied Social Justice Counseling for Indian Communities

Integrating Theory and Practice

Aarathi Selvan and Shoba Nayar

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Foreword

As Aarathi Selvan and Shoba Nayar beautifully lay out in Chapter 2, India was the birthplace of mindfulness over 2,500 years ago, and from there it spread across Asia, taking on different cultural flavors and practices as it traveled. As teachers traveled west, and students traveled east, these practices became accessible to westerners. The modern evolution of mindfulness as an approach to help people who are suffering from physical or mental pain was strongly catalyzed by the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn who, as a young man, had exposure to the Buddhist teachings and practices. He became inspired to make these accessible to everyday people as a "universal dharma understanding" that addresses existential forms of suffering rooted in emotional clinging and unhelpful views on reality. Jon Kabat-Zinn thus set up the Centre for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, and from 1979 onwards developed an approach called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). MBSR and its many offshoots became a vehicle for "mainstreaming" mindfulness; for doing the delicate work of making the ancient practice and teachings of mindfulness available in a common sensical and accessible way to everyday people. Participants who find their way into an MBSR course are often not particularly interested in learning to meditate but are deeply motivated to discover how to suffer less from often intractable pain and other health conditions. From the beginning, Kabat-Zinn examined the program outcomes using Western empirical methods and the results of these early trials (published in 1982 and 1985) showed significant promise for this pioneering integration of Western and Eastern epistemologies. This early work seeded a global field of research and practice. Tailored and adapted Mindfulness-Based Programs (MBPs) are now taught and integrated into clinical practice for a wide range of physical and mental health conditions, and have become a routine part of workplace well-being, and educational, criminal justice, and community settings across the globe.

The mindfulness field has had tremendous impact and brought strong benefit to communities globally. It is, however, a young field and there are some inevitable imbalances, unhelpful trends, and blind spots. First, although

MBSR was a vehicle for teaching practices and principles that are not generally part of American mainstream culture, the program itself was, of course, deliberately contextualized in a Western mainstream setting, so sensitivity and adaptation is needed when bringing it to other contexts and cultures. Second, although Kabat-Zinn's vision was that MBSR could be a vehicle to enable engagement with both the individual and the collective drivers of distress and flourishing, the reality is that the predominant practice and research trends in the MBP field have prioritized individual well-being and have not been available to the full societal demographic. The MBP field has thus emerged with a leaning towards being a strongly white-centric, privileged space. There is widespread recognition of these imbalances and much good work is underway to bring equity and inclusion into MBP practice.

This seminal book offers important teaching and perspectives on these issues and is a powerful contributor to the mindfulness and counseling field. There is much wisdom here that is both embedded in the Indian context and is highly relevant to our work in other contexts globally. Aarathi and Shoba guide us into this wisdom through sharing their practice journey of over a decade of teaching, research, and community-based practice at the mental health organization founded by Aarathi: 'Pause for Perspective'. We learn through case vignettes, narratives, and dialogues that bring the therapeutic encounters to life; through practice and inquiry suggestions; and through being taken on a theoretical and practical journey of the pathways to healing through a body based social justice-oriented perspective.

From the outset, Aarathi and Shoba reframe mindfulness and counseling as socially responsive practices rooted in justice and ethics. They reclaim and underline the natural continuity and deep interconnection between the individual relevance of mindfulness and its collective and relational roots and impacts. This embeddedness of social justice into mindfulness teaching and counseling practice is not an add on or a theoretical idea—it is deeply embodied as a felt experience.

Aarathi and Shoba are transparent about their own positionality and come over as both humble (they are clear that no single narrative or framework can encompass the fullness of what is at stake in struggles for mental health and justice), and simultaneously they are appropriately bold. They have a voice and perspective that is highly relevant to colleagues in India and internationally who recognize the need to widen the scope of their work beyond an individual wellness lens but who struggle to do so. The wisdom in this book clearly conveys that holding the wider social justice lens while engaging in the close work of meeting individual suffering needs to come from a lived experience of sensing the intertwined nature of the personal and the social and discovering how to embody this in practice through lived engagement. If you are looking for support, methods, and guidance on how to engage in this journey, read this book, and follow the reflective inquiries, journal prompts, and practices that are laid out within. You will not regret it.

I found myself reading this book and drafting this foreword during a trip to India, my first trip since a highly formative series of trips over 40 years ago in my late teens and early twenties. The combination of reading these words and being once again in that rich, diverse, and complex context was a potent stimulus to continued reflections on the themes of equity, justice, the fragility of our planetary ecosystems, and my own inevitable blind spots and biases. It was a reminder that my own pull into the work of practicing and teaching mindfulness came from recognizing our shared humanity and a wish to contribute to collective wellness (which of course goes well beyond the human and recognizes our embeddedness within the web of all living beings). It was also a reminder that inevitably my context and conditioning as a white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, middle-class, Western educated, privileged woman shapes how I engage. The trip and reading this powerful book renewed my energy to engage in mindfulness practice as a way of shaking up my complacency; as a way of awakening from conditioned tendencies towards individualistic views of who I am in relation to the world and other people; as an act of generosity to the world; and as part of an ongoing practice of taking a stand for social justice. When we take our seat and connect with the feel of this moment in our hearts and minds, we can recognize that the flavor of this moment is always being shaped by our personal and collective histories and conditioned tendencies.

This book will act as a trusted companion on this journey of awakening. If you come from a place of privilege, there is guidance here on how to engage with the journey towards allyship with fellow humans, and reminders that this engagement needs to be active rather than passive. If you come from a place of marginalization, there is guidance here on how to support kindly embodied recognition of the patterning that this will have imprinted within your system, and ways of journeying towards the freedom that is everyone's birthright.

I highly commend this book. It is a treasure. You will be drawing from its wisdom for years to come.

Professor Rebecca Crane, PhD
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Preface

Situated at the intersection of multiple lineages—clinical and counseling psychology; anti-oppressive mindfulness practices; community mental health; and social justice stories across caste, gender, sexuality, and disability—this book has been shaped by years of practice, research, and reflection. More importantly, it is shaped by the relationships and conversations that have formed us: with clients, colleagues, communities, and research participants whose stories and bodies have illuminated what it means to live and respond under systemic oppression and privilege. Drawing on our field experience and shared passion for social justice, we have crafted this book to empower mental health practitioners with the skills and insights needed to navigate the layered complexities of identity, power, and privilege in counseling in the Indian context. Too often, counseling texts offer cultural-competency frameworks without attending to the body as a site of knowing or to India's unique socio-political dynamics—where caste, class, gender, sexuality, and disability intersect in endlessly varied ways. Western-imported cognitive and psychoanalytic models, while valuable, can inadvertently stereotype or obscure these embodied realities. Our hope is to bridge this gap by weaving in knowledge and practices that honor Indian contexts and histories, while remaining accessible to practitioners serving Indian communities globally.

Aarathi: I am a non-binary, queer clinician and researcher (they/them). I have been immersed in the field of psychology since 2000, and, as a counselor beginning in 2008 and later as a clinical psychologist, have navigated a landscape shaped by Western influence, Brahminical patriarchy, cis-heteronormativity and ongoing uncertainty about what mental health practice should look like in the Indian context. I have had the material and social privilege to complete a Master's in Psychological Counseling from Columbia University, a Master's in Philosophy in Clinical Psychology from Osmania University, and, more recently, a PhD from University of Madras.

I write from the location of growing up in a middle-class, urban, upper-caste household marked by cis-heteronormative expectations. Our family carries a history of mental illnesses and neurodivergence. Depression and domestic violence were central features of growing up. A gendered woman within Brahminical patriarchy, I learned early to move quietly, keep opinions to myself, and perform emotional labor for those around me. Despite that, or perhaps because of that, being subject to assault in public spaces was a common experience that I know many women in India, including myself, to have. The privilege of education, especially in psychology, owed entirely to the resources and support of my upbringing. An early inter-caste marriage and the joys and challenges of raising two children over the past 15 years have continually pressed me to confront my own caste and gender privileges. Concurrently, I have navigated postpartum depression; a late autism diagnosis; coming out in terms of gender and sexuality; and the unraveling of my marriage, homophobia, and a certain level of daily hypervigilance specifically meted out to queer trans individuals in my country—all of which have deepened my understanding of embodiment, resilience, and systemic barriers to care.

The work of social justice and mental health came together for me within the urban landscape of Hyderabad where I grew up. My interest in the field of psychology began when I was a 15-year-old, and a good part of the attribution came from feeling like I lived in a world where I did not belong. A common autistic experience, I realize. Learning about integrating multicultural and social justice-based practice in mental health was a training that began in my postgraduate studies and has only furthered since. While working through the experiences of assault, neglect, and domestic violence takes time, it makes it harder to notice relative privilege and learn to recognize its impact on oneself and the world. That process has been both a necessary ethical guide to unravel the crevices and cracks within which Brahminical supremacy and dominance sits, and an indispensable journey that I continue on.

The container of this journey is Pause for Perspective, the mental health organization I founded in 2013. Over more than a decade of grassroots work—with clients, colleagues, supervisees, students, and MBSM (Mindfulness Based Symptom Management) research participants from a wide array of caste, class, gender, sexuality, neurodivergent, and disability locations—this organization has been co-created through collective learning, mutual witnessing of struggles and growth, and shared commitment to Anti-Caste, queer-affirmative, and decolonial practices. I have been held in conversations and engagements while being both a student and a supervisor with utter grace and kindness by other women and disabled, trans, non-binary, queer mental health practitioners from caste margins and from caste privilege. I continue to be called on my privilege many times, supporting the shaping of who I am today—and by no means is this journey of collective

unlearning and learning about liberation complete. The team, our communities, and the bodies that have entrusted me with their stories continue to shape what I call "Embodied Social Justice".

Shoba: I am a cis-het clinician and researcher (she/her). My clinical work as a mental health occupational therapist and my academic training occurred in Aoteaora New Zealand. These were formative years in developing my knowledge and awareness of what it meant to be an Indian immigrant and a minority living in a Western country. My work with immigrant and refugee communities, and interactions with Māori colleagues and friends in Aotearoa New Zealand—which, like India, lives with the legacy of colonization—brought to my awareness how issues of social injustice, oppression, and privilege get enacted in everyday interactions and situations, and the profound implications for people's health and well-being.

I come to this book from a place of embodied uncertainty. My mother is Anglo-Indian and through my maternal lineage I carry the ancestry and DNA of a Scottish great-grandfather who came to India and married a Brahmin woman. Most probably a colonizer, the knowledge of the Scottish lineage has been lost to the family. My father comes from a middle-class, upper-caste Hindu family. He converted faith when he married my mother. From my father's side my ancestry is that born and bred of Indian soil. I have only ever known that I was Anglo-Indian, raised a Christian. Caste was never spoken about. Colonization was never spoken about. My parents immigrated to England in the mid-1970s, where my sister and I were born, and in the early-1980s we immigrated to Aotearoa New Zealand. I was fortunate to be able to visit India on a regular basis, but I was still too young to understand the complexities of my heritage. In 2014, I relocated to India. It was a decision based on a deeper calling—one I now realize is teaching me about why I have lived so long with a sense of not knowing where to ground myself. Each day, through conversations with Aarathi, interactions with Indian researchers and clinicians who are exploring issues faced by marginalized communities, and my own interactions with friends and strangers on the street, I am unraveling what it means for me to live as a descendant of both a colonizer and a colonized people, and how intersectionalities of caste and class are embedded in my being. This is an ongoing journey. I acknowledge the privilege I have as a global citizen and the responsibility that comes with that positionality in speaking up and working towards a more socially just society for all.

While we write from a specific positionality—as mental health practitioners trained in both Indian and Western frameworks, who are committed to Anti-Caste, queer-affirmative, and decolonial approaches—we do not assume that this work speaks for all. It cannot. No singular narrative, framework, or identity can encompass the fullness of what is at stake in struggles for mental health and justice. Thus, rather than an attempt at a comprehensive or

universal account, this book is a situated offering—one that emerges from years of working alongside individuals and communities in India who navigate the embodied impacts of caste, gender, queerness, migration, and other interlocking systems of violence. It is informed by the voices of MBSM participants who shared with great courage and clarity their experiences of their bodies as sites of both vulnerability and resistance. Their insights are central to this work.

We recognize that there will be omissions, blind spots, and limits. There will be moments where readers, particularly those whose lives are shaped by marginalizations we do not share, may feel unseen, misrepresented, or insufficiently held. We acknowledge this possibility and offer this book with humility and a deep openness to critique, discomfort, and a beginning dialogue. It is our hope that the content will continue to evolve alongside the well-being of Indian peoples both within India and globally, making a meaningful contribution to an ongoing and collective exploration of what embodied social justice in counseling can look like rooted in specificity, relationality, and accountability.

Chapter 1

Overview of Embodied Social Justice

The intersection of social justice and mental health is increasingly significant for clinical and counseling psychology, both as a subject of academic courses and a focus for research and professional practice. While social justice centers on the principles of fairness, equity, and the protection of human rights, counseling, as a profession, is grounded in the principles of empathy, compassion, and the quest for mental well-being. The intersection of social justice and counseling recognizes that psychological well-being cannot be fully achieved without addressing the social, political, and economic contexts in which individuals live both within and outside of the counseling room. In locating the contents of this book, we have chosen Lee and Hipolito-Delgado's[1] [p.xiv] definition of social justice. They assert that social justice counseling upholds access and equity

> to ensure full participation of all people in the life of a society, particularly for those who have been systematically excluded on the basis of race or ethnicity, gender, age, physical or mental disability, education, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics of background or group membership.

Recognizing embodiment in a social justice context allows for a deeper, more nuanced engagement with the complexities of oppression and privilege, enabling individuals to express and process social injustices through physical and emotional channels. Through a social justice lens every person must have access to privileges; yet historical and continual marginalization and oppression of some social groups over others ensures access remains the privilege of a select few. Social justice is further compounded by the complexity of intersecting identities that shape one another and lead to occurrences concerning who experiences systemic privilege and power, and who is oppressed in a context.

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Defined as power and benefits that are not earned and based on "identities, status, or background variables",[2 p.37] systemic privilege is offered to the social groups who take the position of the social core.[3] For instance, in India, a cis-gender, heteronormative, upper-class, upper-caste neurotypical, non-disabled young man has access to the resources needed (i.e., education, network) to further wealth and secure livelihood largely because of the background variables into which he was born. He forms the social core which has systemic power—"the ability to influence an outcome in a desired direction, including outcomes that relate to another person's actions, feelings, or thoughts".[2 p.37] Using the same example, this person wields the power to influence access to work, marriage, relationships, and wealth, often to his own benefit and, at times, at the expense of others without such access.

Social groups that do not have this systemic power experience systemic oppression—"the harmful experiences related to having identities, status, or backgrounds that have been constructed (currently or historically with current legacies) as less deserving, less worth, or less human".[2 p.37] The systems of oppression are racism, ethnic oppression, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, religious and spiritual oppression, parentism, geographic oppression, educationism, relationship oppression, employment oppression, casteism, and classism. For instance, a trans non-binary, queer, and disabled, Dalit Muslim, person living in poverty, in India, does not have access to the same things as the cis-gender, heterosexual, upper-caste, upper-class man from the previous example. The word Dalit is used here to highlight the self-identification of the various sections of people from the Schedule Caste communities to center the marginalization they continue to face in society.[4] Their identity locations provide them with little to no access to resources to live a life of dignity and financial and emotional security akin to those in the social core who access resources merely by being born into and identifying within those locations, an unearned systemic privilege.

We believe that counseling informed by social justice values encourages empowerment and resilience, holding the narrative of both being subject to and responding to injustice, helping clients recognize their strengths and capacities in resisting oppressive conditions. However, incorporating a social justice framework into counseling requires both critical self-awareness and structural competence. Counselors must examine their own social positions and biases, understanding how privilege and power dynamics influence the therapeutic relationship. This self-reflection involves ongoing education—political, cultural, social—and a willingness to engage with uncomfortable truths about inequality and injustice. Doing so allows for authentic and equitable connections with clients from diverse backgrounds, and deeper understandings of the social systems that affect their clients' lives in order to contextualize presenting issues and offer more relevant support.

Mindfulness Based Symptom Management (MBSM)

Mindfulness may be described as an intentional and ethically grounded awareness that integrates memory (including personal and collective history), discernment, and compassion. It is relational, rather than individualistic, oriented toward reducing harm and fostering connection. Thus, mindfulness is not merely present-moment awareness but a dynamic process—powered by intention and memory/history—that inclines toward compassion and guides skillful action in the world. MBSM is a mindfulness-based intervention (MBI) rooted in Buddhist ethics of exploring values for well-being via cultivation of wisdom and compassion. The nature of experience is accessed through structured classes based on the Buddhist concept of Four Foundations of Mindfulness; namely, attending to the body, feelings, mind, and context of the mind. Adaptations have been made to the MBSM program offered in India to integrate interventions that represent the fifth force of counseling psychology—social justice—and key ideas of Narrative Practices. The adaptations are premised on the understanding "the person is not the problem but the problem is the problem" and that "people are always responding to the problem".[5 p.1072] Details of the program are shared in Chapter 2.

Embodied Social Justice—Sites of Liberation, Protest, and Resistance

Figure 1.1, drawn by Aarathi, offers a visual representation of the elements involved in embodied social justice —identity locations, sites of oppression and privilege, mindfulness practices, and bodily responses.

At the base of the tree, the roots symbolize social identity locations—caste, gender, religion, class, and disability, race, etc.—that ground each person's embodied experience. To the left, lies the space where systemic privilege and oppression manifest in behaviors and interactions; while on the right, the question "What do I/we really want?" highlights the values and desires guiding embodied social justice practitioners' choices. From the roots rises the trunk of mindfulness, anchoring present-moment awareness, encircled by the helixes of Notice (Meeting Self), Sit with (Deepening), and Respond (Expanding) to map the iterative process of attending to body, emotions, sensations, and thoughts. The side labels on the trunk of the tree—liberation, protest, and resistance—name the overarching themes of embodied social justice action. Above, the lush foliage represents the myriad insights and experiences that emerge through this practice. This forest represents a collective landscape where each individual's process weaves into a larger tapestry of solidarity, resistance, and possibility.

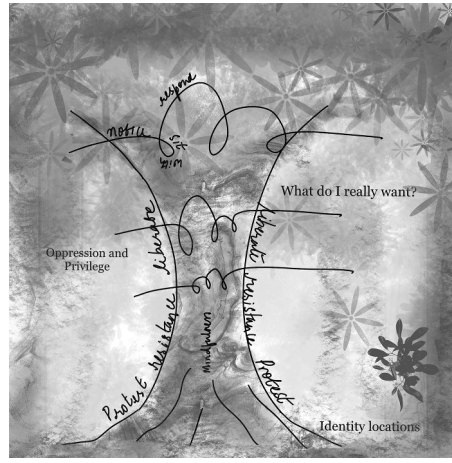

Figure 1.1 Pictorial representation of embodied social justice.

The Text

Embodied Social Justice in Counseling for Indian Communities: Integrating Theory and Practice offers a comprehensive exploration of counseling microskills and mindful practices that can consciously support both individual and collective liberation within a framework of social justice. Addressing pressing needs in the Indian community, this book bridges the gap between traditional counseling practices and the urgent demands of working with marginalized and privileged communities alike. By integrating mindfulness within the framework of social justice, our intention is to offer a fresh perspective that can enrich the practice and understanding of MBIs globally, and appeal to professionals who are involved in mindfulness and social justice and are working with and within the Indian diaspora.

The book is broadly structured into two distinct sections; the first is more theory based, while the second section offers more practical steps for engaging in embodied social justice counseling. While it is not necessary to work through each section in order, we would recommend that before starting any practices with clients, you first read and integrate Chapters 9–11.

Section 1 begins with foundational concepts, establishing the ethical foundations, relevance of mindfulness in social justice, and overall approach of embodied social justice in counseling. Further, it introduces the embodiment framework developed in the Indian context which supports the understanding that the body is both shaped by and is shaping the contexts that enable people to live liberated lives collectively. This first section comprises seven chapters.

Chapter 2: History of Mindfulness in the Social Justice Context, explores the evolution of mindfulness, tracing the history of Buddhism and western

adaptation of mindfulness. In India, mindfulness has been recontextualized to support anti-oppression efforts informed by Dr B. R. Ambedkar's articulation of Buddhism in Navayana, highlighting its role in fostering a deeper consciousness among individuals facing social inequities. This historical perspective enriches the understanding of mindfulness and illustrates its potential as a powerful tool for social change.

Chapter 3: Influence of Current Social Justice Theories on Counseling, delves into critical social identity theories that influence counseling, including Mad Studies, Disability Justice, the neurodiversity paradigm, queer studies, and the Anti-Caste paradigm. The historical presence of these approaches to counseling, as conceptualized by grassroots organizations in India, offers a necessary introduction to support the subsequent understanding of the embodiment framework of body as a site of liberation, protest, and resistance.

Chapter 4: Need for an Embodied Social Justice Approach in Counseling, addresses the growth of counseling practice in India and advocates for a counseling paradigm that incorporates somatic practices. It presents an integrated model vital for community mental health in marginalized Indian contexts, combining historical insights with contemporary social justice challenges.

Chapter 5: Ethics of Embodied Social Counseling, discusses the foundational elements of ethical practice in relation to embodied social justice counseling. The chapter unpacks key ideas regarding uncovering stories, the body, and the role of the counselor; and discusses the importance of meeting clients where they are and maintaining transparency in therapeutic practices. These ethical dimensions guide practitioners in cultivating respectful and conscientious interactions that honor and integrate the client's bodily experiences into the healing process.

Chapter 6: Body as a Site of Liberation, explores the transformative potential of accessing the body as an alive, agentive being moving individuals toward collective liberation. Foregrounding diverse perspectives and intersectional identities, the chapter examines how individuals navigate their embodied realities within contexts of systemic privilege and oppression, emphasizing the role of the body in collective liberation.

Chapter 7: Body as a Site of Protest, centers on the lived experiences of individuals with identity locations in marginalization, and how their bodies respond to systemic oppression. It explores the dual facets of bodily protest: the refusal to engage with oppressive systems and the assertion of presence to reclaim power and agency. Offering an alternative take on "freeze" as a nervous system response, a nuanced approach to embodied protest underscores the transformative potential of the body in protesting oppression and fostering liberation.

Chapter 8: Body as a Site of Resistance, centers on the lived experiences of individuals with identity locations in privilege, and how their bodies

respond to systemic privilege. It explores how individuals use their bodies to resist privilege and work on making room for others while working on one's own internalized biases resulting from experiences of privilege.

Section 2 focuses on developing individual counseling skills that cultivate embodied awareness and foster a deeper connection with one's body across various identity locations. This section introduces practices and inquiries aimed at encouraging reflective exploration of one's bodily experiences. Chapters 9–11 are foundational for counselors to develop self-awareness in their practice. Chapters 12–14 expand the focus to relational dynamics in dyads, detailing how counselors can effectively engage with clients. The final two chapters, 15–16, consider the application of embodied social justice principles within group counseling settings, discussing group dynamics and specific interventions for couples and communities that foster collective healing and social transformation. In writing this book, the text is centered on the adult population. We have deliberately chosen not to include working with families as neither of us have worked extensively with children and the included practices, developed within the MBSM framework, have not been used with children.

Chapter 9: Presence, draws from the framework of generative somatics to explore sites of shaping and sites of change. Three pillars of presence are introduced, guiding participants from reflection and mapping systemic influences through embodied awareness supported by group reflection and mirroring to explore privilege and oppression. Finally, clarity and commitment focus on how the body informs actionable alignment through declarations.

Chapter 10: Making Mindfulness Accessible for Self and Others, delineates essential elements for making practice customizable and accessible to specific groups of individuals and clients. This chapter focuses on ensuring that both formal and informal practices are made accessible for both counselors and clients.

Chapter 11: Practices of Mindfulness, introduces practices tailored to enhance bodily awareness and accessibility including Awareness of Breath, Body Scan, BEST (Body, Emotions, Sensations, Thoughts), and Loving Kindness, each adjusted to be inclusive of diverse identity locations. These practices serve as tools for counselors to engage deeply with their somatic experiences in a transformative way.

Chapter 12: Notice, introduces the 3Vs and B (Visuals, Vocals, Verbal Content, and Body Language), foundational skills for noticing and observing within the therapeutic dyad. By honing these skills, counselors can better attune to subtle cues and foster a more empathetic and responsive therapeutic environment to better understand clients' embodied experiences.

Chapter 13: Sit With, delves into the therapeutic relationship with active listening and reflective techniques including asking insightful questions,

paraphrasing, identifying keywords, summarizing, and reflecting feelings. These techniques are framed within the context of body awareness, helping counselors sit with their clients' experiences.

Chapter 14: Respond, covers advanced therapeutic skills such as goal setting, confrontation, focusing, reflection of meaning, interpretation, feedback, and psychoeducation to guide clients through the landscapes of their experiences and emphasize integrating body awareness. By applying these skills, counselors can help clients navigate complex emotional and psychological terrains as they discover new pathways to liberation and resistance.

Chapter 15: Working with Couples and Families, focuses on building intimacy and understanding through body-centered practices while centering ideas of social justice. Examples of couples with intersectional identities are explored.

Chapter 16: Working with Communities, examines the dynamics of group interactions, underscoring the importance of community agreements, group process, and structure. It covers different types of groups, and the importance of setting group intentions, attention, and stance. By integrating body awareness, practitioners can enhance their ability to navigate and guide group processes towards collective liberation and resistance.

Features of the Text

Contributions from clinicians working in the field of embodied social justice are embedded throughout the text, offering practitioner insights and realities of engaging in embodied social justice counseling and practices. We are grateful for the voices of Eman Albedah (United Kingdom), Lauren Reid (United States), and Indian practitioners Meherin Roshanara, Gayatri Bhukya, Rachana Dronavalli, Manasi Udgirkar, Ramya Banda, and Jehanzeb Baldiwalla (their biographies can be found toward the end of the book).

Case vignettes, transcripts of sessions, practical exercises, and reflection questions are integrated throughout to bridge between theory and practice, and foster a supportive space to explore embodied narratives. The practices and reflection questions have either been created or modified by Aarathi to center an embodied social justice perspective in an Indian context. These key features ensure that *Embodied Social Justice in Counseling for Indian Communities* is both a foundational text for those interested in the intersection of counseling and social justice and a practical guide for implementing these approaches effectively.

We also call attention to the use of language. We have chosen to use 'counselors' to embrace the diverse range of mental health practitioners—psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, psychiatrists—who are using a counseling paradigm and working in the field of embodied social justice counseling. You may align better with the role of therapist or practitioner. If so, we encourage you to swap out the word counselor for the term of your choice.

Guidelines for Engaging with Practices

To get the most from the embodied social justice practices, we recommend approaching them with intentionality, curiosity, and care. Below are key considerations to support your journey—both as an individual practitioner and in partnership with others.

Cultivate awareness (noticing vs hypervigilance). We invite you to notice—perhaps even loiter with—your field of presence, even when hypervigilance constricts your posture in very real alarm. When you catch yourself contracting into watchfulness, pause, offer yourself a breath, posture shift, or the rest your body needs. As you deepen your practice, greet each tremor or tension not as a malfunction but as a messenger, responding with warm, nonjudgmental curiosity. When your attention drifts back to alarm, recognize that your body is echoing personal histories and responding to broader currents of systemic oppression. In this kinder space of inquiry, every sensation becomes a doorway to deeper understanding, collective resilience, and healing.

Cultivate soft language. Words shape the quality of attention. It may help to play with words that we offer and see if you would like to use another word that offers greater softness. For instance, rather than speaking of 'monitoring' or 'scanning' your experience, alternatives like 'loitering', 'lingering', or 'softly noticing' may feel more supportive. Choosing words that evoke curiosity and ease reinforces a compassionate stance toward whatever arises in your body and mind. Given the risk that words can trigger, offer yourself gentleness and consider words you would prefer to incorporate in this journey.

Choose your practice space. As you engage in the practices throughout this book, select environments that feel safe and minimally distracting—a quiet corner of your home or office, a garden bench, or a gentle walking path can all become practice spaces when you bring full attention. Notice how different settings—indoors versus outdoors, alone versus in community—shape your experiences and trust your body's guidance about where you feel most supported. Before settling into practice, pause to notice the light, sound, and temperature of your surroundings. Is the room too bright or dim? Is there background noise that pulls your attention? Does the air feel too warm or cool against your skin? Small adjustments—a relatively quieter corner or sitting amidst your favorite books or posters—may support your capacity to loiter with sensation. Tending to these environmental factors reinforces the message that your body's comfort and safety matter.

Partner for accountability and safety. Embodied social justice work can stir deep material. Identify an accountability partner, a peer in your cohort or a fellow reader, who shares your commitment to collective liberation. Together, establish clear agreements around confidentiality, disclosure

limits, and mutual respect. Acknowledge each other's differing social locations and how those may influence the holding dynamic. Your partnership is a container for shared reflection, honest feedback, and compassionate challenge; it is not therapy, so set boundaries accordingly.

Thoughtful pairing and relational growth. When invited into group related practices, begin by pairing with someone whose identity locations overlap with yours—this can foster initial safety and trust. As you both gain confidence, experiment with cross-location pairings to deepen systemic awareness and practice co-creating space with those whose perspectives differ from your own. Notice what shifts when you and your partner hold similar or divergent experiences of privilege and oppression.

Trauma-sensitive framing. As you embark on embodied practices, move at a pace that honors the nervous system rather than pushing through discomfort. Begin each session by checking in with your body: Notice where tension or tightness lingers and invite yourself to soften into whatever arises. Utilize grounding techniques (e.g., orienting to five objects in the room) to settle safely into the practice. If a full 10-minute practice feels overwhelming, shorten it to 2 or 5 minutes. Always remind yourself (and your accountability partner) that pausing, stepping away, or choosing a gentler practice is itself an act of care.

Journal for embodied sense-making. Consider spending a few minutes writing about what your body invited you to notice at the end of every practice. You might begin with prompts such as: 'Today my shoulders whispered…', or 'My chest opened when I recalled…', or simply, 'What did my body invite me to?'. These brief reflections build a habit of tuning into bodily wisdom. Over time you will notice patterns, moments when your body consistently signals hope, resistance, or fatigue. Reviewing journal entries weekly can illuminate shifts in embodiment and guide next steps.

Accessibility adaptations. Embodied social justice work must be accessible to all bodies and minds. If you are neurodivergent, you might prefer practices that pair a brief audio cue with closed captions or written scripts you can scan in your own time. If you are d/Deaf or hard-of-hearing, seek video recordings with clear captioning or visual movement prompts. For people with mobility limitations, adapt movement practices into smaller gestures—hand or shoulder lifts instead of full-body stretches—and use multisensory anchors like textured objects or scented candles to ground attention. Invite your accountability partner to co-create adaptations together, ensuring the practice feels both safe and nourishing.

Ethical self-reflection. Our social locations inflect every practice we teach or model. Periodically ask yourself, 'How do my privileges shape what I notice and name in my body?' 'What lenses might I be projecting onto a client's experience?'. To support ongoing accountability, create a short list of reflection questions—'Which part of my identity feels most visible right

now?' or 'Where might I be unconsciously centering comfort over confrontation?'—and revisit them before group sessions or after sharing practices with others. This ethical self-check nurtures humility and deepens solidarity.

Community sharing and co-learning. Embodied social justice thrives in relational webs. Consider forming a small practice circle—online or in person—with fellow readers, students, or colleagues. In each session, one person can lead a brief practice, another can share a journaling prompt, and a third can offer feedback on language choices (e.g., I like how you said 'hover' instead of 'monitor'). Rotate roles so everyone both teaches and learns. Alternatively, create a digital forum or chat group where you post reflections, questions, and creative adaptations. By pooling insights and holding each other accountable, solitary practice transforms into collective liberation.

Lastly, we acknowledge that while we have framed this text in the context of counselors working with people from the Indian diaspora, we believe that the issues raised and discussed in this book, specifically those of systemic privilege and oppression, along with the practical exercises and reflections, are pertinent and relevant for individuals of any ethnicity given their unique identity locations. Social justice and the intersection of systemic injustices is a global phenomenon. On that note, we hope *Embodied Social Justice in Counseling: Integrating Theory and Practice for Indian Communities* becomes a valuable addition to your bookshelf and an integrated part of your personal and professional practice.

References

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