Rae Johnson: Sexual harassment as abuse of power

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The following is a transcript of the original audio. Please note that this conversation was meant to be a spontaneous exchange. For better or worse, the transcript retains the unedited quality of the conversation.

Serge: So Rae, what are we going to talk about today?

Rae: Well, I was inspired by your prompt to have a conversation about the recent spate of accusations of sexual harassment in the media. I thought that it might be useful, as folks who work with the body who are trying to incorporate a social justice lens in the work that we do, to talk about sexual harassment as not about sex and gender as much as it is about power... so that we can link the behaviors that go with sexual harassment to other kinds of discrimination, micro-aggression, and abuses of power. I thought it would be particularly useful for us within the somatics community to have a look at how that translates on a body level, particularly with respect to nonverbal communication and what we already know about the nonverbal communication research. We can draw on (this research) to help us understand what's going on in these interactions and how people are being violated without necessarily there being a conscious awareness on the part of the person who's doing the aggression that that's in fact what they're doing.

So, I think that then leads us to having a look at the issue of boundaries - how boundaries get navigated on a body level, how we can become more attuned to boundary issues, and how power affects our capacity to navigate boundaries. And, last, I'm really intrigued by some research that I've recently encountered about privilege and power. These studies, both neuroscientific studies and social behavioral studies, suggest that having power for extended periods of time actually causes neurological changes that impair a person's ability to read the nonverbal signals of others. So, if we can touch on those territories, that would be great.

Serge: So, just from the overview that you give, it feels like we're already squarely in the midst of it... that what we're looking at is dynamics of power. Where what happens is boundaries can be violated as part of these dynamics.

Rae: Exactly.

Serge: And the third point you made... You put it in a context where it's something that might be inherent in the dynamics of power, in the sense that, as this research suggests, something happens where power, quote-unquote, corrupts... preventing people in power from hearing those cues that we normally hear.

Rae: Exactly. And interestingly enough in, in the research that I was reading, the authors were suggesting that it was exactly those capacities to read others - particularly to read and pick up on those very subtle but important non-verbal cues about what people were interested in, what they felt comfortable with, and what they felt motivated and inspired by. (The authors suggested that), perhaps these same skills contributed to the person's rise to power in the first place - they were good at reading a room. They were good at navigating interpersonal relationships such that they inspired confidence and trust and could get people on board to go along with what they wanted. But then I think part of what happens is that people in power stop getting the nonverbal cues of discomfort, disagreement, resistance, or refusal from others because they hold power and people (around them) are afraid to show how they really feel.

: And so...part of what the authors of these studies might be suggesting is that people in power get so used to people pandering to them, saying yes to them, refusing to disagree, refusing to stand up, refusing to push back both verbally and non-verbally that (people with power) stop reading others. The neuroscientific studies... seem to show that power causes a form of brain damage. They've done scans suggesting that these changes are observable and long lasting. So, I don't want to overextend their findings, but I would suggest that maybe part of what they're discovering is what we've been working in the somatics world for so many years, which is (power impairs) our capacity for kinesthetic empathy.

Serge: Yeah, I mean certainly it changes the field of inquiry from outrage at a given person's abusive behavior... into looking at it in a more systematic way. And I'm having a reading of a system of power which then affects people in different ways and damages the people in power, um, as much as well, not necessarily as much, but as well as the people who they abuse. And so then the question is not one of outrage of how a given person can do that. Not just that, but mainly looking more deeply into the dynamics of power itself.

Rae: Yes. The damage that social systems of power...does to everyone.

Serge: Yeah.

Rae: (This is) part of why I think it's useful to look at how power operates on a body level. How does it manifest non-verbally? How does it manifest somatically? When you start focusing on the issue of power and its relational dimensions, it becomes possible to make links from sexism, which is (the starting point of today's topic), to racism (for example) and how white people can have the same kind of stupidity

born of privilege with respect to people of color (that many men seem to have with respect to women). People of color go, how can you be doing this? How could you doing this on purpose? Are you just evil and cruel? And white people go, no, I had no idea and I'm really sorry. Not all of them, but some of them, and it is that stupidity I would suggest this research is pointing to.

So it's not about letting anyone off the hook or letting ourselves off the hook for taking responsibility for the damage that we do to others, but maybe it gives us some insight into how we could be doing such damage so unconsciously. And if we don't recognize that even if our motivations may be pure that our behaviors and our impacts in fact do cause damage, (the idea that privilege makes us dumb) gives us some way of saying, OK, right, I get it. I just interacted with this person in a way that they found offensive or harmful or dismissive or insulting and I didn't mean to be any of those things, but I get it. I get that because I hold privilege in relation to that person, it's made me stupid about what I'm doing and I need to educate myself. I need to begin to reestablish that sensitivity, awareness, and attunement to what's going on at a body-to-body level.

Serge: You used two words - "stupid" and "sensitivity". In this case, "stupid" is something that does not come from lack of intellectual ability. It's a blindness and insensitivity that's bred by the circumstances of differentials of power.

Rae: Yes, it's how we're socialized. We learn that there are some things (and some people) we don't have to pay attention to, and we believe that we don't have to pay attention to them because our lives have shown us that it is not a threat to us to fail to pay attention to them.

Serge: And so I want to highlight this because the way we function efficiently is that we don't pay attention to what we don't need to pay attention to. When there is no danger, then we have no reason to pay attention to something. And there's nothing wrong with that in principle except when it actually does hurt people. But so what's happening is we miss the signal that what we're doing is hurting people.

Rae: Yes. The other thing that I think the research in non-verbal communication has shown us is the process of being socialized into systems of power that are inequitable and unjust also compromises the capacity of the people who hold less power to actually show how they really feel. For example, as someone who was socialized as female, I learned (to the point where they felt natural to me), postures and gestures and nonverbal behaviors that signal submission. There is variation cross-culturally...these signals, but in the culture in which I was raised everyone (around me) clearly read them as submissive. I learned to enact these submissive signals (in the presence of men) without even thinking about it. So as someone who's being read as female, when someone who identifies and has been socialized as male comes up and begins to cross what might be a boundary, I signal submission. They proceed and they don't realize that they've crossed a boundary because I haven't signaled, "Stop, buddy."

I'm not suggesting that was the case in all these situations we're reading about in the media; I know that in a good number of them, there were clear "stop" signals that were then violated anyway. (That said), I think what I was just saying about how we learn behaviors of dominance and submission on a body level still carries some weight and is a useful thing to consider when we're looking at these dynamics.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. So, we're not just simply talking about what happened, and certainly not talking about specific instances where there was a very clear violation where the person insisted that there was a violation. But what you're talking about, which is a little bit chilling, is to realize how without knowing it, we are actually replicating the structures of oppression, because we are so bathing in them that we take them for granted and we replicate them. We embody them in our day to day behavior.

Rae: Yep. That's exactly what I'm suggesting. And I agree with you, Serge. I find it a little chilling too, that I am, in my own "habitus" - my own appearance, body image, how I speak, how I move, how I dress, how I express myself - that I am reproducing the power dynamics (that reflect) what I learned about what's OK, what's appropriate, and what's normal for who I am as a member of particular social groups. (It's chilling to realize) how hard it is to question all that because social norms start to feel like they're natural and right when in fact they are only constructed.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. So it is both chilling and liberating. The liberating part is the sense that, as we realize how prisoner we are, the environment we live in, is also the sense that being mindful of it has the potential to free us. And, to the extent to which we imagine ourselves to be free, we only are more likely to perpetuate what has been ingrained in us. But, to the extent that we are more aware of how we are determined by all the influences we have absorbed in being raised and in living in a certain society.... And the minute details of how our postures, how we dress, how we signal things on a moment by moment basis, we are actually more likely to become a little bit more aware of the power dynamics and change them.

Rae: Exactly. And speaking as one practitioner to another, I argue that the place to begin that process of awareness and attention is...to explore the somatic experience of privilege. Whereas before (as a researcher and practitioner) I was mostly focused on the somatic experience of oppression in the body, (now) what I've come up with and what I encounter in my own explorations is that privilege (often) feels like nothing. It feels like comfort. It feels like normal. It feels like no blips on my radar, no feedback loops that needed attending to.

Serge: And so, so let me expand a little bit on this. I want to put it in the context that the way we function as human beings or animals is that, in order to function efficiently, we simply cannot attend to everything that happens. Much of what we do functions below awareness. Consciousness, one possible way to think of it, is as a dashboard... in which you have a little signal, like a little red light, that says something needs to be paid attention to. So what you're saying is that privilege is one of those situations where there's no red light because everything's going well, so why would you pay attention to that? And so it's going to be below awareness.

Rae: Exactly. Those monitors are not particularly well attuned...we haven't cultivated sensors for (being oppressive) because we haven't needed to, and we're not doing regular readings anymore, if we ever were. Because as you say, it hasn't been an issue. It hasn't been a threat because we've held the privilege that inoculates us from threat, that protects us from threat in ways that people with less privilege don't have. So, for example, one of the things that the nonverbal communication research shows us is that people in subordinated social groups are much better at reading the body language of people with more power than the other way around.

Whereas, if you're holding privilege that protects you from the threat of others with less privilege then you can afford to be relatively oblivious and, as you suggest, why wouldn't you? It's metabolically expensive to be paying attention to something that doesn't threaten you, that couldn't have some negative effects that you need to be prepared for and able to respond to. So where does that leave us as a society, as a conglomeration of cultures? And I use the term culture very broadly to include cultures of gender and ability and religion, not just race or ethnicity.

In a world that's getting increasingly smaller, our survival will depend on our capacity to work with one another, to collaborate and to not inflame conflict by doing unconscious damage to one another. In fact...I think we're seeing it now. I think we're seeing it in the United States in terms of race relations. It's here with us now. The consequences of white people being oblivious to the damage that they enact on people of color every day...the consequences of that oblivion are starting to cost us and they will continue to cost us. So in fact, we'd be wise to shift our paradigm to something a little more inclusive and to recognize that in the long run that oblivion does do damage to the people who hold privilege as well. Because what it does is creates a world full of conflict and strife and enmity and the kind of ideological and cultural divides that at some point feel quite impossible to bridge.

Serge: Right. Right. So we're talking about the shift, not just in attitude, but also in how we pay attention to things because we evolved to pay attention to things when there is a need to pay attention to at the present moment. What we're talking about here is there is a very real threat, but the threat is not a clear and present danger in the moment. It is actually quite manageable moment by moment, day by day or week by week to behave without noticing. But long-term... I don't mean just long-term in the sense that there is n clear and present danger right now... But the clear and present danger is not necessarily affecting the white person in this moment. So there is a possibility to ignore the danger even as it's happening. And it's a shift from what alerts us moment by moment to an awareness of the danger, even though there is no immediate, instant moment threat.

Rae: Yes. And, I would argue (to come full circle back to the prompt for this conversation around sexual harassment in the media) and I can't speak to this as a man, but it would make sense to me that the focus in the media on the significant consequences to the men in power who have been called out on their behavior and the loss of employment, prestige, connection, lots of power. Those examples might in fact serve as a template - not just for men going, oh, maybe I should pay attention to this because maybe it does apply to me and maybe the consequences are going

to come home to roost sooner than I think. I would argue that all of us can (begin to be more attentive) wherever our own particular social identifications give us privilege.

Serge: Yeah. So we're talking about this being a call to paying attention to what normally doesn't get noticed. It's the experience of privilege or relative privilege. Yes. So how do we do that?

Rae: I have just recently developed a set of three recommendations for that process. And the process really is about regaining the capacity for kinesthetic empathy across a whole range of relational situations. Those three steps, (and this might sound a little strange) but I always recommend that people start with where they have been wounded - where the dynamics of social power have caused damage to them, where they haven't held power, where they have felt subordinated or marginalized or abused at the hands of others who held more power than they did.

And I think that most of us understand some of those dynamics. So they've manifested in growing up as a child, and the fact that we're in a world with adults who have more power than we do. We know that feeling of helplessness, and having other people decide for us how things are going to be. But I would argue that even those of us who seem to hold a lot of privilege in today's society (so I'm talking white, straight, male, able-bodied, and all the rest of the sort of indicators of privilege that we're attuned to today) that in my work with folks who hold those kinds of privilege, in asking them to look deeply on where they've been wounded by other people and what that's been like and how that felt, they in fact have sometimes really deeply poignant, touching, compelling stories to tell about the wounds that they have experienced as a member of a hierarchical society. And understanding what it feels like to be wounded can become the basis for understanding what other people feel like when we wound them.

Serge: Yeah. Actually, that's a very powerful point. Which might also gives us a different perspective on the blindness to social clues. If we are reasonably healthy, we can remember the moments and situations where we've been wounded and from there develop empathy. If the wound is traumatic, it could be the result that people who have been wounded this way are absolutely... find it unbearable to bear the sense of being powerless and from that place refuse to see powerlessness in themselves, and actually are turned off by people who they experience as powerless.

Rae: Because it's triggering. I take it as a given (and I didn't used to be able to do this because I didn't have any research backing me up, but I feel like I do have some now), I take it as a given that oppression is traumatic.

Serge: Yeah.

Rae: And part of the power of somatic work (for me) is its capacity to help survivors of trauma learn how to reestablish some capacity to regulate themselves when environmental conditions threaten to overwhelm that capacity.

In lots of ways that's the skill that those of us who've worked with trauma survivors in other ways (not necessarily trauma survivors in the context of social justice) I think that's one of the things that we've learned how to do, and we learned the benefits of, is that once we know where our wounds are, once we've begun to care for them and develop resources to manage the kind of protective response of our nervous systems when we feel threatened - if we know that and have some resources in place to mitigate it, we're much less likely to be hyper reactive to conflicts. To situations where, for example, if a person of color calls me on something that I've done, if I haven't examined my own traumatic wounds from my own oppression, I would argue that I'm going to be way more likely to overreact and need to defend because I can't tolerate the sensation of feeling as though I'm under attack again.

Serge: Hmm.

Rae: So healing from trauma, healing from the traumatic imprints of our own oppression, I think is a necessary precursor to being able to hold and tolerate the critical feedback from others when we've been oppressive to them.

Serge: And so to put this together: There is a sense that societies, as we know them, are organized in a way that uses power oppressively. There's going to be differences between societies, obviously. But, in some way or another, what we experience in social life is a structure which has some degree of oppression. As we are more aware of how we are affected by that oppression, we are actually better able to function in not becoming agents of oppression towards others.

Rae: Exactly. To bring this back to the body, for me it's been critical to learn and to unpack (and to unlearn, actually) some really important things about my own response to oppressive interpersonal dynamics. And one is to be sensitive to boundaries and to have a really clear indicator light. I'm going back to that dashboard idea. To have a really clear and functioning indicator light in my own interoception for when a boundary has been crossed. And this is part of being socialized as female, but I would argue that other social groups experience this as well. To do some real healing work around body image and to begin to feel my body as always already OK, those two qualities - (the first is) that capacity to say I'm already OK however I am already OK in my body - there's nothing "wrong" with it from a social perspective. And (secondly) I can feel where my boundaries are.

If I can do those two things, that equips me reasonably well to move in the world and to handle the power dynamics that come at me - (the dynamics) that I encounter and that I perpetuate - with some degree of skill in terms of how I navigate these things. The other thing that I find incredibly helpful and I almost always recommend is undertaking the process of learning this (work) in a safe environment. And then generalizing the skills that you learn to a more challenging real life environment, but to regain some capacity to sense into and to freely move your body. So liberating your body movements so that you're no longer constrained by the social norms of how bodies move, not just the social norms around how bodies look.

Serge: So, we are our bodies, and we are bodies in movement.

Rae: Yes.

Serge: And so, we are staying at the level of abstraction if we're not paying attention to how our sense of ourselves and our sense of how we fit in society is reflected in how we feel about our bodies or body image... and in how we move.

Rae: Yes, exactly. Just to give you an example, a nonverbal communication researcher named Shulamith Firestone wrote an article based on her research called "The Smile Imperative" and she was articulating a phenomenon (and when I talk to women about it, they'll go, oh yeah, of course I know this so well) which is the nonverbal dynamic, particularly between men and women (but not always) that women smile. They smile when they're not happy. They smile as a gesture and an affirmation of submission and compliance and the cliché around that is for many women, even just walking down the street in public, they've experienced total strangers, men who don't know them, telling them to smile. "Smile, sweetheart. You look so much prettier when you smile." But it's not about pretty, it's about (the fact that) as a male in this society, I have the authority to control your body, and to require you in your body to manifest an indicator of submission and compliance and this is how we're going to do it. You're gonna smile.

Serge: I want to shift a little bit. When you say "control your body" in that sense, when you use the word body, (what you're talking about) is control your total self, control your soul, control your whole being. So it's really not body in a sense of only a part of you, but body in the sense of every part of you.

Rae: Yes, and here's how somatic dissociation becomes part of the trauma response repertoire. When someone else is telling me how to look and how to behave (at the level of total strangers telling me when and how much to smile) if my body no longer feels like mine, if I don't have control or authority over it, I leave. I begin to identify with parts of me that don't have anything to do with my body because my body is available for the control and use of other people. It's not a safe territory anymore. Now you can see the childhood abuse parallels and all the other trauma parallels. But it's true with oppression as well. So yes, I agree. Our bodies are ourselves and we learn to have them not be ourselves when our bodies are taken over by people who don't have our best interests at heart.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. So I want to stay for a moment to absorb this as we're coming to an end. Again, a chilling note. And a welcome chilling note, in the sense that drawing attention to pitfalls is actually the best way that we can do something about it. But there is something very chilling about that. I'm not saying it to sugarcoat it, but just to absorb it, to see how we can be in relation to that.

Rae: Yes. And to see if there are ways in which we can make it possible to tolerate the truth of it.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. Not tolerating the experience, but tolerating the truth of it.

Rae: Yes. So that we can transform the experience.

Serge: And so what comes to me is a sense of wanting to share the experience, wanting to communicate with others about ways in which we have had a variety of this experience... That might certainly be a step.

Rae: I think it's a really important step, Serge. In the courses and the trainings that I do, one of the first steps (after bringing to awareness some of the features of embodiment and oppression that you and I have just talked about), the next step is to find a way to tell our body stories to one another. To give ourselves an opportunity to feel into what oppression has done to our own relationship with our bodies and to begin to articulate that and share that with one another. And what I've experienced over and over in these classes and groups is the relief that people don't feel alone in it anymore. And it can be remarkably relieving of shame, to not feel alone. I'm not the only one in the room, even though I might not consider myself the same person socially as another group member, we share this experience of, "Yep, I know what that means to shut down." I know that feeling and you shut down because of your social identifications, and I shut down for a very different set of social identifications, but we share that in common. We know what that feels like.

Serge: I shut down for one identification. You shut down for another. But we have that in common - that we shut down,

Rae: And that becomes, again, beginning to build the foundation for kinesthetic empathy with one another. I can feel, I have felt, what you have felt.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah.

Rae: So there's the hopeful part.

Serge: Yeah.

Serge: So that we're facing the reality of the embodied experience of oppression and power. And, as we are facing it, discovering how it affects all of us differently, but it affects all of us. There is a sound basis to rebuild.

Rae: Yes. And to move from positions of self interest to positions of collective well-being. And I think that, in fact, is the challenge of the planet at this particular moment in time. Are we going to make that choice and how do we do it? And I would suggest that starting with our bodies is one way to begin that process.

Serge: Yeah. Thanks, Rae.

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