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Dance movement therapy: crossing cultural and professional bridges

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ABSTRACT

As the profession of dance movement therapy (DMT) grows and develops, more DMT's are combining movement with counselling and psychology, making valuable contributions across the globe. The sudden threat of Covid-19 made the need for clarification and integration of cultural and professional boundaries clear. With a shrinking world and increasing threats of refugees, displacement, climate change, intergenerational trauma and pandemics, DMT's can join with other healing disciplines to bring creative healing options into communities and the world. How can it adapt to meet these new challenges while protecting professional standards and ethics? What might this integration look like?

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Introduction

As the profession of dance movement therapy (DMT) grows and develops, more DMT's are combining movement with counselling and psychology, making valuable contributions across the globe. With the sudden threat of COVID, therapists discovered that Zoom allowed them to reach around the world. New forms of treatment are being offered, bringing the need to clarify and integrate cultural and professional boundaries. A shrinking world, new waves of refugees, displacement, climate change, intergenerational trauma and pandemics give DMT's a new possibility to partner with other psychotherapies, providing creative healing options for communities and the world. As DMT moves from its origin in local psychiatric hospitals out into the community and the world, it will need to address challenges of diverse cultures and settings. How can it adapt to meet these new challenges while protecting professional standards and ethics? What might this integration look like?

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Some creative arts therapists are confronting this challenge, particularly among European arts therapists who face issues of cross-country practice, training and certification standards. They address the fragmentation and alienation of our postmodern world, bringing greater needs to forge new integrations and identities (Karkou et al., 2011). Others focus on the need to develop shared assumptions, definitions and assumptions for best practices in training and employment (Orkibi, 2010). The use of Zoom presents other challenges of disembodiment and re-embodiment. Finally, diversity and creativity within general guidelines of shared personal and professional definitions must be acknowledged (Bonin von & Muller, 2007; Orkibi, 2010). At the 2nd International Research Colloquium in Dance Therapy in Pforzheim, 2006, researchers found cross-cultural support for the use of DMT with patients with depression and cancer, and cross-cultural assessments of schizophrenia and parent-child interactions (Koch & Brauninger, 2006). Others focussed on important connections between body psychotherapists and dance movement therapists (Payne, 2006, March). Since most of the published literature comes from art therapists and cross-cultural dance therapists, the relationship between DMT and the verbal counselling professions warrants further exploration.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore the relationship between DMT and verbal psychology, and American DMT training and other cultures, through heuristic descriptions of challenges faced and lessons learned.

Cultural humility and cultural sensitivity

Both dance movement therapists and psychologists now recognise the importance of addressing cross-cultural concerns by acknowledging their own backgrounds and biases (Jackson, 2020; Shiraev & Levy, 2001; Sue et al., 1999). Therefore, this article will start with a description of this author's background and training. While its use of universal symbols helps DMT's cross cultures with some degree of comfort, they must also understand the specifics of local cultures (Lomax et al., 1968; McNiff & Barlow, 2009). Western therapists who can project their own assumptions and stereotypes on other cultures must respect local taboos and attitudes towards psychotherapy. Cultural sensitivity requires DMT's not to appropriate symbols from a different culture without understanding their cultural context.

As an American DMT, I was trained in what has been called a classic Chace model in the first master's class at Hunter College in 1971. Marian Chace, one of the founding members of the ADTA in 1966, often used a circle structure and rhythm (Sandel et al., 1993; Serlin, 1993) to bring individuals together into a coherent structure and group interaction. The assumptions of our approach were that movement styles correlated

with personality and psychopathology styles, and an expanded integration and movement repertoire correlated with expanded integration, emotional and communicative style (North, 1972). My practicum and internship were at Bronx State Hospital, and I worked as a dance therapist at Queens Children's Hospital and South Beach Psychiatric Centre, all typical placements for DMT's at that time.

Wanting to understand the strong emotions that emerged in the DMT training, I started studies at the NY Gestalt Institute with Dr. Laura Perls, a dancer and concert pianist, familiar with the language of process and of the arts. I simultaneously studied with Irmgard Bartenieff, who encouraged me to write my first article exploring an integration of DMT with Gestalt therapy (Serlin, 1976). Gestalt, as a language of therapeutic process, seemed a useful way to think about movement and still informs much of the way I conceptualise movement change over time. This was my first attempt at a bridge.

In 1985 I earned a PhD in psychology and had to learn psychological and diagnostic language, working in psychological facilities. I also worked as a psychologist and DMT in new settings (Koch & Brauning, 2006; Serlin et al., 2000) such as nursing homes and integrative medical centres. I also began travelling to different parts of the world where both DMT and psychology were practiced in different ways yet saw that the essence of a character and problem could be translated between cultures and conveyed in simple words and movement. How can the disciplines of psychology and DMT be bridged and integrated into a variety of settings and bridge cultures (Capello, 2020; Chang, 2006; Serlin, 2007)?

Cross-cultural connections

Because my interest in DMT came from my background as a folk dancer, I understood movement as cross-cultural communication, useful in DMT (Hanna, 1979; Lomax et al., 1968). On a trip to Israel in 1962, I saw the power of dance build the spirit of the young country with movements of agriculture and optimism, and studied Israeli folk dance with Fred Berk at the 92nd St. Y. The use of the circle in most folk dance was congruent with the Chace method we later learned at Hunter College (Schmais, 1981). I trained with Irmgard Bartenieff at the Laban Institute, learning more about the power of harmonic structures. Years later, after an internship at the C.G. Jung Institute in Los Angeles in 1982, I understood the circle to be an archetypal structure used in ancient village and religious dances around the world to celebrate the changing of the seasons, births and deaths, planting and harvesting, unity and wholeness (Serlin, 1993). Understood in most cultures, the circle and simple archetypal forms still form the basis of my work with trauma survivors among Syrian refugees and training therapists in

China. Whether dance therapists ‘speak Jungian’, or ‘Labanotation’, most feel the power of the circle and it is understood around the world (Panhofer & Karampoula, 2018).

Nonverbal communication also helps us understand how cultures reveal their qualities through their movements. In 1975 I worked in a Swedish psychiatric hospital and observed cultural differences in styles of movement and psychopathology. Working with psychiatric patients in a collectivist culture with a high tendency towards verticality was quite different than working with Puerto Rican and Italian patients at Bronx State Hospital (Serlin, 1996). In the USSR and Russia before and after the fall of the Red Curtain, I led movement groups which presented me with the intriguing issue of how to help group members start to be ‘individuals’ and initiate movement after so many years of being followers (Serlin, 1992). I taught movement on the Greek island Skyros and participated in an ethnographic research project at Columbia University (Lomax et al., 1968) where I observed how Greek immigrants in the US kept dancing as a way to keep their communities alive. In Yugoslavia and in China I saw local people get up on stage or in parks and dance (Serlin, 2017). All these experiences gave me a taste for local culture, and an appreciation for bringing traditional folk forms into DMT.

The photograph below shows women from the Bai ethnic group in Southern China taken when I was teaching in Yunan province, sharing dances with the local women (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Local Bai women with our class in Dali, Yunnan province, 20 May 2016.

Trauma-informed DMT

Israel

In 1986 I taught in Netanya, Israel, through the Lesley University program founded by Dr. Vivien Marcow (Serlin & Speiser, 2007). There I learned that almost everyone in Israel suffered from trauma or PTSD. For the next ten years I taught there in the summers, living and working with students through terrorist attacks and bombing. I began to work with several trauma centres that integrated movement and the creative arts into their trauma treatments. It was in Israel that I first began to bridge DMT with the psychology of trauma.

I became interested in resilience and wondered if it had movement correlates that could be cultivated. One summer during the Intifada, I experimented with the word 'resilience' in movement. Playing with a rubber pop-up doll, the group came up with following descriptions:

Existential Themes: Death/Rebirth, Down/Up, Dark/Light, Transitions, Coming Home

Time Themes: Rhythm, Rest and Renewal, Recuperation, Recovery, Repetition, Breath, Heartbeat

Space: In/Out, Big/Small, Boundaries/Borders, Opening/Closing, Yes/No, Here/There, Entrance/Exit

Resiliency is using the floor to mobilize weight.

Bouncing, springing, jumping.

From Heaviness to Lightness

Heaviness as dark (in the drawing), depression, jail, loneliness, hopelessness.

Lightness as the sky, hope, floating

The close correlation between the words and the experience point to the psychophysical correlates of states of trauma with states of resilience and warrants further research.

Jordan

Unlike the Far East, the Mideast is a hotbed of warring tribes and trauma. In 2014, I joined Steve Olweean in Amman, Jordan to work with the intergenerational trauma of the Syrian refugees in Jordan. The cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural challenges there were how to use movement with religious women, be part of an interdisciplinary team, and create realistic psychosocial training for medical students to bring movement into their support groups (Dieterich-Hartwell et al., 2020). The training had to be in simple language and simple movements, understood by everyone (Figure 2).

The video below about our DMT training in Jordan was created with support from the Marian Chace Foundation to teach medical students how



Figure 2. Jordanian and Syrian Women and Children playing an improvised game.

trauma lives in the body (van der Kolk, 2015) and how dance be incorporated into support groups for the women.

Community dance

A huge loss for the Syrian refugees was the loss of their culture. For the conference, I created an opening and closing ritual based on the Movement Choir taught by Irmgard Bartenieff in 1976 (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980). For the opening session, the staff, and medical students and I used their local music to integrate the music and movements into an opening ritual they called the 'Haka' and the 'Debka' for the closing. Since traditional communities most naturally gather around music and festivals, we organised an evening concert in their park where we sang 'One Day' and danced with the local children and their mothers. The role of culture can help strengthen community as well as individual resilience (Serlin, 2014; Serlin et al., 2019). Dance therapy can indeed take place outside psychiatric hospitals.

We also introduced a movement choir for the opening of the conference at Fudan University with over four hundred participants (Figure 3).

At an existential psychology conference at Hong Kong University, Dr. Rainbow Ho and I designed the opening ritual. Given the conference



Figure 3. Fudan University Movement Choir, May 2012.

themes of East and West, we combined traditional dances from each county into one integrated whole: Tai Chi and The Twist (music from Chubby Checker) into a 'Tai-Twist' as our embodied statement of East/West bridge-building.

China

China brought new boundaries to cross and bridges to build. My first real trip was as a psychologist for a conference on Existential and Humanistic Psychology.

The first challenge was to bridge East and West; the second was to bridge psychology and DMT. At the China Institute of Psychology, students were trained in the Yalom model of existential group psychotherapy (Yalom, 1980). I invited Dr. Marcia Leventhal to help develop a training program called The Art of Embodiment for counsellors to integrate DMT into their groups and individual work. This training in Existential Approaches to Group Therapy was based on existential themes of Freedom/Fate; Individual/Community; Death/Rebirth; and Meaning/Meaninglessness (Guney & Lundmark, 2019; Kurter et al., 2016). Our two-year training emphasised a cohort model in which students learn about the language of movement (Laban, 1971), understand their own movement style, and practice a process for expressing and working through emotions in the body

called KinAesthetic Imagining (KI) (Serlin, 2014). This integration of existential/humanistic psychology with DMT (Serlin, 2010) brings a Whole Person perspective that can support posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) and growth following adversity (Joseph & Linley, 2006). It both allows for an expression of existential despair and death anxiety, while also on building hope, hardiness, optimism and resilience (Serlin & Cannon, 2004; Wengrower, 2015).

Pandemics

On 5 February 2020, my psychology supervisees from China suddenly faced a new challenge. Staffing the COVID-19 virus hotline, they felt their own exhaustion and caregiver burnout (Figley, 1995). They had only one session for each call: What could we do to help?

Grace Zhou from the China Institute of Psychology (CIP) and I created a short video with movements to help ground people and an interactive Zoom dance/story about planting seeds that we called 'Heart Dance'. Movement as narrative or embodied story has been shown to have physical and emotional health benefits. Using movements, viewers could feel the earth under their feet, establish a safe space with boundaries, and begin to move their bodies in the safe space. Finding a new balance helped them rediscover emotions and resilience (Bella & Serlin, 2013; Carey, 2006; Serlin & Speiser, 2007). 'Heart Dance' became a story about 'Planting Seeds of Hope' using movements of digging in the earth and watering the seeds. The metaphor of tending one's garden helped people quarantined at home (Gray, 2001; Joseph & Linley, 2006). We learned how to ground and steady ourselves, growing roots and feeling the earth. We face an existential choice of whether to give up or choose life. Can we take one step forward? If we choose life, can we do it with commitment (energy, use of strength and weight) and gratitude? Reaching up with hope? The embodiment of simple and universal experiences like: 'stability', 'balance', and 'resilience' can be taught, understood and helpful across cultures. The students in these movement groups are counsellors, pastoral counsellors, and medical professionals who are already working in university or hotline settings and are integrating movement into their online support groups. Our challenge here was to teach essential movements that could help them be grounded, embody the themes they faced and find their resiliency.

Conclusion

With predictions of the coming tsunami of global change, water and resources scarcity, and political instability, the creative arts therapies have a

significant role to play in working with the inevitable trauma (Dokter, 1998; Haen, 2009). Trauma-informed dance movement therapy can help heal the mind/body split from dehumanising terror, bridge multicultural contexts, strengthen individual and community resilience and connections, and decrease compassion fatigue and caregiver burnout. However, movement therapy practices are powerful and need solid clinical training. Trauma psychology teaches the principle of safety first. Bringing body and mind into a wide range of trauma-informed practices (Greenberg, 2020) that emphasis trauma psychology principles of safety, creating a safe space within a trusting relationship, and using movements that are culturally sensitive will help DMT become a valued tool across the globe to help relieve human suffering.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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