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Movement, Laughter and Breath with Intergenerational Women:

A Community Engagement Project about Connections

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May 19, 2018

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Dance Movement Therapy

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### Abstract

This Community Engagement Project was created to explore how movement, laughter and breath can create connection for intergenerational women. A community event was facilitated at a suburban YWCA as an observational tool and for information gathering. Arts based research was conducted and evidence of non-verbal movements were recorded through observation, video recordings, and reflections from the participants in the session. In addition, published peer reviewed articles that explore these elements of expression were utilized as an alternative lens. Recent current events that are affecting women worldwide, such as the #metoo and Time's Up movements, offered the backdrop for this project. The participants for this project were women ages 18 to 75 who signed up for a movement and laughter yoga program at a suburban YWCA. The workshop was conducted in a two-hour period with an opportunity for questions and reflections. These women were taken through mindfulness and guided imagery meditation, dance and movement exercises that included mirroring, Bartenieff/Laban Fundamentals, and Laughter Yoga. The results of this community-based project showed evidence of the nonverbal connections, movement, breath, and laughter can facilitate with this population.

*Keywords:* connection, movement, breath, intergenerational women, mindfulness, laughter

### Movement, Laughter and Breath with Intergenerational Women:

#### A Community Engagement Project about Connections

The expressive therapies have been gaining more attention in the therapeutic and medical communities in recent years. Expressive Therapies offerings at colleges and universities are growing, and the therapeutic world is beginning to implement different arts programs as part of their practice. Various art forms are providing a foundation for this work, including dance, movement, visual arts, music, drama, writing and improvisation. Dance movement, art, music, and drama, can provide a container and an alternative support to “talk therapy” by helping people connect with their bodies.

This Capstone project seeks to explore how movement, breath and laughter can create connection with culturally diverse, intergenerational women. A community engagement project was developed at a suburban YWCA. Participants responded to a flyer posted on the YWCA website and signed up for a Movement and Laughter Yoga Group. Women ages 18 to 75 signed up with basic information on what the session was about. Upon entering the assigned room for the group, some women showed up with Yoga mats, and all appeared tentative and curious about the session.

An experiential laughter and movement session was conducted to explore the dynamics of such a group, the commonalities in movement and expression, and how it connects them on a non-verbal level, culturally and somatically. Tools used in this project were a video camera, still photography and a body attitude sheet based on Laban's Movement Inventory, and reflections from the participants. As the group moved together, new relationships appeared to form, and a natural bonding began to occur between the generations. These bonds were solidified by the end of the session transcending age and culture.

When studying intergenerational women, there are different themes to be taken into consideration. Beyond their initial connection, for the purposes of this project, themes were explored through the modalities of movement, laughter, and breath. Body image, neurological connections through mirroring, attunement and empathy were also considered. By integrating elements through expression, strong bonds were formed between these participants despite age or ethnicity.

With the recent disclosures in Hollywood and in the news around sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace, for example, #metoo and Times Up, this project seemed timely. In addition, these movements appeared to inspire, connect and empower each other. Many female celebrities have been speaking out and developing a stronger voice for women of all ages using awards show acceptance speeches to create a thread of connection. This project attempts to observe the psychological and somatic bonds women share, including common issues of body image, sense of self and group dynamics. This project also attempts to reveal how the simplicity of movement, breath and eye contact, create a container of nurturing, empathy and unspoken sisterhood.

### **Literature Review**

For this Community Engagement project, the following literature review has been conducted surrounding the question of whether movement, laughter and breath, can create connection with intergenerational women. Research was conducted from peer reviewed articles, books, video sources, and movement inventory sheets based on Laban's Movement Analysis.

## **Elements of Expression**

While there are large variety of components to human expression, this paper will focus on dance movement, including biological and physiological properties, breath, mindfulness and laughter.

**Dance and Movement.** When exploring the notion that the Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) process creates connection, De Patricia (2014) explores the use of breath in dance movement therapy as well as Bartenieff Fundamentals and body connections. Irmgard Bartenieff created her mind body sensory fundamentals after working closely with Rudolf Laban in the nineteen fifties. Rudolf Laban developed Labanotation, which was a way to notate and analyze movement upon observation (Brooks, 1993). Laban was a dancer and choreographer, “Laban wrote prolifically about his evolving theories of movement, which have been collected into a system now widely known as Laban Movement Analysis (LMA)” (Brooks, 1993, p. 30). Laban believed body movements were divided into steps, gestures and facial movements (Moore, 2014).

Laban explored movement and how it contributed to health and wellbeing (Brooks, 1993). Rudolf Laban believed, “the dancer moves, not only from place to place but also from mood to mood” (Moore, 2014, p.25). Laban asserted that different styles of dance and the way the body moves can represent how the mover feels, “when people dance together, their moving bodies create changing relationships in space and time” (Moore, 2014, p. 25). Laban had a significant interest in how the body moved through space and developed movement training for professional dancers and non-professional dancers (Brooks, 1993).

As a student of Laban, Bartenieff developed her theory, “It is a body approach that proposes a sensory-kinesthetic and cognitive experience, taking the body’s totality into account as well as movements’ connectivity” (De Patricia, 2014, p. 207). Bartenieff asserts that the breath is the foundation of her work and helps to facilitate the creation of body awareness in the therapeutic process (De Patricia, 2014). De Patricia (2014) asserts, “Somatic Education as a field of knowledge houses different techniques and methods that approach the body in its potentiality of knowledge construction about itself and the world. Here, the body is understood in its cognitive, motor, affective, and sensory dimensions” (De Patricia, 2014, p. 207). De Patricia (2014) believes that the arts and life experience help facilitate and provide a transformational lens to observe body movement and emotions that emerge as a result (De Patricia, 2014).

Marcia Seigal, a graduate of Laban’s work, describes Bartenieff’s theory and experience of working with her by stating, “She thought mind body, and action are one, the individual is one with the culture, and function with expression, space with energy, art with work with environment with religion” (Moore, 2014, p. 12). Bartenieff stresses that her fundamentals are different from dance training or physical training, but are more of a somatic practice (Moore, 2014). Bartenieff developed six exercises that are practiced in progression from the floor, to kneeling to standing, to help activate different regions of the body and create body awareness and somatic connection (Moore, 2014).

***Biology and physiology of movement.*** Homann (2010) discusses and explores new information and discoveries of neuroplasticity in neuroscientific research around the healing properties of the dance movement therapy process. Homann (2010) explores research that was conducted to support the therapeutic benefits of dance movement therapy interventions and how it relates to brain function. These interventions include, creating a safe container, body

awareness, self-regulation and the benefits and connections they have neurologically "Moving together creates a powerful relational experience and often stimulates a deep subjective feeling of connection" (Homann, 2010, p. 96). Homann (2010) states that witnessing another person's movement neurologically connects with the emotional self, "Building a sense of community, decreasing the experience of emotional isolation, and enriched relational interaction are common outcomes of dance/movement therapy group interventions" (Homann, 2010, p. 96). Homann (2010) asserts that the discovery and continued neurological research on mirror neurons helps to provide a scientific foundation for the effectiveness of dance movement therapy interventions (2010).

Memory processing, the mirror neuron system and somatic markers "provide insight into the interrelationship between mind and body" (Homann, 2010, p. 80). Mirror neurons track nonverbal body communication and are part of the complex system that allows us to understand each other's intentions: "Intentions, memory and emotions are thus integrated through sensory processing" (Homann, 2010, p. 95). Homann (2010) asserts this concept is relative to facilitating body awareness in dance movement interventions to help process subconscious emotions that might be blocked and unable to be expressed verbally.

Winters (2008) focuses on emotions, mirror neurons, and movement in dance movement therapy. Winters (2008) studies the question of whether our emotions change when we watch a person model movement or embody the movements ourselves (Winters, 2008). Emotions are related to different ways the body is moved (Winters, 2008). Winters (2008) reports that results of remirror neurons cannot substantiate a difference between the two. Somatic connection to moving in a certain way can create a primal connection in some movers, eliciting emotional disruption and anger (Winters, 2010). The purpose of this research is to support the process of

dance movement therapy as a credible mental health profession, as well as creating more substantiated support around the connection of this modality with neuroscience, (Winters, 2010).

**Breath.** The use of the breath is key in Bartenieff's theory of movement, "Breath is used to keep the movement alive and to facilitate shape change" (Moore, 2014, p. 53). Moore (2014) states that holding one's breath can keep movement bound, "Holding one's breath tends to reduce the variation of shape flow, leading to a loss of physical fluidity and plasticity that can impede the movement process" (Moore, 2014, p. 53). Lalande et.al. (2012) discusses breath awareness as vital to the reduction of stress and to keep brain chemistry in healthy balance. Zimberoff (2012) researches the unconscious and how breathwork deepens mindfulness, "The unconscious mind is akin to the vast depths of the ocean. However, the breathwork is even deeper since it brings all of this into the depths of our body tissues to uncover and heal body memories" (p. 94). Zimberoff (2012) continues to state that this work accesses body memories that have been deeply seeded in our body for several years. Zimberoff (2012) also asserts that the body doesn't lie and that it is a trustworthy gauge of our emotions and instincts.

Lalande et al (2012) and Zimberoff (2012) discuss the importance of breath in reduction of stress and anxiety, as well as the transformative properties of creating body awareness and bringing body memories safely to the surface. Zimberoff (2012) states, "An example from our work is that when many women first begin breathwork, they may experience being born and giving birth at the very same time. The body holds the birth memories and stores these memories in our cells, our tissues, our organs, our energy field" (Zimberoff, 2012, p. 94). Zimberoff (2012) asserts that in women's bodies they cannot determine energetically whether it is experiencing at a cellular level the process of birth or giving birth. Zimberoff (2012) states that, "These memories are stored in our blood cells and flow through us continually" (p. 94). Zimberoff

(2012) reflects that once the connection is made between the breath and the unconscious, the memories will emerge from the very depths of our unconscious.

**Mindfulness.** The practice of mindfulness has come to the forefront of modern culture in the western world (Thompson, 2018). Thompson (2018) reports that mindfulness is immersing into our culture, not only socially, but in business and educational platforms. Dance movement therapy has been proven to create a connection between the mind and body (Thompson, 2018). Thompson (2018) describes the dictionary meaning of mindfulness as, “the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one’s thoughts, emotions or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis” (p. 28). Thompson (2018) explores the increase of mindfulness programs and examines the history of mindfulness, and its contribution to the field of education.

Thompson (2108) explores the four stages of mindfulness, “Mindfulness of body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of thoughts, mindfulness of phenomena, or how we interact with the world around us” (p.28). Thompson (2018) discusses that mindfulness can be practiced in varied expressive disciplines, “visualization, intentional breathing, yoga, muscle relaxation and meditation” (p. 28). Thompson (2018) states that mindfulness can be practiced individually or in a group setting and is an effective intervention for stress and anxiety.

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn’s theory of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction was originally developed to help with pain management but has gained attention in creating a healthy balance in daily life, work and self-regulation (Kabat-Zinn, 2012). In the video, “Mindfulness for Life,” Kabat-Zinn (2012) defines mindfulness as a way to connect to your life. Kabat-Zinn (2012) asserts to pay attention on purpose in the present moment, non-judgmentally as if your life depended on it. Kabat-Zinn (2012) describes a way to find a wiser relationship with the self

instead of being at the mercy of our fears and anxieties. Staying in the present moment is when we are truly alive and be in our own body (Kabat-Zinn, 2012).

Kabat-Zinn (2012) states that our bodies are made up of more than the five senses. He discusses the theory of proprioception being aware of our body in space. Kabat-Zinn (2012) suggests the idea of knowing and having a sense of our space without having to think about it. Kabat-Zinn (2012) asserts that mindfulness can help us become more present and attuned to our senses, to authentically and organically create an empowered sense of self (Kabat-Zinn, 2012).

**Laughter.** Laughter is another form of expression that is very accessible and an activity we perform every day in social groups, in the workplace, with our families or loved ones, or on our own. In recent years, a body of research has been conducted about the medicinal and therapeutic benefits of laughter Rod (2002). Rod (2002) attempts to answer questions regarding the medical benefits of the process of laughter. Rod (2002) provides an overview of forty-five studies that show evidence of laughter's positive effect on immune system, pain, lowering blood pressure, symptoms of illness and life span. Rod (2002) asserts there are four different mechanisms of humor and laughter that affect well-being, "First, laughter might produce physiological changes in various systems in the body" (p. 216). The second relates to humor and laughter improves mood (Rod, 2002).

The third mechanism can affect the immune system and decrease the likelihood of heart disease (Rod, 2002). Relative to these findings, Rod (2002) asserts that more controls for this research are necessary to continue to validate the benefits of laughter and humor on immunity. In contrast to this study, Dr. Mandan Kataria, a physician from India, claims that there are many health and psychological benefits to laughter, and with his wife developed the practice of

Laughter Yoga (Laughter Yoga University, 2017b). Laughter Yoga University (2017a) provides scientific support to his work stating that laughter can reduce levels of stress in the bloodstream.

Laughter Yoga University (2017a) provides information around how the body cannot differentiate between a fake laugh and a real laugh which seems to correlate with research discussed from Zimberoff (2012). As previously stated, Zimberoff (2012) reports findings that in breathwork, women at physiological and cellular level can have a sensory experience of the birthing process, unable to determine whether they are giving birth or being birthed.

Laughter Yoga University (2017b) conducted his own research by asking four subjects to join in a local park to laugh without jokes or sense of humor. Laughter Yoga University (2017b) claims that within a few days more people joined in and the group eventually grew to fifty people. The results of this practice were experiential, and the participants claimed they felt an elevation in mood (Laughter Yoga University, 2017b).

Realizing that the body chemistry was the same for fake and real laughter, Laughter Yoga University (2017a) felt there was a breakthrough. As time passed with the original laughter group, they ran out of jokes which began to sabotage the positivity of the experience (Laughter Yoga University 2017b). As the individuals came together and laughed, over time Laughter Yoga University (2017b) reports the laughter became more genuine.

Laughter Yoga University (2017b) continued work by developing laughter exercises that involved movement and improvisation. Laughter Yoga University (2017b) reports an integral part of this process is evoking childlike playfulness in the group. In addition, Dr. Kataria's wife, a yoga instructor, realized there was a similarity between breath in yoga and laughter and Dr. Kataria decided to incorporate this into the practice, as deep breathing or prana (Laughter Yoga University 2017b). Laughter Yoga University (2017a) reports that this concept started in 1999

and there are currently more than a thousand laughter clubs worldwide (Laughter Yoga University, 2107b).

Strean (2009) provides a medical perspective regarding the health effects of laughter. With the growing Laughter Yoga clubs and groups, Strean (2009) discusses the hesitance from the medical community to support this as an evidential health benefit. Strean (2009) reports that laughter can be effective in various medical settings, including psychiatric, geriatric, cancer and hospice care, rehabilitation, trauma and rehabilitation. "The prevailing medical paradigm has no capacity to incorporate the concept that a relationship is a physiologic process, as real and as potent as any pill or surgical procedure" (Strean, 2009, p. 966). There is a lack of research due to the medical community's hesitance to endorse its health benefits (Strean, 2009).

Strean (2009) asserts that laughter's effect on stress reduction could show to benefits on natural killer cell activity in Cancer and HIV, with testimonial and percentages of laughter as therapy for patients with cancer (Strean, 2009).

### **Intergenerational Women**

When exploring movement through the expressive modalities with women in a group setting, there are many factors to consider. Research, experience and documentation from process-oriented group therapy helped to create a foundation to build upon for this project. Schmais (1985) introduces eight concepts of movement in groups explored, that were determined relative to the healing process, Synchronicity, Expression Rhythm, Vitalization, Integration, Cohesion, Education and Symbolism (Schmais, 1985). These concepts were determined as nonverbal factors discovered in the primarily verbal focused groups (Schmais, 1985). In addition, the definition of healing process was grounded through the phenomenological lens as

opposed to the basis of medical research when describing the transformative properties of Dance Movement Therapy in groups (Schmais, 1985).

**Body Image.** Pylvanainen (2003) explores body image in the medical, psychological and dance movement therapy fields and how dance movement therapy can help women change how they view their bodies in social settings. Marian Chace's theory is explored around body image, "According to Marian Chace's proposition, there is the idea that body image develops through an individual's experiences in relating to others" (Pylvanainen, 2003, p. 43). Chace also considered body image as "a social formation and believed that we have a tendency to form our body images according to the experiences we obtain through the actions and attitudes of others" (Pylvanainen, 2003, p. 43). Chace and other dance movement therapists focus less on the research or building theories and more on the clinical experience when working with issues of body image (Pylvanainen, 2003).

Kranz (1999) describes clinical experiences that contributed to use of dance movement therapy and focuses on Blanche Evan's theoretical framework, as an intervention for body image issues. Definitions of eating disorders in this article are based in Evans work through the lens of relational and developmental theory (Kranz, 1999). Trauma and societal influences are explored as a possible trigger for the behaviors associated with an eating disorder, "Evan's model used psychodynamic concepts, such as the unconscious, defense mechanisms, and resistance, in terms of recognizable psychophysical experiences that could be moved" (Krantz, 1999, p. 85). Four different dimensions of body image are discussed, sensorimotor, boundaries, space and body awareness, and expressive forms related to body image Kranz (1999).

Schilder's concept of body image as the reflection of the individual's inner and outer world, was the foundation for Evans' work with this population (Kranz, 1999). Case studies of

Evans' methodology with this population are examined, and her integration of her psychophysical approach, the unconscious and interventions with dance, voice and movement (Kranz, 1999).

**Women working in groups.** Davis, Weitz and Culkin (1980) explored movement styles of women through the lens of Laban's language of movement, "Sex roles are often revealed in the microprocesses of everyday interaction, including nonverbal communication" (Davis, Weitz & Culkin, 1980, p. 4). Davis, Weitz and Culkin (1980) revealed that women are more aware of nonverbal cues than men. These findings also indicate that women are more comfortable moving with women than men. In addition, women move with less aggression than men.

When exploring movement through the expressive modalities with women in a group setting, there are many factors to consider. Davis, Weitz and Culkin (1980) discuss evidence of sex differences in the details of body movement style with women and men. Davis, Weitz and Culkin (1980) discuss a study that was conducted over a four-year period focused on nonverbal communication between men and women through the movement lens. "Women were found to make more head movements and to articulate their hand and forearm in gestures more, while men sat in wider positions with marked trunk leans to the side" (Davis, Weitz & Culkin, 1980, p. 5). Davis, Weitz and Culkin (1980) observed that in the group setting women were more comfortable moving together in contrast to when they were moving with men.

**Age.** Fersh (1980) reports, "The dance/movement therapy group offers the elderly an opportunity to explore, express and share feelings and experiences together, interweaving nonverbal and verbal elements of communication" (p. 35). Fersh (1980) reflects on the philosophy of aging and discusses the importance of movement and how dance movement therapy can stimulate the life force for well-being, "In terms of the psychosocial dimensions of

aging, multiple loss can be a major theme in the experience of growing older” (Fersh, 1980, p. 35). Fersh expands on the aspects of aging, including loss that support the need for to dance movement therapy interventions with this population, “These losses can include the death of a marital partner, friends, or relatives; the decline of physical health and the approach of death; and the loss of status, income, and participation in society” (Fersh, 1980, p. 35). In addition Fersh (1980) states that as adults age they face these losses, the need to process their feelings increases and to find a way to embody a renewed sense of purpose I their own lives.

### **Methods**

A onetime movement and Laughter Yoga session was conducted to observe how women moved together while integrating laughter and breath. This session supplied the foundation for this Community Engagement Project.

### **Participants**

Fourteen women ages 18 to 75 signed up for a workshop advertised as a Laughter Yoga and Movement group at a suburban YWCA. There were two women of Asian descent, one African American, Two Hispanic and nine Caucasian, who responded to a flyer on the YWCA website for a planned onetime event. The women were cooperative and verbalized their interest for what they were about to participate in. A thorough overview of the workshop and what to expect was outlined as well as an opportunity for questions. The space provided for this workshop was appropriate for the size of the group, offering the opportunity for expansive movement when needed.

Informed consent and health release forms containing explanations of possible health risks and privacy of information were handed out a Body Attitude Sheet (see appendix) was used to assess movement in three participants ages, sixty, seventy-four and eighteen and the somatic

connections experienced throughout the group session. There were no predetermined age guidelines for this session and the age group that attended was random.

### **Warm up**

The two-hour session was divided into three parts. They are the warm up, theme development and closure.

**Introduction to session.** The introduction exercise consisted of greeting each other with laughter, moving around the space and greeting each other with hands placed together and bowing. The group was brought back together in the circle to introduce themselves with an individual movement representing their names and to help them express their personalities. This movement was given to also help the group attune to each other somatically and create a body memory for non-communication and recognition with each other. In addition, this movement was facilitated to help each woman to be seen by the rest of the group and to claim her space in the room.

Participants were prompted to be aware of their feet and how they connected to the earth. Participants were asked to take a deep breath in through their nose and out through their mouth as they stood in place. The option to close or open their eyes was offered, in case any of the women had a trauma history. As they stood in place a guided body scan was narrated instructing them to focus on their breath and notice any sensations in the body. The scan began at the feet and was directed up through the body to the top of the head. A guided imagery was included with helping them to embody a golden light that emanated from the middle of the earth and came up through the floor to touch the bottom of their feet. As the exercise continued a reminder of breath awareness and focus on their heartbeats was given.

As the session continued the group was prompted to begin walking through the space, focusing on their breath and their journey through the room. At first, they were asked to focus inward and not acknowledge each other. After a few minutes they were instructed to acknowledge each other, if they wished, and make eye contact. The participants were also instructed to play with their weight as they walked, change direction and experiment with speed as they walked through the space. After the spaces in the room were explored and an initial connection was made with themselves and each other as a group they were asked to come back to the original circle in the center of the room.

A mirroring exercise began as the group leader began swinging their arms side to side and moving their body in the same manner. The group was asked to follow this movement together. The group leader then prompted an individual in the group to add to the movement for the rest of the participants to follow. Each participant took a turn creating a movement and the group repeated this and by the end of the exercise each participant had helped created a collective movement. In addition this exercise was helpful to begin to bond the group and to give an opportunity for each member to feel seen and heard.

### **Theme Development**

**Team building.** An improvisational game of tug of war was played and the group was divided in half and instructed to stand on each side of the room. The group was asked to decide what type of challenge would be in the middle of the room, for example, mud, a deep ravine, or water. The leader tossed an imaginary rope, mirroring heavy weight and let the team members decide what the weight of their rope would be. The group was prompted to work together and organize who would be in front and who would be in back. Through movement the teams were to non-verbally decide who would win as this unchoreographed, improvisational movement

would continue in this exercise. When this decision was made, the group was to pull the other team across the challenge and bring them to their side of the room for a team victory.

The next exercise, to facilitate connection and playfulness consisted of tossing an imaginary ball to each other. Once again, the participants were prompted to decide the weight of the ball and how they would toss it to each other. As the game continued the participants were prompted to think about three things that they like about themselves. The next part of the exercise consisted of each member of the group placing items in the ball and passing it to the next person in the circle. After each group member placed these things into the imaginary ball the group was asked where they would like the ball to go. The different ideas given for the balls next location were to let it float up to the sky into the universe, let it float up to the sky and land on a cloud, or throw it on the ground and jump on it.

**Laughter.** The group was prompted at the end of this exercise to return to the original circle in the middle of the room. An overview and instructions were given for the next section of the session. Laughter Yoga principles were introduced as well as a history of the process and procedures of Laughter Yoga and Breathing exercises. Information around the parameters of the exercises were given along with the criteria of the movements and techniques involved. An explanation of the process of Laughter Yoga was given and the importance of the clapping exercises in between each movement and laughter segment. One of the exercises introduced childlike playfulness by having the participants say, “Very good, very good, yay!”

Milk shake laughter was introduced as the participants imagined holding two glasses of milk and pouring one into the other while making an “eh” sound and then drinking the milkshake while laughing. Exercises that followed began to force the members to take risks in their body movements and in the use of their voices.

**Mirroring.** The exercises given in this session were greeting laughter, clapping laughter, and car laughter. These exercises were performed in five-minute increments as the leader monitored the level of participation and interest. The group was instructed to maintain eye contact with each other as they performed each exercise. The next exercise consisted of an improvisation of rowing a boat. The group was divided into two lines, with participants standing one behind the other. As the rowing motion commenced they were instructed to laugh as they rowed the imaginary boat. In addition they were asked to mirror each other's movements as they rowed.

**Witnessing.** A gibberish exercise was introduced to facilitate nonverbal communication and asking for needs to be met through movement and eye contact. This exercise was named by the group leader, "How was your day?" based on the idea around how couples communicate their needs at the end of their workdays and that sometimes with the words in the way, the other may not feel heard. In addition, with fatigue from the day, the words may not accurately reflect their feelings and sometimes cause tension, hurt feelings and rejection around not being heard.

The group was broken up into partners and asked to take turns telling each other how their day has been and how they are feeling, all in non-sensical gibberish. They were prompted to keep eye contact and be mindful of the other person's body language. Once each participant had a turn, their partner would create a movement in response to them to give them what they might need.

**Attunement.** The group gathered in a circle and the group leader prompted them to stand still and shut their eyes if they were comfortable but offered the opportunity to keep them open, again being mindful of any trauma that could potentially be present with the participants. They were asked to begin laughing in a fake or real laugh and listening to the others in the group.

They were instructed that the laughter may not be consistent and to also notice the stillness in between, laugh and listen for others in the group. This exercise was given to facilitate non-verbal connection and body awareness in each individual as they sensed each other in the group. communication.

**Mindfulness.** The participants were asked to remain in the circle after the laughter naturally ended. A deep breathing exercise was given to attempt to ground them and help them make a deeper connection with their bodies and the emotions that may be coming to the surface as a result of the last exercise. Standing in silence they were prompted to focus on their breath and heartbeat. While breathing, the group was prompted to begin to vocalize on the breath out making a sound. They were instructed to place their hands on their diaphragms and focus on how the breath filled the diaphragm and released up and out of the body. They were asked to focus on the sound of their voices and to raise and lower the volume throughout the exercise.

### **Closing Ritual**

In closing the final exercise given was conga laughter, giving the participants a chance to continue to connect with their voices, and move together in a small celebration of this sharing session. This was the final laughter exercise where the group moved around the room singing in a tribal chant, “Ho ho, ha ha ha,” as a final laughter exercise.

Upon the conclusion of this exercise the group came back together in the original circle to find their own space and stand with their legs slightly apart to feel the ground under their feet. Once grounded another breath in through the nose and out through the mouth was taken as they were prompted to notice any body sensations and to focus on their heartbeat. The participants were prompted to open their eyes and establish eye contact with the members of the group, while placing their hands together honoring each other, honoring themselves and collectively reaching

their hands up to the sky. A final breath was taken and the group thanked for their time and energy.

## **Results**

The following describes the results observed after implementation of the procedure discussed above.

### **Intergenerational Movement Study**

Three participants were observed and assessed by using a Body Attitude Coding Sheet, for the purpose of tracking movement within the age span. One sixty-year-old participant (A), one seventy-four-year-old participant (B) and one 18-year-old female participant (C). Participant (A), moved in bound flow, with little movement in her upper body. (A) moved with direct movement inside her own kinesphere. She remained in bound flow until the tug of war improv, where she explored heavy weight in her lower body to ground herself as she pulled the imaginary rope. Her movement repertoire expanded as the group progressed, especially during the exercise where the group rowed the boat. Her facial expressions relaxed as she continued to attune to the group and by the conga exercise was taking movement risks and embodying the process of laughter.

Participant (B), moved in bound flow, very directly, with little movement in her chest and neck. She maintained eye contact with the other participants as they interacted with movement and during the laughter exercises. She tested her space and movement repertoire with each new exercise and began to move more indirectly in more of a dream state. She began to expand her interaction with the other participants as she moved through the exercises. She became a team leader during the rowing exercise and the tug of war. Her upper body became less bound and she

was embodying the laughter, while opening up her chest and expanding her gestures outside of her kinesphere.

Participant (C) similar to (A) and (B), was bound in her chest, but moved indirectly integrating gesture merger despite being bound in her upper body. She became more exploratory in her movements through space and tested her kinesphere during the skipping exercise and began to increase her arm scapula movement and her lower body half. She began to make eye contact during this exercise and began to be less bound in her head and neck. Participant (C) moved out of her kinesphere during the conga exercise and began to connect with her breath during the laughter yoga exercises.

This group showed evidence of witnessing and holding each other during the session. At the end of the group, relational connection increased, and boundaries of age decreased. The younger participants interacted with the older participants the age line was diminished. It was evident that none of the women were ready to leave at the end of this session and communicated that they wanted to have the opportunity to participate in this type of expressive session again. Contact information was exchanged, tears were shared, supportive hugs and nurturing words were expressed.

As they were interacting any bound movements became more fluid, posture improved, and ease of breath and laughter were evident. A few of the participants shared how afraid they are to laugh, as they are in a grieving process because of the death of a loved one, others felt a sense of relief and mastery by allowing themselves an opportunity to breath and move in this setting.

**Transition to breath.** The question and answer portion of the session gleaned responses of feeling that they deserve to laugh and awareness around not taking enough time for self-care.

One participant expressed that after this session she feels like it is alright for her to take risks and have fun. She shared that she had been grieving over her recently deceased husband and didn't realize how little she was aware of her breath. She revealed not feeling as lonely after sharing this time with the group.

Another participant shared the recent passing of her mother had left her emotionally and physically paralyzed and unaware of her breath. She indicated a shift in her awareness and more open to allowing herself to interact and enjoy the company of the other participants. Another realization among the group was taking the risk to ask for what they need and learning to allow themselves to be witnessed and nurtured by others. General reports from the group indicated they felt more freedom in their movement and connections they made with the other participants through the movement, laughter and breath

### **Discussion**

Discoveries were made in this study in pursuit of answering the question of how movement, laughter and breath could create connection with intergenerational women. Elements of expression were explored that encompassed dance movement therapy, breath, mindfulness and looking through the Laban/Bartenieff lens. Moving, breathing and laughter revealed a natural and organic formation of a group. Supported by the literature and video data collection, consideration of collective women's issues including the aging process, body image, and how this creates a nonverbal connection, helped to add validity to these modalities creating a bond between these women.

An interesting theme that emerged in this work was the resistance around eye contact. When laughter exercises were introduced, there was visible discomfort among the group to engage with each other in that way. After the first introduction exercise of greeting each other

with laughter, there seemed to be an observational, somatic shift not only in their movements, but in the overall energy in the room. Witnessing, group cohesiveness and familiarity developed as the laughter yoga exercises progressed. Laughter seemed to create the most connection and exploration out of their areas of comfort and the participants became masterful and more involved as the session continued. Fear of laughter was a common theme, as well as feelings of self-consciousness around moving and laughing.

As the group continued to work together, especially in the tug of war exercise and the rowing exercise, they began to make more authentic eye contact and became more physically relaxed as they moved around each other in the space. During the tug of war, the team's bodies moved together with synchronicity, not exploring out of their space, but experimenting with different weights.

Members on each side pulled forward and back with varying weights and effort, and the group somatically decided which team would fall into the imaginary mud in the middle of the room. The group worked together and organize who would be in front and who would be in back. A few women chose to be leaders and each participant began to look out for each other and begin to attune to each other.

When observing through the lens of body image, due to the fact there was no mirror, it seemed the women were more comfortable moving in space and did not seem as self-conscious. As a result, breath the participants became less bound in their movements and less held in different areas of their bodies. Instinctually, they began to move around each other in a mindful, yet methodical way, making sure they came back together in the circle in their same places.

For the next exercise, women chose their own partner and the youngest participants chose to work together. The rest of the intergenerational participants were mixed in the coupling. As

they spoke in nonsensical language they were prompted to keep eye contact and be mindful of the other person's body language. Upon processing after the conclusion of this exercise the women said they felt heard by their partner and some embraced each other at the end. A few of the women said they felt nurtured and could feel empathy for their partner without knowing what they were saying. There was a good amount of laughter and release of emotions in this exercise.

In an attempt to make this new formed and bonded group its own expert, members were asked to suggest a laughter exercise for the group to do. One of the old women in the group reported feeling playful and wanted to skip. Eye contact during this exercise increased as did exploration of movement through space and with weight. The members also began to move around each other in a sequential pattern being mindful of other's space.

During one of the final exercises while standing in the circle with eyes shut and laughing randomly the laughs ebbed and flowed as members listened for each other but could not see each other. The attempt to create a somatic bonding and connection became clear as they began to play off of each other's laughter.

As we gathered together for the final closing ritual and gathered in a circle and honored each other, there was a warmth felt in the room and a grounded sense of connection that had occurred. The most transformational part of the group processing was watching the group mix together intergenerationally, for example the young women spent a great deal of time speaking to the seventy-year-old woman in the group. There was a shared sense of having a collective experience and the boundaries of age were broken down, and a tribe was formed.

The findings of this study and the experiential data collection opens the door to further study when finding ways, the Expressive Arts can continue to create connection in groups of all ages. Dance movement therapists need to explore ways to support the phenomenology of the

transformational benefits of movement, laughter and breath. More studies could be conducted to encompass a larger demographic of women in more controlled studies including, interviewing, use of music, writing and narration, guided imagery, visual arts, improv and psychodrama.

There is a rich amount of discovery to be made as the underlying primal connection that women share and their non-verbal communication creates stronger community.

After experiencing the friendship, connection and camaraderie that resulted from this project, I was honored to share such a powerful ninety minutes and witness the factors of age, cultural diversity and self-consciousness disappear. Watching this community of women interact, inspired the idea and importance that women of different generations continue to come together, move together, breathe together and laugh together as a bridge of understanding, empowerment and to strengthen themselves and each other. As they said their goodbyes, numbers were exchanged, hugs were given, and plans made, and this group of women, who randomly signed up for a workshop they weren't quite sure of, left having made verbal and non-verbal connections and a shared experience that showed a visible impact.

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### Appendix

The Body Attitude Coding Sheet was developed in 2013 by Dance Movement Therapists and Professors at Lesley University. Beardall, Blanc and Weaver developed this data collection tool based on Laban's Movement Analysis and Bartinieff Fundamentals. The purpose of this tool is to notate observations and create movement interventions when developing a treatment plan and working with clients. Based on Laban's principles of Body, Effort Shape and Space, BESS. Please refer to table A below for an example of said movement data tool.

Table A

Clients Name: Group or one-on-one		Date:	Setting:			Observer:
<b>Body Attitude</b>		<b>Fundamental Connections</b>		<b>Space/Use of Kinesphere</b>		
Breath		Head/tail		Near / Mid / Far		
Parts: Held   active		Arm/scapula		V   S   H		
Alignment		Heel/coccyx		Dimensions		
Initiation		Thigh/pelvis		Planes		
Gesture / Posture / G/P Merger		Upper/lower		Diagonals		
Upper Right   Upper Left		Body half		<b>Shape</b>		
Lower Right   Lower Left				Shape flow		
Sequencing: simultaneous, successive, sequential				Shaping/carving		
				Directional arc		
				Directional spoke		
<b>Self Observation</b>						
How do you feel emotionally?						
What do you sense and experience in your body?						
<b>Flow</b> Free.....Bound						
<b>Weight</b> Light.....Strong						
<b>Space</b> Indirect.....Direct						
<b>Time</b> Sustained.....Quick						
<b>States / Drives / Phrasing</b>						
Awake Dream		Vision Spell Passion Action		Impactive Impulsive Swing Crescendo Decrescendo		
Rhythm Remote						
Stable Mobile						
<b>Comments/Notes</b>						

**Treatment Plan**

Summary of BESS: What are the patterns that are seen, possible metaphors?

Short-term goals:

Long-term goals:

**THESIS APPROVAL FORM**

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Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences  
Expressive Therapies Division  
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Dance/Movement Therapy, MA

Student's Name: Lisa Jason Hough

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Movement, Laughter and Breath with Intergenerational Women: A Community Engagement Project about Connection

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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