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# Meeting Point: Partner Dancing as Couple's Therapy

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MEETING POINT: PARTNER DANCING AS COUPLE'S THERAPY

A DISSERTATION

submitted by

RAMI ECKHAUS

In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

LESLEY UNIVERSITY  
May 2019



Lesley University  
 Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences  
 Ph.D. in Expressive Therapies Program

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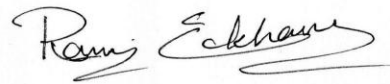
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ram Ekhar", written over a light gray rectangular background.

SIGNED: \_\_\_\_\_

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation research explored the experience of partner dancing as a therapeutic process that reflects upon the dynamics and interactions of couples who are in the process of couple's therapy. The research also aimed to gain insight on the ways in which the experience of partner dancing can support these couples' therapeutic processes. Partner dancing is a dance-form that is based on the interaction between two individuals. Such interaction requires the dancing couples to communicate on many levels that may uncover layers of their relational dynamics. In this research, five couples who were undergoing couple's therapy were asked to participate in four weekly consecutive sessions. The structure of each session consisted of a partner dancing experience and a verbal reflection that related to the couple's dance experience and the ways in which they associated it with their relational dynamics. The qualitative data analysis process included analyzing the raw interview transcripts of the couple's sessions, the pre- and post-interviews that were done with the couples' therapists, and a triangulation process that was conducted by a board certified dance movement therapist. The thematic analysis aimed to detect recurrent themes including areas of similarities and differences in the way these themes manifested through the couples' experiences. The eight categories that emerged were fundamentally tied to couples' relational issues and included the aspects of communication, intimacy, synchronization, attunement, negotiating spaces, interpersonal dynamics, shifts in daily life, and the couples' impressions of partner dancing as a couple's therapy format. Findings indicated that the couples' non-verbal overt physical dynamics allowed a meaningful process of reflection while unearthing their attitudes and actions that impacted their relational cycle. Thus, the overall experience acted as a field

that operated on psychological and emotional levels, highlighting the couples' abilities and challenges to engage with each other on multiple levels, such as verbal, emotional, and physical. The conclusions indicated that the utilized structure of partner dancing combined with an elaborative reflective process could foster novel clinical practice in furthering couple's therapeutic processes and treatment plans, whether as a collaborative process, as adjunct, or as a main therapeutic practice method.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

The Japanese movie *Shall We Dance?* (Suo, 1996) tells the story of a worn-out, successful businessman who, regardless of his shyness, secretly starts taking ballroom dance lessons. Slowly, changes begin to occur in his life as he becomes more confident, fulfilled, and alive; his social, business, and eventually personal relationships change as a result of his immersion in this art-form. This motion picture illustrated a few of many attributes of partner dancing (PD) as a leisure activity. The popularity of PD, which includes Argentine tango, ballroom, and Latin dances (for example, rumba, salsa, foxtrot, and waltz), has increased throughout the past decades: theater and television shows have all taken part in the global exposure of this set of dances. Despite the growing awareness of the healing effects of PD on cognitive, mental, and physiological aspects (Kshtriya, Barnstaple, Rabinovich, & DeSouza, 2015), and though gaining popularity, only recently have researchers started to empirically study and evaluate the influences of this set of dances. Several studies have centered on the positive effects of PD on the frail elderly: improving physical skills, (McKinley et al., 2008), cognitive capacities and mental functions (Kattenstroth, Kalisch, Holt, Tegenthoff, & Dinse, 2013), spatial cognition and executive functions (McKee & Hackney, 2013), and reducing depression (Haboush, Floyd, Caron, LaSota, & Alvarez, 2006). Other studies have found that PD had notable benefits for people suffering from mental diseases such as Parkinson's disease, (Hackney & Earhart, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Hackney, Kantorovich, & Earhart, 2007), Alzheimer's (Abreu & Hartley, 2013; Rösler et al., 2002), and dementia (Guzmán-García, Mukaetova-Ladinska, & James, 2013) while improving cognitive skills, physical functions, bonding,

wellbeing, and overall quality of life. Though some studies have noted limitations in using dance as a rehabilitation technique (Demers, Thomas, Wittich, & McKinley, 2015), researchers have found clear evidence for the general health and fitness benefits of PD (Guidetti et al., 2015), contributing to relationships with partners and overall quality of life of cancer survivors (Pisu et al., 2017), improving functional capacity (Belardinelli, Lacalaprice, Ventrella, Volpe, & Faccenda, 2008), suggesting favorable results on body size perception (Fonseca, Thurm, Vecchi, & Gama, 2014), reducing stress levels (Pinniger, Brown, Thorsteinsson, & McKinley, 2012), alleviating mood disorders, and promoting life satisfaction and self-efficacy (Pinniger, Thorsteinsson, Brown, & McKinley, 2013).

While results of these studies are promising, they have mostly overlooked the emotional and psychological benefits of PD. Compared to other dance forms that do not necessarily rely on partner collaboration, PD demands communication, collaboration, and attunement between the dancing partners (van Alphen, 2014) and can assist in developing nonverbal ways of communication (Picart, 2002). Therefore, PD can serve as a means to reveal interactional styles (Kimmel, 2013; Tremayne & Ballinger, 2008).

In this relation, it was suggested that couples' joint activity can also enhance the quality of intimate relationships (Ricard, Beaudry, & Pelletier, 2012) and positive emotional states (Kreutz, 2008; Quiroga Murcia, Bongard, & Kreutz, 2009). While Hawkes (2003) described the ways in which PD could raise interpersonal themes, others have stressed the necessity of connection and intimacy (Denniston, 2007), or promotion of bonding and trust within the dancing couple (Pinniger et al., 2012), that allow the revealing of human dynamics (van Alphen, 2014).

Not surprisingly, the ability to communicate and express one's needs in any relationship is also one of the main themes that has been researched in couple's therapy in order to help couples improve their "relationship satisfaction" (Lebow, 2013, p. 2), communication and relationship distress (Shadish & Baldwin, 2005), or conflict resolution and positive exchange (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). Evidently, research has been collected on couple's therapy, and studies have detected the healing potential that lies in PD, though no research has yet explored the innate value of PD in relation to couple's therapy, which introduces a unique platform to explore multiple questions that relate to couples interactions (Bucci, 2011; Picart, 2002; van Alphen, 2014; Watanabe-Hammond, 1990).

In this vein, in 2017 a pilot study was conducted by this researcher with the aim to explore partner dances as an art form that can facilitate the expression of couples' dynamics and interactions. The intent was to gain insight on how these dynamics might (as revealed in the dance expression) relate and be applied into the clinical setting of couple's therapy. This study looked at the experiences of three couples who met with the researcher for four sessions. These sessions combined learning PD and processing the content that surfaced as a result of the dance interaction. The overall findings related to foundational relational aspects and promoted awareness to the ways in which exploring the art form of PD can contribute to processes of couple's communication, expression, and growth.

Based on these encouraging results, compounded with the fact that the participating couples in the pilot were not in the process of couple's therapy, this current dissertation was proposed in order to gain insight on the experience of PD as a

therapeutic process that reflects upon the dynamics and interactions for couples who are presently in therapy. This research also aimed to explore the ways in which the experience of PD can support or enhance the couples' therapeutic process.

The research was carried out in Israel, a country known for its political and cultural complexity, layered with multiple religions (Jews, Muslims, and Christians), nationalities, and ethnicities. Its predominant Jewish population is comprised of multiple religious denominations and ethnic groups (such as Sefarad and Ashkenaz) that range from secular to ultra-orthodox. Acknowledging Israel's ethnic diversity, the research was open to all couples who could attend without any restrictions of nationality, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. Furthermore, while noting Israel's mosaic cultural nature, the lens of this research was primarily a relational one that aimed to expand therapeutic processes and assist couples in the ebb and flow of their dynamics. Therefore, this study focused on PD as a tool that can unveil relational constructs by creating a structure that intertwined PD with a reflective process. As will be discussed in Chapter 4 , such structure can be framed into a model that provides vital knowledge that could be applied within the frames of expressive therapies and couple's therapy. Lastly, due to the scarcity in the literature that relates to couple's therapy through expressive therapies and movement therapy in particular, this research broadened the use of dance movement therapy; it paves the way for novel clinical practices as well as new research avenues that could further the field of dance movement therapy, benefiting clients and clinicians with therapeutic insights and competencies.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Literature Review**

The aim of this literature review is to examine literature on PD while connecting the findings to the therapeutic structure and central themes that reside in couple's therapy, thereby providing a foundation for future research of PD as a new form of couple's psychotherapy. This review will examine literature on the following aspects: (a) health and wellbeing effects of PD, (b) relational characteristics of PD, (c) an overview of couple's therapy, (d) different issues in couple's therapy, (e) attachment and relationships, (f) relationships and intimacy, (g) creativity and expressive therapies for couples, (h) touch and movement in couple's work, and (i) dance and the metaphor of dance in couple's work.

#### **Health and Wellbeing Effects of PD**

While engaging in PD can provide various benefits, this review sought to comprehend how the characteristics of PD could contribute to one's wellness and quality of life. Roberson and Pelclova (2014) conducted a qualitative study especially aimed at understanding how social dancing could contribute to the wellbeing of seniors. Over a period of three years, researchers acted as participant-observers in 10 social ballroom dance events that were held once a week in two dance halls. Informants were asked to fill out questionnaires, comprised of multiple-choice items and open-ended questions, during dance recesses, and 87 questionnaires were analyzed. The researchers found that the activity promoted enjoyment and the qualitative data supported three main findings: (a) social dancing can be considered a physical activity, (b) social dancing can promote a spontaneous social atmosphere of enjoyment and interaction, and (c) social dancing can

allow reconnection to one's past and history. While this study exhibited a process of prolonged engagement as well as an interesting debriefing process that was carried out by a focus group that discussed the benefits of the dance experiences, triangulation seemed insufficient since only questionnaires were used to evaluate the contribution of social dancing. Furthermore, the lack of details regarding the questionnaires impacted this study's credibility. Nonetheless, this study exhibited potential positive social and emotional benefits of PD for elderly people.

Additional benefits of PD were explored by Kreutz (2008), who sought to understand the role of Argentine tango in people's identities, motivations, and social relationships. During dance evenings at tango venues, participants ( $N = 110$ ) were asked to fill out a questionnaire that was designed to provide information about emotional, physical, individual, and social potential benefits in tango dancing. The analysis showed that 64% of the dancers who were in a close relationship chose to dance with their own life-partner. Furthermore, the most common motivational factor to dance tango that accounted for 85% of the dancers was stress reduction, which was related to relaxation, enjoyment, and mood regulation. Other motivational factors for tango dancing, which accounted for almost 60% of the dancers, were physical, emotional, and social benefits. While this study provided valuable information about the different rewards of tango dancing, it seems that further research with in-depth analysis, possibly including qualitative interviews, could provide additional pertinent information regarding the nature of the emotional benefits that were not discussed at length in the study.

### **Relational Characteristics of PD**

#### **PD as a Dance of Cooperation**



Though the previous studies centered on the benefits of PD on wellbeing, the current literature has mostly overlooked the emotional and psychological effects that lie in PD. Bernstein (1979) theoretically discussed the characteristics of PD, comparing them to "a micro-study in cooperation" (p. 2). Bernstein noted several aspects of PD that are required for their smooth execution, such as the man's clear lead and the woman's attentiveness to the leader's role. Bernstein suggested that PD allow people to explore a wide range of emotions and therefore carry expressive, therapeutic, and psychological aspects that relate to communication and interpersonal contact. Similar to Bernstein, in her ethnography, Picart (2002) highlighted the aspects of cooperation and non-verbal communication between the dancing partners as a primary feature in PD.

### **PD as Reflecting Gender Roles**

Partner dances are predominantly based on an interaction between a man and a woman. Therefore, they can raise awareness to gender roles that are illustrated through the dance. Savigliano (1995) and Davis (2015) both wrote about tango as a dance that embodies traditional hierarchical gender differences and disparities. Savigliano (1995) claimed that the encounter between men and women on the dance floor reinforces heteronormative power relations, and Davis (2015) asserted in her ethnography that the codified interactions that are a part of the tango culture emphasizes couple inequality by the meanings of dominant masculinity and subservient femininity it reproduces. Based on feminist theories, Davis linked the notion of passion to power and therefore viewed tango as creating a "politics of passion" (p. 9). She claimed that in these interactions, men exude hierarchical supremacy as leaders and negate women's autonomy by leaving them little control and making them dependent in a narrow space (the dance hold). Littig

(2013) also enhanced this view of tango as a dance that portrays gender roles and reinforces traditional gender dichotomies through the etiquette and norms it exudes.

Contrary to the aforementioned feminist theories that questioned the themes of shared activity and cooperation between the dancing partners, Leib and Bulman (2009) studied gender expressions and identity of 62 social and competitive ballroom dancers ( $n_{female} = 32$ ;  $n_{male} = 30$ ) in San Francisco whose ages ranged from 18 to 70 years and who identified as educated, progressive, and middle to upper-class. The majority of the sample identified as white or Caucasian and politically liberal. In-depth interviews and observations of lessons, parties, and ballroom competitions were conducted, aiming to understand the rising popularity of ballroom dancing despite its traditional and constricting gender norms. The authors found that the perception of gender in ballroom practices reflected current expressions of femininity and masculinity as a multi-layered identity. They also argued that many dancers today are progressive egalitarians who incorporate an array of feminine and masculine characteristics into their daily gender identities" (p. 605).

The authors (Leib & Bulman, 2009) found that though female participants (both hetero and lesbian) recognized that most of the decisive traits were assigned to the leading roles, they viewed their roles as equally contributing to the dance performance. The authors also noticed that female dancers freely constructed their gender identity on and off the floor and even redefined their roles in the dancing partnership. Regarding the men's position, the current ballroom scene led the authors to suggest that participation in PD defied traditional gender masculinity and allowed men (both hetero and gay participants) to balance feminine and masculine identity aspects in the form of equal

participation, emotional connectedness, and emotional creative expression. The authors concluded that the ballroom arena is a safe place to explore traditional norms and gender roles as well as alternative characteristics of femininity and masculinity without being bound to traditional standards.

It should be noted that the lack of information regarding the interview process limits the trustworthiness of these findings, and the authors (Leib & Bulman, 2009) also noted that their findings could not be generalized to the American ballroom community due to the lack of racial and political diversity in the sample. Nonetheless, this exploratory study highlighted the opportunities of PD to explore gender identities and could serve as the basis for future studies on gender norms and cultural expressions in postmodern society.

In his discussion of the social fundamentals of tango, Olszewski (2008) strengthened the notion of raising collaboration and mutual dialogue between partners versus the reinforcement of traditional gender dichotomies. Olszewski conducted an ethnographic qualitative research study investigating the embodied experience of the dancing partners as a participant observer in Argentine tango halls during a period of five months. Based primarily on his own experiences as a researcher, teacher, and dancer, as well as on informal interviews, Olszewski emphasized the social quality of PD and demonstrated how the intimacy that is created in the dance is predicated on the relationship between the two partners and how the spontaneous improvisational character of the dance is a result of a live human interaction and connection. Contrary to critical feminist views that perceived PD as perpetuating dichotomized roles (Davis, 2015; Littig, 2013; Savigliano, 1995), Olszewski offered a perception of the dance couple as active

collaborators who are engaged in a shared experience. Olszewski also highlighted the equality between the roles of the leader and follower, both carrying aspects of intensity and assertiveness. While some concerns with trustworthiness and research ethics affected the credibility of this study, relying on informal interviews conducted without informed consent, this important study allowed access to the individual and relational meaning of the shared partner dance experience that hadn't yet been highlighted.

### **PD as Revealing Interactional Styles and Dynamics**

Notably, the aspect of required interaction between two individuals in PD consists of multiple layers in regards to their relational roles and dynamics. Matzdorf and Sen (2016) suggested that the embodied experience of PD could provide potential insights to explore the parallels between the concepts of leadership and followership in competitive ballroom and in organizational arenas. Contrary to traditional dichotomous views of leading and following as split and mutually exclusive (men lead, women follow), Matzdorf and Sen's aim was to gain insight into the way these concepts are mutually constructed and enabled.

In their autoethnography, the authors described their experiences facilitating workshops using dance and participating in amateur dance competitions. Matzdorf and Sen provided a modern view that integrated aspects of both roles of leading and following in each of the partners' movements, thus framing the constricting definitions of leader and follower as leader and co-leader.

The (male) leader's responsibilities were described as planning, communication, and modifying the dance in response to the feedback and environment he is dancing in. The (female) co-leader's responsibilities were defined as listening to the signals from the

leader, taking the lead in the sense of filling or making space, and creating her own action. Though each of the partners was described as having defined roles, the aspects of constructing a relationship that consists of trust, acceptance, and the creation of a private space was noted. By exploring the responsibilities of both dance partners, the authors demonstrated how various aspects of organization arenas are embodied in the complexity of the role demands from both dance partners, such as communication, tuning into others, and being flexible to plan changes.

Matzdorf and Sen's discussion provided important insights that could be further qualitatively researched to anchor these findings. It should be noted that the authors' aim to promote growth by creatively comparing the two realms of PD and the work place could also be translated to other fields; the most natural one would be in working with couples' relationships and dynamics. Similar to the cooperative aspects discussed in the workplace, couples' relationships have also been widely described as a dance of cooperation; though, as yet, no research has been done to explore how PD could actually be used as a modality tool to explore couple's relationships.

As previously mentioned, the review of the literature found limited empirical research examining the psychological aspects raised in PD, though some authors theorized about the ability of PD to reveal inter-relational themes. Hawkes (2003) described a working process of an Argentine tango group as one that facilitates not only self-body awareness, but also the practice of non-verbal ways of communicating while relating to others. The author further asserted that dancing with a partner raised multiple interpersonal issues that could allow one to explore relational polarities such as experiencing roles of passive versus active; guiding versus following and listening,

bonding and separating, decision-making, and trust. According to Hawkes, the mutual dance experience could also produce a sense of harmony and oneness between the dancing couple that may also raise therapeutic themes concerning individuation, separation, and various resistances. Denniston (2007) also described the partnered dance of Argentine tango as one that allows participants to explore human relationships since it produces a non-verbal dialogue and stresses the necessity of features like connection and intimacy within the couple in order to be fully immersed in the dance.

Tateo (2014) enhanced this view through a phenomenological study of an Italian tango group by using semi-structured interviews and observations as a member-researcher during several months. Tateo concluded that Argentine tango dancing framed representations of life and produced psychological processes with themes such as intimacy, empathy, gender relationships, affect, and group dynamics. The researcher also related to the harmony that was created between the couple as a third entity, seeing the improvisational character of tango as a conversation between the man and the woman, rather than as the dichotomist view of leader and follower.

By characterizing the innate relational qualities in Argentine tango, Papart (2015) added yet another notion, arguing that tango can be employed within a therapeutic setting to enhance "interpersonal, communicative, and erotic skills" (p .29). The author highlighted that the communicative power of tango stems from its ability to transcend verbal messages by stimulating non-verbal motor and sensory cues, reciprocal attention to movement, and awareness to the surfacing emotions within oneself as well as within the dance partnership. Papart claimed that erotic functions are created by communicating a combination of sentiments, fantasy, and desire that are developed within the frame of

communicative competencies. Therefore, the author suggested that tango is a practice that can specifically promote such communicative and erotic competencies. Based on Papart's intriguing premise, it can be assumed that all partner dances that have similar communicative traits could be used to enhance erotic expressions, which would be worthwhile to explore in a research capacity.

Similar relational themes were explored in a qualitative study by Hewer and Hamilton (2010), who analyzed member posts on a salsa forum. Hewer and Hamilton found that salsa dancing not only promoted the buildup of individual emotions in the construction of one's self but also fostered sharing emotions with another by developing the partners' non-verbal communication skills. The researchers also pointed out that salsa dancing contributed to the exploration of emotional expressions. While highlighting valuable aspects of non-verbal communication, relying on self-report online posts poses a threat to this study's credibility due to questions of authenticity of self-presentation in online forums.

To conclude, the discussed literature above raised awareness as to how PD can provide a context to study psychological topics such as ways of communication, couples' inter-relational dynamics, intimacy, and trust (Denniston, 2007; Hawkes, 2003; Olszewski, 2008), as well as exploring couples' roles and gender relationships (Savigliano 1995). It must be noted that these aspects were specifically discussed in relation to a connection between men and women. While groups and competitions of same sex couples do exist, currently there is no literature that addresses non-conforming relationships in PD (such as the LGBT community), including the challenges or benefits it could reveal. Such aspects would be worthwhile to explore in future research.

### **An Overview of Couple's Therapy**

Not surprisingly, similar themes noted above in PD studies are dealt with in different approaches of couple's psychotherapy that aim to assist the couple to develop adequate coping skills to address relational issues (Wile, 1988). Couple's therapy approaches differ in their primary principles and theoretical foundations. Wile (1981), a renowned couple's therapy expert, delineated three main traditional approaches for couple's therapy that reflect the period he was writing in. The first is the psychoanalytic approach, which centers in infantile impulses, childhood conflicts, and the theme of separation-individuation, linking present problematic or destructive patterns to childhood events or unconscious processes. Through this lens, relationship difficulties are seen as unresolved childhood conflicts that need to be unblocked to facilitate positive relationships. The second approach is the systems approach, which focuses the attention on the couple as a unit trying to adapt to changes while maintaining homeostasis and being flexible and adaptable. Through this lens, partnership is viewed as having a reciprocal influence, so that one's behavior is seen as a cause or effect of that of the other (Zinker & Gestalt Institute of Cleveland., 1994). The third approach is the behavior therapy approach, which centers on positive reinforcement, translating partnership issues to behavioral terms, focusing on communication skills, and changing interpersonal behavioral patterns.

While there are numerous approaches to couple's therapy, current trends focus on integrative therapeutic modalities that weave and expand on these traditional approaches, combining cognitive, biological, psychological, and psychodynamic theories in order to tailor the treatment for the couples' needs. Snyder and Durbin (2012) discussed the



usefulness of these integrative approaches and argued that such approaches benefit by selecting specific interventions from various models to assist the client. Their main claim was that in order to produce effective therapeutic results, the treatment has to be matched to the couple's needs. For this reason, the authors suggested that studies should also focus on common and distinguishing factors in couple's therapy to allow shifting between approaches in the course of therapy.

In order to outline a framework of unifying themes among the wide range of couples therapies, Benson, McGinn, and Christensen (2012) gathered information from empirically supported interventions in couple's therapy that used various models. The authors outlined five common fundamental principles: (a) assisting the couple to communicate their difficulties in an objective way and assess each one's part in relationship hardships, (b) reducing emotional dysfunctional behavior, (c) eliciting emotional avoidant behaviors that lessen the couples' ability to experience emotional closeness and intimacy, (d) enhancing positive communication patterns, and (e) emphasizing and reinforcing achievements. The authors suggested that providing treatment principles as well as ways to carry them out could allow therapists to fit their interventions into a framework (regardless of the specific approach used) instead of clinging to a treatment manual. It should be noted that research has not yet established the effectiveness of each specific principle in enhancing relationship satisfaction.

### **Different Issues in Couple's Therapy**

#### **Power and Egalitarianism**

While having common themes, the literature has also demonstrated several issues dealt with in couple's therapy. One general theme in couple's therapy focuses on power,

dominance, equality in relationships and their effect on marital satisfaction. An observational study (Whisman & Jacobson, 1990) examined the concept of marital-power inequality as reflected in dominance through verbal communication patterns during conversation: dominance through talking (defined as focusing on one's own experiences) or dominance through not listening (defined as a lack of interest in the spouse's words, withholding information, and limiting communication). Participants in this study consisted of distressed couples ( $n = 31$ ) who were defined by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) and non-distressed couples ( $n = 23$ ) defined by absence of marital distress according to the DAS. Verbal behavior was coded through the Verbal Content Coding System (VCCS). After initially participating in a video communication assessment, couples completed the DAS and were taped while discussing events of their day. The tape was then coded, and couples participated in 23 sessions of social learning marital therapy designed to increase positive changes and communication. The results demonstrated a statistically significant negative relationship between power inequality and satisfaction, suggesting the association between higher inequality and less satisfaction for distressed couples ( $r(22) = -0.39, p < 0.05$ ). In addition, researchers found that when couples exhibited greater power inequality, they were more likely to benefit from their treatment and develop marital satisfaction after therapy (partial  $r(29) = 0.35, p < 0.05$ ) and at follow up (partial  $r(18) = 0.39, p < 0.05$ ). In other words, experiencing greater power inequality and reduced satisfaction allowed couples to benefit more extensively from social learning in marital therapy that could assist them in resolving these issues. In addition to the limitations stated by researchers, such as relying only on speaking content that may be biased and susceptible to expectations, the lack of

randomization process due to the quasi-experimental design presented a major limitation to this study's findings. Notwithstanding this limitation, this study demonstrated the significance of power differences within a relationship that should be further explored in future research, possibly considering a different randomization and control group and other interaction styles that reveal power differences.

### **Aspects of Trust and Communication in Couple's Therapy**

In addition to the themes discussed above, couple's therapy also deals with relational aspects that affect the subject of trust and communication styles. Rempel, Ross, and Holmes (2001) studied how trust influenced the way married couples ( $N = 35$ ) attributed meaning to experienced events. Trust was defined as the individual's confidence in the partner's willingness to respond to his or her needs even when conflicted with his or her own preferences. The researchers found a significant linear relationship between trust and attributions,  $F(1,33) = 7.94, p < 0.01$ , as well as a positive relationship between the characteristics of the events and the attributions given ( $r = 0.59, p < 0.01$ ). These results led the researchers to suggest that couples defined as having low-trust were expressing more negative attributions while attribution statements in high-trust couples centered on positive relational aspects. Interestingly, it was found that couples who were defined as having low-trust expressed fewer affective attribution statements, aiming to avoid further conflict. The researchers concluded that the level of trust in the relationship influenced communication dynamics. It should be noted that the researchers did not fully consider the nature of the events couples related to in their attributions; this should be also taken into account in future research. A subsequent study (Miller & Rempel, 2004) also found that individuals who attributed positive motives to their

partner's behavior demonstrated high trust in their partner, regardless of their partner's behavior, and vice versa: individuals who demonstrated high-trust in their partner tended to attribute positive motives to their partner's behavior. These results suggested that one's behavior and one's attributions to the partner's motives both carry a role in relational trust.

### **Attachment and Relationships**

So far, the literature review has discussed some of the central issues in couple's therapy. Another therapeutic paradigm that relies on the influence of one's primary internalized attachment models on the formation of adult relationship has shown great promise.

#### **Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)**

The approach of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) that bases itself on attachment perspectives focuses primarily on emotions and their role in couples' relationships. Johnson (2007), this approach's founder, relies on the fundamentals of Bowlby's (1969, 1988) concepts of attachment and stresses the human need for emotional safety and responsiveness, appreciation, dependability, and care.

Johnson (2004) described how EFT can provide a new language for the process of couple's therapy while focusing on the question, "How do we get from alienated distress to safer, more satisfying closeness and effective communication?" (p. 7). She claimed that every couple has a unique relational dance as they unconsciously negotiate their needs for a safe emotional connection with another. Such a dance may include feelings of anguish, sadness, anxiety, or fear from rejection. By working on each of the partners' experiences and underlying relational fears (stemming from internalized early attachment

models), the couple could learn to "communicate and regulate emotions" (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008) as they develop new positive ways of relating to each other.

Underlining the importance of emotion in relationships, Johnson (2007) asserted that the intimate interactions (and not the conflicts) that a couple experiences are the best predictors for the quality of the relationship. In this regard, EFT focuses on the couple's emotional interactions that surface during the session and underlines the importance of new experiences that would allow strengthening the couple's connection instead of focusing on the negative dividing issues. For this reason, Johnson stressed the need for creating bonding moments between the couple during therapy while discussing the partner's need for attachment. Achieving bonding was also described by paying attention to non-verbal physical engagement interactions such as having a couple face one another or look at each other while sharing their basic emotional needs.

In conclusion, contrary to therapeutic approaches that focus on conflict resolution or task interventions, EFT does not aim to resolve communication circuits or negotiate pragmatic issues as a main goal since, from its theoretical perspective, distressed couples cannot change their communication during a situation of vulnerability or anxiety. Therefore, the main idea of this approach is to validate both partners' needs and secure their emotional bond through new emotional experiences that allow for the disentanglement of their dynamics.

Being a relational approach, EFT invites couples into a new relational experience in order to create a shift in their interactional cycle. This principle may hold promise to construct therapeutic approaches that would use live interactional experiences in the

process of couple's therapy. Such interactions may include forms of movement such as PD, as will be discussed further on.

### **Relationships and Intimacy**

EFT has underscored not only the way early attachment operates in adult relationships, but also its influence on a couple's ability to experience closeness and intimacy. Though the concept of intimacy has been widely used in discussing relationships, it requires some clarification. Noting the lack of research on the definition and concept of intimacy, Register and Henley (1992) aimed to gain a deeper understanding of this concept through a qualitative phenomenological study. Eleven males and nine females whose ages ranged from 25 to 75 years (*Mage* = 32.4) were recruited from university and college evening courses. Their relational status encapsulated different relationship categories such as married, divorced, widowed, living together, or single. The subjects were asked to write a clear and detailed description of a specific intimate experience; they were not given any time restrictions.

The thematic analysis yielded seven themes related to intimacy: (a) non-verbal forms of communication (gestures, acts); (b) *presence*: noting physical and non-physical aspects of the other's existence; (c) *time*: noting that the intimate experience had a specific period of endurance; (d) *boundary*: described as a sense of togetherness and creating a space for the other in one's world without physical or psychological boundaries; (e) involvement of the body in physical intimate contact with another and raising awareness to physical sensations with self and other; (f) *destiny and surprise*: a combination of a feeling of an unexpected and spontaneous act that was however still meant to happen; and (g) *transformation*: having a feeling of insight or change of two

entities caused by the act of relationship union. The last theme also indicated the ability of intimate experiences to create changes in individual lives and in relationships.

These findings furthered the understanding of the underlining themes of intimacy that might be explored further in future research. It should be noted that the qualitative method allowed gathering insightful information about the theme of intimacy, a peer debriefing process increased this study's credibility, and an elaborate description of the analysis procedure enhanced its trustworthiness.

Popovic (2005) theoretically explored the constructs of closeness and intimacy and noted that while these concepts may be used interchangeably, they each carry unique aspects. Popovic explained that while intimacy is widely linked to a romantic or sexual perception, the concept of closeness that may include various aspects such as affection, desire, and curiosity is usually connected to an emotional one. Regardless of the intersection between these concepts, the author highlighted that mature intimacy can be founded on layers that include communicating needs and understanding the origins of dysfunctional behavior while replacing it with affective relational interaction. Consequently, Popovic argued that "therapeutic strategies that facilitate closeness may empower and ease couples into working together as a team in confronting their problems" (p. 45).

Patricik and Beckenbach (2009) also argued that intimacy is an important construct of relationships that is connected to trust, self-disclosure, emotional expression, commitment, and love. The authors specifically aimed to learn about the ways men define intimate experiences. Five male participants, whose ages ranged from 21 to 50, were recruited. All participants had had prior relationships with women, though one

identified himself as gay. The participants were interviewed in semi-structured interviews that consisted of 14 open-ended narrative-based questions.

The thematic analysis discussed definitions of intimacy and described it as affecting the way the participants related to their partners and involved different levels of verbal, physical, and emotional sharing. Participants noted that intimacy allowed them a sense of authenticity and vulnerability with their partners in a way that was different from their ways of being in the company of other men. It was also found that physical expression was an important layer in communicating emotional connection and intimacy. Lastly, all men expressed their desire for intimacy and the way social constructs of masculinity influenced the perception of intimacy, wanting the space that would allow them to be vulnerable without being perceived as effeminate at the same time.

Though a member checking process enhanced the credibility of this study's findings, triangulation and member checking in future research may increase its validity. Nonetheless, this interesting study highlighted male perceptions of intimacy, thus offering important implications in research and clinical practice.

In another related study, Cole (2014) aimed to gain an understanding of the importance of intimacy and embodied experiences in relationships of both male and females. Cole asserted that "to become intimate with someone else usually tends to either be mediated through or focused on the body" (p. 87). By providing several case studies that focused on changes in perceptions of intimacy for those who have suffered from the loss of physical abilities, Cole's article shed light on the general human need for intimacy in relationships and raised awareness to the way couples can experience mutual embodied experiences through different types of touch and physical sensations.



### **Creativity and Expressive Therapies for Couples**

As seen, the literature above discussed the concept of relational intimacy and the way couples can enhance it in various ways. The expressive therapies paradigm is another therapeutic model that could assist in enhancing a couple's attunement and sense of embodiment. In a theoretical paper, Kossak (2009) discussed how expressive therapies could be used to deepen a therapeutic alliance while integrating different concepts of "play, improvisation, aesthetics...and mind/body connections" (p. 13). Underlining the importance of the concept of attunement and embodiment as a kinesthetic physical experience, Kossak explained how the practices of expressive therapies assist in focusing on clients' present states. These practices can create a shift in their awareness of self and others and heighten their sense of connectivity and intimacy. Erskine (1998) also discussed the concept of attunement and emphasized the aspect of sensing others through kinesthetic and emotional ways that allow a reciprocal shared experience with another. Erskine elaborated how the need for attunement is met relationally in interpersonal contact, stating that "The satisfaction of relational needs requires a contactful presence of another" (p. 238), thus stressing the need for contact and connection through kinesthetic interaction.

While therapeutic attunement and embodied awareness are discussed as elements that are created between the client and the therapist in the therapeutic encounter, the basic perception of attunement and embodiment might also be used to enhance the connection between couples and the therapist or between partners who are being engaged in a shared expressive artistic activity. Despite this intriguing notion of using creative methods with couples for relationship enhancement, a review of the literature demonstrated a lack of

empirical research focusing on expressive therapies, particularly movement and dance, for couples' therapeutic processes, though a few were located.

### **Touch and Movement in Couple's Work**

Kessel (2013) presented an approach that utilizes couples therapy techniques in conjunction with body psychotherapy. Kessel elucidated how present somatic experiences are viewed as related to unresolved childhood wounds, past experiences, and relationships. By describing several case studies, the author demonstrated how focusing on the embodiment and somatic responses of both couples and therapists could help them clarify thoughts and feelings, which resulted in a change in the couple's experience of understanding and communication. While Kessel's discussion strengthened the notion of the value of integrating somatic experiences in couple's therapy, more detailed research should be performed to explore the effectiveness and experience of such interventions.

Kathlyn Hendricks (1997), a dance therapist and founder of the Hendricks Institute, also described her somatic work with couples that is based on the premise of union and separation cycles in couple's interactions. Hendricks elucidated that these cycles can be detected in asymmetrical unconscious patterns in which individuals physically approach or move away from their partners. She also claimed that revealing these unconscious forces that derive a couple's relationship can be used to promote intimacy. The author described the application of these foundations in therapeutic sessions, during which couples are filmed while asked to move together in distance or in proximity. While watching the edited footage, the partners are encouraged to focus on their movement patterns in order to detect their moving polarities. Questions that raise awareness to sensations and emotions in one's body are also designed to enhance the

impact through a reflective process. Though Hendricks' use of movement in couple's work is inspiring and adds to the understanding of harnessing the ample information that can be generated from couple's movement into therapeutic work, Hendricks' method mainly focused on two motional polarities that can be detected in an improvised movement. While these polarities can attest to profound relational patterns, focusing mainly on them might disregard the innumerable movement patterns in which couples can unearth a wider range of their dynamics. In addition, while improvised movement can be a vital source of knowledge, one should take into consideration that many individuals or couples can be deterred from such requirement versus a more structured format that can ease up the anxiety in moving.

A similar approach was described by Solomon and Tatkin (2011), who incorporated the aspect of touch in couple's therapy, aiming to develop couples' intimacy and their ability to be comfortable with touch and proximity while reducing emotional distress. Solomon and Tatkin discussed how incorporating movement in couple's therapy could serve as a vehicle to access somatoaffective information relating to partners' attachment issues, such as "approach and avoidance, or separation and reunion" (p. 72). The authors suggested integrating exercises that would work on the couple's proximity and distance (moving toward and away from each other) with the intention of igniting experiences of reuniting and joining or disengaging and separation. The information provided through the physical responses could shed light on one's core secure and insecure attachment patterns, as Solomon and Tatkin clarified: "By means of close real-time and video observation we can identify attachment strategies through movements in body, face, and eyes...before thought and before speech" (p. 81). Solomon and Tatkin

noted that such interventions aim to bypass cognitive awareness mechanisms and create an experience that would promote internal reflection. Though these interventions raise awareness on the potential benefits of using body and movement in the course of couples' work, more elaborative research is needed in order to gain insight about body-centered techniques in couple's therapy.

Based on the concepts of Formative Psychology (Keleman, 1985, 2007), a somatic approach that observes the evolution of anatomical body shapes through embodied human experiences in the attempt to inform behaviors and create meaning, Keleman and Adler (2001) introduced another relational model. Aiming to deepen couples' dynamics into a fuller meaningful relationship, the authors focused on enhancing partners' ability to fluently engage in interchangeable patterns of closeness and distance while developing their somatic skills. The authors described a four-stage process which can also assist in diagnosing a couple's relational situation. The first stage described the intensity in couples' initial relational stages that can include aspects of growth and excitement on one hand but also ones that can inhibit separateness on the other. The second stage was described as one where individuality can develop along with the couples' attachment. The third stage focused on the ways intimacy is affected by the ways couples form separateness or detachment, such as patterns of alienation or volatile disputes contrary to a desired flexibility and flow. The fourth stage described the ways in which couples can recreate their alliance with support and growth, accepting their individuality along with the complexity that lies within relationships. While Keleman and Adler's theory sheds light on the uses of body-centered approaches in the process of couple's therapy, the nature of their therapeutic process and physical exercises remained

obscure; therefore, it would be worthwhile to solidify their theoretical basis through detailed research.

Though not specifically targeted to couples, another approach presented by Murphy (1979) integrated dance and movement techniques while working with families with infants. Murphy demonstrated how conflicting interactions and miscommunications with infants can be reflected during live interactions in the therapeutic encounter between infants and their parents. Therapeutic vignettes illustrated forms of dysfunctional communication, negotiation, and display of feelings through non-verbal parent-child interactions. Though this approach was designated for families with infants and was not empirically investigated, Murphy's theoretical article demonstrated how awareness to nonverbal interactional cues can provide the therapist with valuable information that can be used in the course of therapy in order to guide parents in resolving conflicting situations. While Murphy focused on family dynamics, it could be well hypothesized that specifically observing a couple's non-verbal interaction would also allow detecting relational themes.

A key aspect that relates to applying movement in couple's therapy deals with touch. Petrella and Rovers (2014) discussed the importance of combining inter-partner touch in couple's therapy, aiming to strengthen the couple's attachment and security. The authors asserted that through the sense of touch people receive non-verbal information about their environment, their connections to others, and their sense of security. As a result, the authors suggested that touch can have a crucial role in the healing process of partners. Through various case studies, Petrella and Rovers illustrated promising examples of using eye contact, talk, touch, and embrace in their interventions that

reduced couples' distress and enhanced their bonding, attunement, and secure attachment. De Villers (2014) also supported the importance of using touch as a means to improve communication, affect, care, and pleasure in relationships and demonstrated how various touch exercises could assist couples to develop tactile awareness.

The preceding literature has clearly shown that resolving conflicts and enhancing communication are some of the issues researched and dealt with in couple's therapy that aim to strengthen a couple's bonding and trust using various techniques. Different creative interventions that were reviewed also demonstrated how creative and expressive methods could contribute to the therapeutic exploration in the process of couple's therapy. While these papers seemed potentially beneficial, it should be underlined that all the discussed approaches and interventions relate to the nexus of relationships as an interaction between two individuals. In this context, employing a non-verbal movement art-form that is defined by the collaboration between two individuals could be a natural avenue to therapeutically explore and reflect on relationship states, specifically researching how motion and embodied language can reveal not only family issues (Murphy, 1979) but especially a couple's relationship story.

### **Dance and The Metaphor of Dance in Couple's Work**

The review of the literature also demonstrated that the potential that lies in PD has intrigued scholars due to their relational and interactional style, though limited empirical research that specifically examined the use of PD in the process of couple's therapy has been found. Picart (2002) theorized about partner dances and characterized them as an artform that demands the blending of two bodies in order to create a shared harmonious experience, enhancing features of intimacy and perception of self in both partners. Most

importantly, Picart claimed that the experience of PD can assist the dancers to confront their emotional, physiological, and interaction inhibitions while being in a connection with a partner and thus can enrich their expressive vocabulary.

Similar to Johnson (2004, 2007), who widely borrowed terminologies of shared dancing in her discussion about couples' interactions, other theoretical papers also used a dance metaphor to describe a partnership that consists of individuals who form their own pas de deux with different needs and desires (Lerner, 1989; Minuchin & Nichols, 1993). Based on their own PD experiences and community-mindedness, Wulff and St. George (2007) used a dancing metaphor to describe the salient similarities between PD and family therapy. The authors illustrated how, similar to the collaborative work in family therapy that needs to consider the partners' subtle meanings and interpersonal communication abilities, PD required couples to make joint efforts and develop coordination and adaptation while being engaged in the dance. It also allowed them to develop communication through verbal and non-verbal signals. This creation was described as demanding acute attention and attentiveness, as well as accepting changes with flexibility from both partners. In addition, the leader's role was perceived as contributing to communication and protection, contrary to other perceptions previously noted (such as Littig, 2013; Davis, 2015) that focused on this role's manipulative or dominant features. Wulff and St. George concluded that the dance experience clarified relational themes in family therapy.

Elliott (1992) also used a metaphor of a shared dance in order to convey the aspects that are needed to produce a good relationship. Elliott noted the importance of flowing movement, harmony, recognition, and acceptance of one another's differences,

while still being able to create a joint rhythm, contrary to stagnation, struggle, or control. Aiming to attain amelioration in couples' abilities to understand each other's desires and beliefs, Elliott described a technique in which couples can learn how to communicate mood and affect through movements and steps that allowed raising awareness to issues such as the partners' comfort zones, control, trust, and caring. Through the process of exploring steps and movements, Elliot claimed that the couple may deal with other issues of compatibility or incompatibility, as well as expectations and conflicts in their relationship. An important aspect of implementing this technique in couple's therapy was helping couples articulate and communicate their needs rather than what changes they expected from their partners.

Watanabe-Hammond (1990) specifically noted the value of PD as a practice that heightens synchronicity and relational empathy through the dance interaction. This concept of embodied relational empathy between the dancing partners was strengthened by Koehne, Schmidt, and Dziobek (2016) who concluded that mutual dynamic synchronization enhances kinesthetic and emotional empathy and that interacting in a practice that requires the development of acute synchronicity can also lead to empathy in other situations such as social interactions.

The literature reviewed so far has demonstrated the ways in which shared dance and movement carry notable benefits that can potentially support relational aspects. In this vein, a specific technique of a shared dance activity has been discussed by Dermer, Matson, and Sori (2008) as a method that can help therapists recognize and address the underlying themes of couples' relationships while increasing their intimacy. The authors noted that couples often find themselves in a cycle of recurrent interactional patterns that



are too difficult to disentangle through traditional verbal therapy, and thus illustrated a dance intervention that could be integrated in the process of couple's therapy.

In this intervention, the couple is invited to slow-dance together while the therapist observes them from a distance, takes notes about their verbal and non-verbal interaction, and intervenes as necessary. Processing the experience and providing observations follow, after which partners discuss relationship issues, emotions, and thoughts that resulted from the dance experience.

The dancing activity was described as a therapeutic intervention that can assist the therapist in detecting aspects relating to the couple's interaction, such as touch, eye contact, communication, and negotiation. This intervention could be used at different stages along the therapeutic process: at the beginning as an assessment tool, in the middle as a means to help couples reconnect and communicate, and in the last stages as a way to solidify their relationship and what they have learned. The authors noted that, contrary to verbal therapy, by engaging in a shared non-verbal experience couples could gain new insights about their relationship, discover ways of synchronicity, and explore emotional and physical intimacy. In addition, couples could discuss their experiences and issues (such as power dynamics or adapting to each other's needs) that surface through the dance expression.

Considering the paucity of the literature about the topic of PD and couple's therapy, Dermer et al. (2008) illustrated the idea that partners can increase their awareness of physical and emotional capacities while attuning to their partner. While additional studies are needed in order to gain insight on the ways that dance can serve as

a facilitator in the therapeutic process of couples, this paper added an important layer that clarifies possible implications and benefits of its use.

Captivated by these affiliations, DeBoer (2006) intended to explore the influence of PD classes as adjunct to couple's therapy through a qualitative phenomenological study. Sixteen individuals (eight couples) who were undergoing couple's therapy participated in a weekly one-hour salsa dance class led by a dance/movement therapist and an experienced salsa dancer during a period of six weeks. All couples were asked to complete questionnaires prior to starting the classes and were also interviewed before, during, and one and a half months after the lessons ended. The interviews revealed several emerging themes related to music appreciation, class structure, attendance, the challenge of the learning process, and the positive effect of group interaction. Though the initial intention was to research how PD could assist the process of couple's therapy, the design of this study was quite flawed and did not pay sufficient attention to the initial question it aimed to investigate. While demonstrating interesting results regarding positive group interactions and incentives to go dancing, the triangulation process was insufficient, the literature review scarcely related to the topics it aimed to investigate, and the point of choosing the method of group lessons for this study and asking participants to change partners during the lessons remained unclear, particularly since the aim was to reveal how PD could contribute to the process of couple's therapy. Nonetheless, this study raised awareness of the role that PD could play in the process of couple's therapy, which should be investigated in future research with a more careful design.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review has demonstrated the theme of couple's relationships through various therapeutic perspectives. While some studies have discussed different relational aspects and tried to resolve relational deficits by focusing on relational shortcomings, attachment approaches (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Johnson, 2004) were exhibited as an example of approaches that try to break the couple's reiterative cycle while creating a new emotional experience. In addition, the literature has shown the way different researchers and theorists have widely used a shared-dance metaphor while trying to illustrate the relational dynamics a couple should aspire to. Such metaphor elucidates the notion of two individuals who have the ability to create a mutual collaborative journey that is constructed of fundamental aspects of closeness, safety, and intimacy, since, as Orbach (2003) explained, "the body is one made in relationship. It doesn't exist in any viable way outside of relationship" (p. 10).

Relying on the metaphoric concept of relationship as a mutual dance, PD was discussed as a unique art form that can positively contribute to people's physical and mental health. While the cognitive, physiological, and mental effects of PD have started to be researched, the emotional and psychological aspects that they potentially carry have intrigued scholars and led to theorizing, though they have scarcely been empirically explored. Because partner dances are a dance form that requires different levels of communication from the dancing couple, it can be assumed that they can reveal couples' dynamics and interactions. These dynamics and modes of communication have been at the forefront of researches and theories of couple's relational themes, and while no published article has examined the use of PD as a therapeutic form, the potential of PD to uncover, develop, and support couple's dynamics has already been discussed.

Understanding that PD introduces a unique platform to explore multiple questions that relate to couples' interactions, shifting the metaphorical term of relational dance to an actual physical event that evokes reflective emotions would seem to be a worthwhile and altering experience. Therefore, there is a clear need for research that explores how PD could be structured and employed as a new therapeutic form for couple's relationships in order to foster novel clinical practices.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Method**

#### **Research Guiding Question**

With the intention to expand the knowledge on the relational unit and provide additional means that would allow strengthening it, the herein applied method relied on the research guiding question: What is the experience of PD as a therapeutic process that reflects upon the dynamics and interactions of couples who are presently in therapy? In addition, in order to better understand the experience of PD as a therapeutic process, the present study investigated whether the experience of PD supports/enhances the therapeutic process of couples who are currently in couple's therapy.

A qualitative phenomenological approach that describes “the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences or phenomenon... [intending to reach a] description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57) was suitably chosen in order to gather knowledge and insights about this phenomenon. This approach aims to enlarge the comprehension of human phenomena by describing the different ways in which individuals have experienced them. (Moustakas, 1994), in order to gain a comprehensive understating of its fundamental nature.

#### **Participants**

The researcher contacted a network of colleagues and couple's therapists, briefly described the study and asked them to inform clients about the study and refer couples who would be willing to participate in the research.

All therapists were introduced with the same details: They were informed that the research study was part of a PhD program and aimed to explore how PD can assist the

therapeutic process of couple's therapy. They were briefed that the research will entail four sessions. The first session will consist of an intake and a PD/ movement experience with a short reflective process, and the remaining sessions will consist of PD/ movement experience and a reflective process.

Couple's therapists used their own judgment to refer couples who could benefit from participating in this study. Interested couples contacted the researcher and scheduled an evaluation so as to meet the research criteria. During the initial phone conversation with the referred couples the researcher repeated the same information.

### **Criteria for participation.**

Five couples were recruited as participants for this study. The participating couples had to meet the criteria of currently undergoing couple's therapy and wishing to try an additional therapeutic intervention that might help to bring new perspectives into their present therapeutic process. All participating couples needed to be open to experiential processes through movement and accept being filmed throughout the entire process. Former knowledge in PD or any other dance form was neither necessary nor an exclusion.

### **Design**

Five couples who were undergoing therapy were asked to participate in four weekly consecutive sessions lasting 90 min to 2 hours to gain insight on the use of PD as a suitable intervention to assist their ongoing therapeutic process with their therapist. The rationale for conducting four sessions was based on a similar process that was conducted in a pilot study prior to this research. The pilot demonstrated that four sessions generated ample information and promising results. The rationale for conducting four sessions was

also based on the notion that the couple's participation would serve as a short specific intervention in the couples' ongoing therapeutic process, and therefore does not require a more elaborative process.

Since the participating couples were in the midst of a therapeutic process, after obtaining an informed consent by the couple (see Appendix A) and by the therapist (see Appendix B), the researcher interviewed the couple's therapist in order to receive important information about the couple (see Appendix C).

The couples and therapists were notified that during the four consecutive sessions the participating couples could meet/ consult their therapist, or continue their ongoing sessions: (a) If they chose to, (b) If their therapist saw there was a need to do so, and (c) If the researcher detected clinical reasons to involve the therapist, so to better monitor the couple's process and provide them with therapeutic support. The four research sessions were conducted in the same format with each couple and occurred completely independently of the couples' ongoing therapy sessions. The couples were also notified that withdrawal from the study will not have any repercussions or impact their ongoing therapy. Up to two weeks after completion of the research sessions the researcher interviewed the couple's therapist in order to receive their reflections and impression on the process (see Appendix D).

All sessions with the participating couples were held at the researcher's private practice which has a large space designed for the activity. All sessions included a warm up led by the researcher followed by a partner dancing activity and then a verbal reflection process.

### **The procedure**

***Session 1.*** The first session lasted two hours and consisted of several parts. The first part was a verbal intake, conducted by the researcher (see Appendix E). The intake focused on the couple's profile, brief history and crucial life transitions, current relational state, description of their challenges /struggles they experience or have experienced, each of the partners' reasons for participation, and wishes/aspects that they would like to enhance, change or improve in their relationship. The couples then engaged in a 30-40 min movement and PD introduction activity taught and led by the researcher. This activity included: (a) Conducting a short general warm up: gently moving body parts from head to toe, and walking in the room as to prepare them for the next stage of movement. (b) Asking the couples to find a joint rhythm to music without gesturing or verbal communication. (c) Learning and experiencing aspects of the lead while holding a double hand hold. One participant was asked to hold his or her partners' hands and lead him/her in the room as they saw fit. The partners were then asked to reverse roles. Music was not used in this exercise. (d) Repeating the same exercise (using a double hand- hold) while the partner who was in the following position was asked to move with his/her eyes closed while being led. Couples were asked to interchange their roles and music was not used. (e) Teaching the partners about the dance frame (men in the leading role and women in the following role), and finding the position that was comfortable for them to stand in, in terms of hand positioning, space, distance, and proximity. (f) Asking the men to practice leading their partners while freely walking together to music (maintaining the dance frame). (g) Teaching the couple a basic partner-dance step and allowing them to practice it with music, (dancing roles in which men were leading and women were



following were maintained). Following the activity, the couple was asked to reflect on their experience.

The first session allowed evaluating whether the couples fit the research criteria. Reasons for exclusion included lack of wish/ will to engage in PD/ movement, refusal to be videotaped, and lack of cooperation in the process. None of the couples were disqualified, as they fully cooperated.

**Sessions 2-4.** The second session started with a brief summation of the previous encounter, allowing the couples to share any thoughts or reflections that came up following the first session. The couples were then asked to describe their relational goals as they currently perceived them. The rest of the sessions were conducted in a similar way. The couples engaged in a 45-minute PD activity. The activity began with a short general body warm up (moving body parts from head to toe) that was led by the researcher. Following the brief warm up, the couples continued to learn and engage in PD.

The couples were taught and practiced the same partner dances: tango, rumba, and merengue. These dances are commonly used as introductory dances for newcomers and were also chosen based on the rationale of having less complication of rhythm or frustration caused by the technical demands of the dance. The couples engaged in these dances according to their pace and ability during the remaining sessions. No other modification was implemented to how PD is taught for any newcomers learning these forms of dance.

Following each of their 45-minute dance sessions, the couples were interviewed and reflected on their shared experience. The semi-structured interviews in these sessions were composed of open and structured questions asking couples about their relationship and their experiences through the sessions (see Appendix F). The semi-structured interviews were based on the following questions: (a) Can you describe your experience in partnered dancing? (b) What did you discover through this process? (c) Was there anything new / exciting / difficult for you in this experience? (e) Were there any challenges you encountered when dancing together? If so, could you elaborate on how you coped with these challenges? (f) Are any of these challenges similar to the ones you have encountered in your relationship? (g) What was it like for you being in your relational role (leader/ follower)? Did you learn anything new about your relationship? Did the experience reveal anything new about your relationship? (h) Were there any themes that resonated from this experience that you could relate to your relationship or to yourself? (i) Did this experience have any effect on your interaction with your partner outside the sessions? The questions were intended to allow an open discussion with each couple that incorporated the couple's reflections about relevant themes that surfaced as a result of the activity.

*The PD teaching method.*

The couples were introduced to the same two to three PD (as described above) that they learned and practiced throughout their sessions. The same music tracks were used throughout the research process. The teaching method consisted of working on the dance hold (where partners will not have full body contact but need to maintain a physical contact through their hands, arms, and shoulder blades). Throughout the overall

sessions the couples were taught a variation of 1 to 3 basic steps in each dance. The teaching process incorporated demonstrating the dance variations to each of the partners according to their dancing role (The dance roles were maintained during the sessions). The teaching process also entailed the researcher standing in the place of each partner and dancing with both partners in order to clarify dance topics such as lead, follow, and frame, and assist when needed.

As previously mentioned, the last session also included a PD activity and reflection on the couples' overall process. The questions were based on the researcher's observations and the content that emerged during the previous sessions, for example: How would you summarize this process? Was there anything that you learned about yourself/ your partner/ your relationship as a result? What understandings could you take and apply from this experience in order to enhance your relationship? Could you share any reflections that came up as a result of your experience that would assist you in moments of conflict/ disarray/ miscommunication?

As explained above, the uniqueness of the provided structure which included teaching PD combined with a reflective process did not lie in the couples' participation in PD as a leisure activity but specifically focused on the ways in which couples processed the ways in which they engaged with each other in a new non-verbal relational experience that relied on partner collaboration. Similar to any expressive therapy treatment in which the artistic experience is part of the therapeutic session and reflective process, the structural frame for this research required a combination of both knowledge and skills in teaching PD as well as in therapy. Therefore, the researcher who is professionally versed in both areas - a trained dance therapist who works in the field and

an acclaimed PD teacher - facilitated both parts of teaching PD and leading the interview and reflection process, assuming the role of a participatory researcher. It should be noted that all therapeutic interventions were conducted under the professional standards of practice and codes of ethics of YAHAT, the Israeli association of creative expressive therapies.

***The couples:*** The following descriptive information was provided by the couples during the initial intake process. All identifying information has been altered to protect confidentiality.

Couple number 1: Ally and Gabriel. Ally and Gabriel were in their mid- thirties. They were both divorced, each with a child from their first marriage. Ally and Gabriel had known each other for five years and had been living together in a committed relationship the majority of this time. Living in a shared household and needing to accommodate their schedule with the co-parent from their initial marriage, Ally and Gabriel had managed to create a schedule that would accommodate their children and still leave time for themselves as a couple. Ally and Gabriel underwent stages of tumultuous fights stemming from issues of trust and miscommunication that resulted in disengagement and frustration. They reached out to a couple's therapist and had been in therapy for a year, both recognizing the positive impact it had on their communication. Starting the research sessions Ally and Gabriel were at the ending stages of their couple's therapy treatment, noting their willingness to enhance their communication and connection. They did not continue their couple's therapy sessions during their research participation period.

Couple number 2: Billy and Lauren. Billy and Lauren were in their middle- 40s and had one adolescent and one young child. Billy and Lauren had been together for 17 years and married for 14. Their initial natural encounter where Billy's outgoing and enthusiastic character, contrasted to Lauren's analytic and self-contained nature, led to an intense connection. During their relationship, Billy and Lauren have confronted various challenges, including creating financial stability and their different views on child rearing. Their main challenge was their inability to communicate as early on as their beginning relational stages. In their relational cycle Billy would get rapidly angry and aggressive, which would escalate their misunderstandings into tumultuous fights, leaving them both in a state of mutual withdrawal, unresponsiveness, and silencing. Their reconciliation was frequently carried out through their sexual connection, though without resolving their debatable underlying issues. Billy and Lauren sought treatment a few years ago although it left them frustrated, aggravating their situation. Their constant arguments and distancing led to the point of nearly divorcing. Wishing to give their relationship another chance, they sought treatment with a different therapist and have been in therapy over a year. They both felt content with their therapist, though they recognize they did not apply the understandings from their treatment, which left their communication patterns unchanged. Billy recently started to take actions to contain his anger. Starting the research, both Billy and Lauren expressed their wish to work on their communication. During the research stages Billy and Lauren met with their therapist only once. They resumed their meetings after the completion of the research sessions

Couple number 3: Jonathan and Nina. Jonathan and Nina were in their late 40s and had three children. They had been together for 17 years and married for 15. During

their shared lives, Jonathan and Nina have had to face challenges that included dealing with their different parental approaches regarding child rearing, considerable health issues that took a toll on their relationship, and their different characters that resulted in communication difficulties. Nina's need to verbally share and discuss things over versus Jonathan's laconic and introverted character resulted in their distancing. While they were successfully leading a shared household, Jonathan and Nina were struggling with lack of communication and lack of emotional and physical intimacy. Jonathan and Nina turned to couple's therapy and had been in treatment for one year. They were both content with the treatment and recognized a certain shift in their relationship. Starting the research process Jonathan and Nina both acknowledged the wish to work on communication and intimacy issues. Jonathan and Nina's participation process was not consecutive and lasted twice the expected time due to uncontrollable reasons. They met a few times with their couple's therapist during their participation process and resumed their therapeutic process after.

Couple number 4: Daniel and Faye. Daniel and Faye were in their early fifties and had two young children. They had been together for 15 years and been married for 14. During their shared years, Daniel and Faye confronted considerable challenges that included life tragedies and financial obstacles. Their initial compatibility that rested upon their mutual interests faded into cycles of disputes and altercations, leading to lengthy, tense silences and unresponsiveness. Daniel and Faye had been in couple's therapy for about four years. Their treatment has consisted of both of them meeting individually with their therapist part of this time, as part of their treatment process. They resumed their shared sessions six months ago. They were jaded and worn out facing the loss of intimacy, often facing significant communication impasses as a result of their difficult

exchanges. At the start of the research, both Daniel and Faye expressed their openness and will to try any process that can positively enhance or contribute to their relationship. Daniel and Faye did not continue their couple's therapy sessions during the research stages. After completion of the research stages they expressed the wish to resume their therapy meetings separately with their couple's therapist.

Couple number 5: Teddy and Mimi. Teddy and Mimi were in their early sixties. They have been married for 30 years and have two grown children. During their relational stages Teddy and Mimi's communication challenges resulted in a cycle of bitter conflicts where Teddy would communicate loudly and aggressively and disengage for a long period of time, leaving Mimi trying to please and appease him. Facing additional conflicts that revolved around the issues of lack of physical and emotional intimacy, they sought treatment with a couple's therapist. After a substantial period in therapy they felt frustrated with the treatment that left them in disaccord to the point of contemplating breakup. Wishing to resolve their difficulties and work on their relationship, they started treatment with a different therapist, with whom they have been in therapy for over a year. At the start of the research, they both acknowledged the positive changes and improvement as a result of their current therapeutic process. Feeling they were in a positive trajectory of change, Teddy and Mimi were still pinpointing their difficulties around issues of intimacy and their ability to accept their different characteristic and personal needs. Teddy and Mimi continued their couple's therapy sessions during and after their research participation period.

#### **Data Collection and Confidentiality.**

The generated data were filmed sessions of the couples' dancing, the researcher's notes documenting each session, pre and post interviews with the couples' therapist, and recorded interviews with the couples. Only the researcher had full access to the data.

### **Data Analysis**

The raw interviews and discussions were transcribed, translated to English from Hebrew, and coded by the researcher with the intention of detecting recurrent and emerging themes according to Kvale's (1996) method for analysis of phenomenological data which allows understanding in-depth each of the participants' experiences. This method included manually transcribing the raw data gathered from the interviews, reading the transcriptions of each interview and deconstructing them into phrases or word units by highlighting statements, grouping and condensing these word units into related categories, and then synthesizing these categories into themes and subthemes, allowing for contextualizing these categories and forming meaning. The data analysis also included the interviews with the couples' therapist. Findings from all interviews were then described, summarized, and compared to current literature.

### **Triangulation.**

In order to corroborate the specific ways in which couples' movement can mirror and be used as a therapeutic intervention for couples who are in the process of couple's therapy, a triangulation process was conducted by a (US) board certified dance/movement therapist who was also a certified movement analyst (CMA) in Laban movement Analysis (LMA). The rationale for choosing a dance therapist who was also a CMA was based on the notion that "A CMA...uses his/her comprehensive knowledge to identify movement patterns... of any human movement [and], uses the Laban/Bartenieff



System as a framework in human movement observation, synthesis, and analysis"

(Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies, 2019). In addition, LMA is a system of movement observation under which human movement can be described and studied. One main principle of the system is that movement is intentional and involves the whole person: mind and body included. LMA holds an awareness of multiple levels of human movement, including elements of body, effort, space, and shape. Therefore, body actions can be described in relation to the qualities of movement, the use of physical space, and the mover's relationship to the other and to their environment (Moore, 2014).

The dance therapist was not given any descriptive information about each couple and analyzed the video recordings solely on the basis of movement analysis. Each of the couple's four sessions was edited into one video clip that documented their entire process. Each video clip was created by editing 5 to 7 minutes of the beginning, middle, and end of each of their four sessions. The dance therapist was asked to watch these clips two times: (a) from a general movement perspective, getting an initial impression, (b) observing and focusing on the couple's interaction. The therapist was asked to analyze and give her impressions about changes in body language, communication, and other aspects in the couples' relationship based on their movement. Findings and emerging themes were then described and further discussed by the researcher in light of relevant literature.

## CHAPTER 4

### Results

As previously described, all the couples underwent a similar process: They met with the researcher for four sessions. After an initial intake that was carried out in the first session, every session consisted of a movement experience that included a warm up and teaching the couple partner dances. Following the movement experience, both partners processed the relational content that had surfaced as a result of their dance experience and were interviewed about their impressions.

The data analysis process which followed the experiential sessions included analyzing the raw interview transcripts of the couple's sessions, the pre and post interviews that were conducted with the couple's therapists, and the triangulation process that was conducted by a dance movement therapist. The thematic analysis aimed to detect recurrent themes including areas of similarities and differences in the way these themes manifested between the couples. The results section will describe these recurrent themes, followed by the couple's therapists' impressions and the dance therapist's feedback.

It should be noted that though the researcher recognizes that each couple underwent a unique experience that related to their own relational story, and while being also aware of the potential contribution to the therapeutic arena by describing each of the couples' processes as a separate case study, in order to gain knowledge of the way PD can support the therapeutic process of couples who are in the process of couple's therapy, this section will focus on the common themes that surfaced out of the entire process.

The thematic analysis yielded eight main themes that came across the couple's experiences throughout the entire process: communication, intimacy, synchronization,

attunement, negotiating spaces, interpersonal dynamics, shifts, and partner dancing as couple's therapy. Each theme had several related subthemes following Kvale's (1996) method of data analysis. These subthemes were relevant to the majority of the couples based on the qualitative analysis that was conducted, as will be demonstrated.

### **Communication**

The first theme was a most prominent one and discussed the topic of communication in multiple ways. This theme included subthemes that addressed the issues of lack of communication, recognizing the value in communication, managing conflicts, and the experience of non-verbal communication.

**Challenges/ Lack of Communication.** All the couples acknowledged that dancing together during the research sessions brought up communication challenges that they were facing in their daily interactions. The loss of communication or the lack of it emerged as a recurrent thread during the sessions and allowed the couples to reflect on situations where miscommunication escalated into bitter arguments or disconnection. The lack of communication was attributed to the challenges of navigating life's hectic routine that left little time, if any, for a mutual and clear dialogue. While all couples expressed their wish to enhance their ability to communicate with each other, it was evidenced that their communication struggles were caused by a variety of aspects: The couples noted lacking better skills or experience in constructive ways of communication. They also discussed their fear of engaging in conflicted dialogues, thus eschewing addressing various potential topics of discomfort; as Gabriel explained, "It's perhaps the fear of getting into an altercation. I want to save this from myself, from us, because it's unpleasant to touch it; it will evoke things. I will say something and she will react and

we'll fight. Who needs this?" Other inhibiting communication aspects were expressed by pinpointing one of the partners' difficulties in sharing and expressing his or her needs that resulted in leaving his or her significant other in an ambiguous territory feeling isolated or frustrated; as Lauren put it: "He is right. I don't usually share. I don't ask for help, it's not in my nature, I'm not accustomed to discuss the bad things or difficulties in a relationship or say something when I am uncomfortable and then it becomes too much and things pile up."

In addition, all couples acknowledged not only the strains that their inability to communicate had added to their relationship but also the encumbering feeling and eroding cost which manifested in loss of intimacy and disconnection; as Nina put it: "He avoids any dialogue and shuts down so I don't really know what's going on and then we become distant and not so nice to each other. I want him to share but he doesn't and it lets me down again and leaves me alone."

**Conflicts.** All couples realized that their conflicts were tied to their communication difficulties which led to substantial misunderstandings and struggles in various areas such as intimacy, child rearing, or financial matters. The couples described that conflicts often arose due to one partner's avoidant attitude in dealing with sensitive issues, fearing to negatively escalate sensitive situations. This avoidance created a cycle that back lashed with a boomerang effect in disputes and altercations, as described by Mimi: "I feel I need to cautiously select my words because I don't want to cause more turbulence, but then I am not really clear or accurate and it leads to an argument since he doesn't understand me." It was clear that most conflicts surfaced where one partner or both felt unclear and vague in relation to unresolved matters or underlying issues.

The couples described many situations in which having poor communication skills or being unable to verbalize their unmet needs led to misinterpretations of their acts or words. As a result, the partners attributed misguided conclusions to the topic they were in disagreement about, best evidenced in the couples' dialogue while reflecting about their experience: Teddy and Mimi:

Mimi: Sometimes you can say something but the other misinterprets it.

Teddy: Yes, it's a misunderstanding that leads to an argument and unjustified behaviors because many times the other person misinterprets the intention or the words as criticism or being argumentative when it was not the initial intention, and then it's like a snowball.

Mimi: Taking into account that it is not what I thought it was is truly important.

Nina's words also clarified this notion: "We don't talk enough so we don't know what the other experiences or feels. Once you share you understand that the other's mood or behavior is not related to you, it liberates you from feeling guilty. Once the dialogue can be more evolved it can save all these misunderstandings.

**Value of communication.** All couples expressed the importance of gaining tools that would enhance their ability to relate to each other. Billy put it best by saying, "You have no manual for relationships. If you lack the right communication tools you find yourself lost and you can't do anything well together, but when you do have them, it goes well, you succeed and you flow together like we did in the dance."

Several meaningful communication skills were noticed by the couples: They noted the need to carefully listen and be attentive to each other before responding; as Lauren and Teddy expressed it: "In order for us to communicate we need to learn to listen

to each other and take each other's feelings into account." The couples also addressed the need to accurately articulate and address fundamental issues without being vague or fearing their partner's reaction. This notion was best expressed by Jonathan saying: "we need to be clear about our intentions or in the way we communicate them, like we did in the dance." Mimi also related to the topic of accurately defining one's intentions, saying: "Sometimes I lack the words; I don't know how to define things as well as he does so it comes out wrong and then it creates circuits of communication between us." In addition, the couples recognized the importance of openly sharing their wishes and unmet needs with their significant others in order for them to enhance their relationships, as exhibited by Billy: "I realize that I have to understand and voice my needs, but then you realize that the other person also has needs, and this was never a part of our dialogue. Now I'm saying to myself- you need to stop and ask her what she needs, what do we need?" Ally strengthened this notion by saying: "I would like us to be able to have an open dialogue on heavy matters and know, to navigate through them when we have different views without feeling criticized by the other but really understanding what is important for us and move forward."

Lastly, the couples identified the value not only in acknowledging difficulties and dividing issues but also in providing positive feedback and validating their partner's efforts. Billy illustrated it by saying: "We have the tendency to complain about the unpleasant things but a positive feedback is really important. You also need to acknowledge the good and then it opens a different space between us."

**Non-verbal communication.** All couples expressed the significance of non-verbal communication that they had experienced in their shared dance and movement.

They noted that physically engaging with each other allowed them to learn to communicate in ways they were not accustomed to that contributed to their sense of understanding each other. Mimi described it by saying: "It's about a nod, a look, a head motion, a gesture, and when it works there is a feeling of understanding, of support, of harmony." The couples also stated that non-verbally relating to each other was a powerful experience that reflected their communication challenges, as seen in Jonathan and Nina's dialogue: "If you don't communicate clearly in dancing it leads to nowhere, you can't move forward and it reflects exactly what we are saying about our ability to communicate together."

Moreover, all couples identified that improving their ability to communicate non-verbally could potentially expand their range of communication and mutual understanding in relational issues; for example, Mimi said, "I do wish to enhance our non-verbal communication through the dance. It allows me to feel things first through the experience and it helps me to clarify my thoughts and verbalize them." Billy's words strengthened this notion: "If we want to do something in the dance we have to do it together, well, it's the same in life- you have to say something if you are uncomfortable, and I have to listen and then comment, and then you react ...it's a full dialogue."

Lastly, engaging with each other in non-verbal ways allowed the couples to address issues of intimacy where they also struggled with lack of verbal/non-verbal communication; as Mimi put it, "Our non-verbal communication is not always positive and there were many misunderstandings related to intimacy through the years that led to mutual frustration. I think that by working on our non-verbal communication through the dance we can support and improve it."

To sum up: While each couple had its own unique relational story, they were all affected by their communication challenges. As a result of their experience, all couples reflected upon the way that learning and implementing additional communication skills allowed relational tension to dissolve, helped clarify the feeling of guilt or frustration due to unresolved matters, promoted addressing untouched relational issues, and assisted them in negotiating their needs in a way that would potentially elicit understating, compassion, and positive relational change.

### **Layers of Intimacy**

The second theme appeared throughout the sessions in its layered complexity. The theme discussed the aspect of intimacy and the sub categories of undergoing a shared experience and the issue of relational trust.

**Shared experience.** All couples expressed that they longed to recreate and enhance a sense of togetherness through shared experiences that they seldom shared. Regardless of the dance challenges that demanded concentration, maintaining rhythm and posture, or being introduced to unfamiliar physical aspects that were dictated by the dance structure, all couples unanimously described their dance experience as one that contained elements of flow, shared joy, and harmony. The couples also referred to their experience as a relaxing and "a fresh liberating experience" that they could share, as Gabriel put it.

In addition, the couples reported feeling a sense of a shared goal and mutual achievement, and realized that the outcome of a smooth dance (from which they derived a sense of pleasure) contributed to their ability to mutually attune to each other. All couples recognized the value in their shared dance experience. They noted that it



provided them with a unique space for exploration and interaction that allowed them to reconnect and validate their alliance. Ally referred to it by saying: "It was us but elsewhere, in a different space outside everything, it was about asking who are we? What are we? We could explore together. It was pleasurable and harmonious."

**Intimacy.** All couples discussed the ways in which their shared experience that included non-verbal aspects of communication such as eye contact, embrace, and synchronization allowed them to get physically closer and promoted a feeling of intimacy with each other; as Billy phrased it, "It felt good to move together like that and I noticed she was looking warmly at me." Teddy's words also illustrated this view: "Throughout the session I felt we got closer; it's really a shared experience that can heighten our intimacy in bringing us closer together."

The couples reflected on the ways in which these moments of closeness and mutual flow enhanced their bond. Nina put it best by saying, "I felt a different sort of connection between us, one that we have not experienced for a long time." The couples added that the structure of the session that combined dancing and a reflective process allowed them to explore subtle layers of intimacy that renewed their sense of connection. They also noted that focusing on intimate relational qualities during the sessions had a lasting impact which they felt during the following days.

Gabriel: "It created a new space between us; it was looking at each other, touching in ways we rarely do; it was this closeness that we felt, and then we shared our intimate thoughts about it with each other and heard each other validating this mutual feeling, and it went along with us".

Ally added: "These are feelings you rarely feel. It's not like we don't touch, or that we are not intimate with each other, but this isn't just a kiss or a hug, it also reflects the good in our connection, the softness, our unique sense of intimacy."

In this vein, some partners shared that experiencing intimacy fostered a sense of comfort and hope towards their relational ties, as they were feeling reassured by their partners' feelings towards them. Teddy best expressed it by saying: "It shows me that she also wants to be intimate with me, that she enjoys me being close to her. It's encouraging because one major aspect of our issues is strengthening this side between us; it shows we can get there. It's another step further." Nina also explained: "It allowed us to be more intimate and it reminded me of the unique humor we share. These are things we haven't felt for a long time. It brought back good things we had in the past."

The discussion of relational intimacy allowed the surfacing of the issues of touch and sexuality. Some couples shared the ways in which their experience heightened and validated their deep emotional and physical connection, as seen in Ally's words: "I am drawn to his touch. It's very powerful, not in a controlling or dominant way but enveloping me in his presence... It reminds me how much I like the feeling of his touch." Others disclosed complex emotions in relation to their state of physical intimacy. Some exhibited their feelings of frustration while describing the loss or lack of emotional and physical intimacy. They stated that they are "expert partners at managing life chores, but have sensed a growing intimate distance between them for years" as Nina put it. They also wished to find ways to "release inhibitions and relational blocks that prevented them from getting closer" as Mimi and Teddy shared.

Moreover, the partners openly reflected on the gap between the mutual apparent feeling of intimacy that they sensed through the dance experience and the loss or lack of closeness, warmth, and sexual sexuality, which they desired in their dynamics.

Faye: "It felt very intimate with him, and it is very important for me to feel his presence like that in our relationship including in our sexuality. I feel it opens something between us.... We forgot this place but it's there if we liberate it. I want more; I want to feel I'm a woman again, not only a mother. I see the potential... I'm asking myself about this place of sexuality, whether it can be revived between us."

Getting closer and interacting through touch also allowed partners to negotiate and reflect on the differences that they felt in regards to their sexual needs. In this vein, they discussed the different expectations that they had from each other that often led to bitterness or dissatisfaction. Faye: "Daniel calls it the 'kitschy' places but I need them, I want the romance, I want the whole thing and he laughs at this, he can't get into this mood and then I panic that it's done and over."

Furthermore, the couples also reflected on the layers of intimacy that they experienced through their shared dance versus solely verbally analyzing it. As Faye said, "Experiencing intimacy is different than discussing it, and it helps because you can't bypass what the body tells you."

Lastly, all couples portrayed their shared interaction as an intimate meaningful experience that allowed them to get closer without any judgment or fear of mutual demands and also as one that created potential pathways for the progression of physical

and emotional intimacy between them on the other. Teddy enhanced this view by saying, "This closeness is liberating, it makes you want to get even closer physically."

**Trust.** The partners also discussed the ways in which the experience reflected back to their underlying issues of relational trust and safety that affected their ability to feel intimacy or be intimate with each other. The majority of the couples noted that they were consciously aware of trying to make their partner feel safe. They acknowledged that needing to clearly communicate their intentions towards each other during the dance intensified their sense of trust and security. These couples also recognized that their non-verbal communication strengthened their sense of bonding, feeling they could rely on each other. Ally said, "We looked at each other, we touched and I felt secure. I felt the comfort in his presence, that I am safe in his arms." Gabriel confirmed this by saying, "I felt that I am protecting her, holding her, but that I could also rely on her."

Furthermore, alternating the dance roles while practicing was described as a powerful experience by all couples who commented on the ways in which it exhibited underlying trust issues. They noted that sensing their differences in their ability to feel safe while being in each others' arms mirrored such relational matters. For example, Mimi and Teddy debated the issue of relational trust and fears of abandonment which surfaced as Mimi reflected on Teddy's resistance in accepting any suggestions from her in the dance: "I trusted him completely, but he couldn't really give in or lean. I didn't feel he trusted me, and this is something he is carrying for years, though he has no reason to. I wish he could let go of his fears." Despite these differences, as some couples progressed with their session they reflected on the positive change that they sensed in relation to these issues. Mimi commented: "It was hard for him in the beginning, and though it

wasn't smooth, I felt a difference in his sense of trust during the dance, he was more allowing, he was more with me." Lauren also shared: "I felt safe this time. He held and led me and it was nice because I felt safe, I felt a change in him."

To sum up: the current theme dealt with verbal and non-verbal aspects of intimacy that surfaced as a result of their dance experience. These aspects included the impact of undergoing a shared experience that promoted a space for the exploration of physical and emotional closeness, as well as the issues of trust, touch, and sexuality.

### **Synchronization**

The third theme discussed the topic of synchronization with sub categories of cooperation and rhythm.

**Synchronization.** All couples related to the challenges in dancing together, especially pointing out the need for synchronizing. The couples noted the challenge to synchronize with a partner in the form of steps width, frame, and posture. They also discussed the need to convey a clear message through the lead on the one hand, and being present as a follower on the other in order to create a smooth movement. While the notion of synchronization seemed evident in order for the couples to dance together, they expressed that they were surprised realizing the time and practice it demanded from them. Nina expressed it by saying: "It's a different feeling that we are in sync, more together, but we need to coordinate and practice to achieve it, the more we practice it gets better, in dance and in life." The couples also noted that finding synchronicity was a challenging task that could not be taken for granted as they were going in and out of it, needing to adjust to each other. Daniel said: "In the beginning we were not dancing really together, everyone was doing their own thing, but we had no choice- if we wanted to dance

together we had to synchronize." Though all the couples were striving to find synchronization, they reported that achieving it, if even briefly, was accompanied by the merits of a sense of achievement and joy, and the one of flowing as a unit. Billy: "It's challenging not to step on each other's feet and finding this synchronization...it's not about trying to move as she wants or as I want but about finding a joint rhythm together, and then when we succeeded. It was fun, everything was easier." Jonathan also explained: "When we started it was a mess, but then when it worked we flew together and you get a sense of accomplishment. You are not on your own; it's something you share together."

It should be noted that while couples acknowledged the benefits of synchronization through their dance experience they commented on the energy and efforts such enterprise required from them and reflected upon their ability to make these efforts and adjustments in their relational dynamics, Teddy expressed it saying: "It is so complex to dance together, you need to adjust, you need to give in, you need to ease up, you need to accommodate." Faye's words added: "We bumped in the beginning but we succeeded relatively quickly. I wonder if we can achieve and recreate it in other places."

Lastly, the couples discussed the parallels between the challenges of finding synchronization in dancing and in their daily lives, especially when unexpected situations arose between them or when they were grappling with different views on a certain issue. While such cases were depicted as often triggering miscommunication and conflicts, resulting in a greater and entrenched distance, the dance experience had mirrored to the couples that they were both equally responsible in resolving these matters and had to participate in a mutual dialogue in order to come to agreement. Lauren explained:

When we deal with something unexpected we are rarely in sync and it throws me out of balance because something that has to go a certain way goes the other.

Finding a mutual solution like in dancing is really challenging. I felt the effort it demands. We both needed to make adjustments. It's not easy but we can achieve it if we put our minds to it.

**Cooperation.** All couples detected the similarities between their relational dynamics and their dance interaction regarding the need for cooperation. They noted that finding synchronicity could be obtained only by mutually cooperating and they reflected on their shared responsibility for this endeavor. The couples realized that in order to create a smooth execution of a seemingly simple walk they had to willingly collaborate, best expressed by Lauren: "I have this tendency of separating responsibilities, but in the dance we had no choice but to do this together. It really demanded a shared work; we had no choice but to cooperate."

The couples also noted that striving for coordination resulted in a better outcome in their shared dance and that experiencing the positive result helped them recognize their strength as a couple. In this vein, they noticed that once they had a shared purpose it allowed them to work better together as a couple, Billy: "It reminds me that when we do things together we are really at our best." Daniel: "It is really about being together and having the same goal. In addition, the couples commented that equally participating in a joint effort fostered a sense of partnership and relief from the burden of single-handedly carrying responsibilities, as they often did in their relational dynamics and matters of daily life; Nina put it best, saying, "I feel that he is more of a partner. Many times I deal

with everything by myself and this way I feel that our partnership is fuller, more compete."

**Rhythm.** The couples' ability to synchronize also related to the sub category of rhythm. Trying to move in synchronization reflected to the couples their natural rhythm and personality differences. Teddy said: "Even when we walk on the street I'm fast and she is sluggish. There is a meaningful difference in our rhythms which is symbolic to our differences in our nature." The couples commented that surmounting the obstacle of attuning and finding the right rhythm between them created a sense of harmony and pleasure that they wished to recreate in their daily lives. Faye best expressed it by saying: "I need things to pop; I need it fast and slowing down demanded extreme effort from me. But then it was so accurate between us, so pleasant and easy." On the other hand, the gap in the partners' natural rhythms also highlighted that their inability to find a middle ground resulted in discontinuity in dance. Such discontinuity was paralleled to potential discord in the couple's relational dynamics as seen in Lauren and Billy's dialogue: Lauren: "Our dancing spotlighted our rhythm differences. I need more time in everything, and he speeds up. He doesn't wait and doesn't listen and then I drift away. Billy: "It's true, it's difficult for me to stop, but then I miss out on things."

In this sense, the partners' rhythm differences resonated and promoted a discussion regarding their different approaches in handling life situations or potential friction points, as one partner (in each dyad) was typically slower and needed more time to adjust (Jonathan, Daniel, Gabriel, Lauren, and Mimi) while the other was hastier and swift (Billy, Teddy, Nina, Ally, and Faye). Daniel best expressed it by saying: "She wants



things done fast and in the dance she gave a boost of energy but I wasn't ready. This gap is parallel to the way we are and can change radically from one situation to another."

The theme of rhythm also dealt with the couples' longing to create a shift or resolve issues they were dealing with (such as intimacy, the ability to communicate with ease, or child rearing), and their frustration with their difficulty to obtain it due to their rhythm/ personality differences; as Faye put it: " I want to run with him, figuratively speaking, I have this fantasy where Daniel can be more energetic... I realize that I have to slow down with him, but I still want to feel different. Will it always be like this?"

Lastly, while the couples negotiated their needs in relation to their rhythm proclivity, the dance experience also allowed them to gain awareness in the ways their characteristic energetic tendencies affected their partner and their mutual relationship in return, as Nina confessed: "I tend to do things really quickly, I don't wait in my daily routine, but I realize that I need to approach him more gently in his level of rhythm, and not in my own because then he shuts down or gets deterred and resistant."

To sum up: Finding synchronization was depicted as a laborious task, albeit rewarding. This task reflected to each couple not only their relational challenges of finding a middle ground despite their differences but also its potential relational value in creating agreement and flow.

### **Attunement**

The next theme specifically dealt with the couples' ability to mutually attune to each other. The topic of attunement was highlighted as a fundamental relational aspect which can also be associated with previous themes such as the couple's ability to synchronize rhythms and physically engage in ways that that would be pleasant and

suitable to both of them. The couples noted that their dance encounter had required them to be considerate, thoughtful, or responsive to each other's needs in ways they were previously unaccustomed to.

In this vein, all couples commented on the parallels between the need to attune to each other in the dance and in their relationships; as Teddy expressed it, "It related to our abilities to see the other more, to consider the other's needs, to be thoughtful." The couples pointed out how physically attuning to their significant other reflected to them the need to pause, observe, and carefully listen to their partner's needs, striving for a positive shared outcome: "It is like tuning in to the other and finding out what I can do, not only for him, but for both of you, since you want the same outcome, like a chorus that sings," as Ally put it.

The couples also shared that dancing together confronted them with their innate capacity to be aware of what their partner was undergoing in the attempt to create a harmonious experience. For example, as Billy said, "I found myself asking her if she is o.k. or comfortable. I never bothered to ask her before if she understands, or paid attention if what I'm doing is good for her. It's about being aware to your surroundings, not to assume but to find out, to ask."

Furthermore, the couples noted the efforts that attuning to the other required from them such as taking into consideration how their own acts affected the other. Teddy: "Sometimes it's realizing that we have different standards or see things differently, so we need to be attuned more." Some expressed that stopping and starting over (in the dance) in cases of colliding or misunderstanding, or waiting and sensing whether their partner was ready demanded exceptional efforts from them that contradicted their natural alacrity

and characteristic need for acceleration. Others voiced their frustration when realizing that they could not achieve a balanced motion or dance in accord without accommodating to their partners' steps or considering what their partner expressed before instantly reacting. Billy and Lauren's dialogue illustrated this notion:

Billy: "it's about stopping and really listening to the other side. It's so unnatural for me. I'm used to going fast forward in everything that I do but then it's more of a monologue than a dialogue and I become exhausted, and for her it creates tension and anger. I realize I have to wait, to consider what she needs. Sometimes it's not even doing or fixing stuff, it's just being there for her and listening.

Lauren: "Everything has to be in moderation, I stop and then he listens, and then he stops and I listen and then we succeed together."

Despite these challenges that contrasted some of the partners' habitual tendencies, the couples stressed that once they attuned to each other, their mutual movement seemed easy and effortless. This notion elucidated the essence of attunement and its potential in resolving misunderstandings while "coming from a place of consideration without force" as Daniel put it. The couples also reflected on the cycle in which one partner's attempt to attune to the other partner impacted the other's ability to attune back to them and be more receptive. They noted that this cycle promoted acceptance and alleviated relational tension, best expressed by Nina and Jonathan: "When I attune to him, or tune myself differently, he can then accept my moves or my rhythm." Jonathan added: "It's true, when I feel I'm attacked I shut down or become blocked, but if she comes differently I can ease in to it and then we become better together." To sum up: The couples discussion clearly highlighted that their ability to attune to the other contributed to the couples' dynamics

with relational benefits such as achieving unity, flow and a sense of "being on the same path," as Nina expressed it.

### **Negotiating Spaces: Distance and Proximity**

The next theme that emerged involved the couples' perceptions regarding the topic of distance and proximity on and off the dance floor. All couples reflected on the space that the dance structure had defined between them. Several couples wished to be closer and professed that their dance position seemed unnatural and created an undesired physical gap between them; as Billy commented: "I wanted to get near her, to hug her and be together like one. It felt distant and cold in the beginning." Some couples required constant physical accommodation and asked their partners to adjust to them in giving them more space, as they found themselves too constricted. Others revealed that they could feel their different space tendencies as one partner needed to be in proximity while the other wished to maintain some distance to allow a comfortable and easy movement.

The couples acknowledged that their dance encounter unearthed their relational issues in negotiating the spaces that they each desired in their relationship. The experience mirrored to some partners their notable juxtaposing needs that were potential tension triggers, as one partner's desire for closeness opposed the other's need for space and freedom, for example:

Billy: "It was about finding the way between what I needed and what she needed, middle between being very close or far, and it really reflects us. Lauren always needs space and distance, but I don't feel comfortable with this space between us: I feel rejected and unwanted and it's exactly the opposite from what she needs because she feels suffocated."

In addition, the couples shared that experiencing their distance or proximity in their dance mirrored their current relational emotional situation or their longing to create change in it. Some commented on a growing emotional distance that had ensued amongst them through the years, some wished to find a renewed sense of closeness, and others commented that being in physical proximity had reflected to them the strength of their relational bond. A few examples that clarify this notion: Lauren: "Throughout the years I can detect a gradual process of distancing between us; you can't go back and become closer overnight." Jonathan: "I feel I distanced myself because I don't have the energy to invest as much, I'm exhausted."

Ally: "I wanted him to give me a little space not because I was uncomfortable but because I felt him really powerful in a good way. It won't get better if he gets closer. I can equally feel his presence if he backs up a little."

Negotiating physical spaces also allowed couples to communicate their perceptions and relational needs with their significant others, albeit hesitating to arouse any tension. Ally: "Sometimes it's challenging to express that you need some space, it's not easy because I don't want to hurt him." The couples also acknowledged that dancing together demanded that they confront their own personal needs regarding the issue of space, navigating between their ability to hold space for another and maintain their personal space or their own capacity to stand on their own two feet. As Daniel put it: "There is a constant examination of the space, how to get into her space, how not to be too intrusive, how it is for me when someone gets into my space." Faye's words added clarifications: "I felt that we were in a good distance, I didn't push him away but I felt that I needed to maintain my space."

Lastly, the couples noted that the clear definition of space that was defined by the dance structure fostered a sense of stability and ease that (for some) was lacking in their relational dynamics; as Faye expressed it:

It was a good and holding structure, I didn't feel burdened. I had my space and we were still together. I was with myself and with Daniel at the same time...I long for us to have a good structure. I realize I might fight it but I know that a structure can help us. We lack it in our relationship.

### **Interpersonal Dynamics**

The next theme that emerged related to interpersonal dynamics issues and included the categories of leading and following, the aspects of control and letting go, and the relational stance of passive versus active.

**Lead and follow.** Both partners discussed the aspects of their role as followers or leaders. The men in the leading role shared that they felt comfortable in leading and that their ability to clearly execute their role progressed as they practiced it. They expressed a sense of enjoyment and associated their satisfaction to their partner's attunement and acceptance to their lead; as Daniel put it: "I felt comfortable leading and I really enjoyed when she got into it and allowed herself to be led. It really felt great together."

Nonetheless, all men commented on leading challenges that included the demands of coordination, concentration, planning ahead, memorizing steps, being attentive, and simultaneously conveying a clear message to their partner.

The women in the followers' role shared the positive feelings that they felt while their partners fully assumed their leading role. They complimented their partners on their lead and expressed feelings of pleasure and safety. Their dance experience in the role of a

follower also allowed them to reflect on their longing to be cared for, contrary to their constant habit of nurturing their surroundings. Nina elucidated this notion by saying: "I wanted someone to take care of me for a change so I could rest and lay my head down." As they progressed, the followers noted that they felt cared for and protected in the arms of their partners who were leading them; they stated that the lead was not aggressive or demanding, but polite, clear, and courteous. Faye: "It was not stiff or intrusive; it was like he was in a kind of state of being, he was leading, and taking me in a good way."

In addition, the followers shared that they desired their partners to express their wishes and take initiative in their daily shared dynamics, similar to the way they had felt in their dancing: Ally: "It doesn't happen much. Most of the time he tries to please me but I like it when he leads. I want him to make decisions, to also say what he wants, not only to comply with everything I say." In this vein, some male leaders commented that the experience clarified for them the philosophical notion of leading. They shared that their experience strengthened their ability to be assertive, to express their needs, and take initiative; as Daniel put it: "I realize that I need to be more assertive and as we progress I'm starting to be more confident. The dance shows me what I need to do." In addition, some leaders expressed their self-doubts and hesitations in their ability to meet their partners' expectations; as Gabriel conveyed: "I was afraid she won't like it when I take charge, that she won't like my lead." However, they also stated that they felt reassured and validated not only by accepting the need to express their wishes but also by hearing their partner's need for them to assert themselves and be clear about their desires, for example:

Gabriel: "It was meaningful to hear it's pleasant for her when I do it [lead], that she wants me to because I always think of everyone else first. I'm definitely taking this place in the dance of leading and making decisions, understanding that I can express my needs and opinions and nothing bad will happen."

Some female partners who experimented in leading their partners noted the feeling of resistance that they had sensed. In contrast, some men who experimented in following shared that being led was a challenging task that demanded from them significant efforts to understand the (female) leading messages. These male partners also associated their challenges in following and difficulties in being led to their own personal characteristic traits, as can be seen in Daniel's words: "It reflects my character; I'm independent, I don't like bosses. I do not necessarily like to lead but I also don't like to do what I'm told. I don't want to control but I don't want to be led or controlled."

Furthermore, the discussion about the aspects of lead and follow allowed the couples to tap into their own relational dynamics. Some leaders revealed that their leading experience confronted them with their general hesitation to assert themselves and reflected their tendency to take the blame for an undesired outcome versus acknowledging it as a mutual responsibility. As Nina put it: "He often takes the blame or thinks that he did something wrong instead of looking at the whole picture. Sometimes there's no one to blame but he takes the unnecessary burden."

Furthermore, some leaders shared their frustration and commented on the differences between the dance experience in which they felt their partner wished them to lead and be assertive, and between their relational dynamics where they felt their partner resisted it. In this sense, the couples noted the complexity in translating their positive



mutual experience to daily situations and negotiated the capacity to do so. Daniel said: "In real life it doesn't happen, she is kind of a control freak. She cannot say she wants me to lead and take her and then she won't be led and resists my decisions everywhere else. It doesn't work like this."

**Control and letting go.** The aspects of leading and following allowed the partners to discuss their abilities in taking control and letting go. While the male leaders illustrated the ways in which the aspect of leading demanded them to take responsibility and care for their partners, they also expressed they wished their partners allowed themselves to rely on them. For example, Gabriel said: "I want her to let go and realize that she can count on me."

The followers mainly discussed the aspects of letting go that they were confronted with both physically and mentally. Some shared that letting go of control and making decisions was challenging and contradicted their innate dominant character. They added that they were challenged by the task to accommodate to their partners and accept their lead, though rewarded with mutual pleasure once they had succeeded, as Ally expressed it: "It was hard to let go and completely let him lead, it doesn't really match my character allowing someone else to take charge, but when it happened I enjoyed it." The female followers also revealed that their partner's ability to take control fostered a sense of relief and peace, recognizing they could rely on their partner and release the need to constantly be in a thinking mode. Ally: "It may sound absurd but I felt I could rely on him in a deep sense, that there is someone who holds me and then I could let go."

Moreover, the couples also negotiated their ability to find balance in their dynamics, asserting that they each had to assume aspects of control and letting go that

they were unaccustomed to. In this relation, some followers elaborated that their ability to let go and their partners' to lead impacted their relational dynamics and equilibrated their partnership. As Nina put it: "It felt nice to experience Jonathan lead. I feel that when he is taking the reins he is more of a partner because many times I deal with things alone, so when he is making decisions or takes initiative I feel that our partnership is more complete." Gabriel's words also clarified this notion: "It was reassuring to see that we can communicate it through the dance, through our movement, that I can be clearer and that she can slowly let go and count on me."

Discussing the polarities of control and letting go also promoted a discussion on the ways in which the couples were confronted with their own dominant or lenient qualities, and their ability to assume a more flexible position in their relationship as can be seen in these examples:

Nina: "I am really quick and motivated and he has a hesitant nature, but I understand that I need to wait more, that if I let go and back away there is more room for him to take and then the energy changes between us and we can synchronize." Ally: "I'm reflecting on this whole issue of dominance, to what extent am I dominant, how much I can let go, and where are the places that he can be dominant and express what is not good for him." Gabriel: "It resonated for me too, that if she wants me to take things into my hands I need to express what I need too."

Some followers shared their wish for their partner's to develop flexibility and their ability to let go of control. They referred to their partners' mental rigidity and difficulties in accepting situations where one opted differently from them. Mini: "He tries

to do things for me that I didn't ask him to. We discuss that he needs to learn how to let go because he is extremely dominant; he wants things to be done his way, but when he let go it was flowing better between us." In this vein, the leading experience also reflected to some leaders the straining efforts that they had to invest while attempting to control relational situations and the price it demanded from them, leaving them exhausted and drained. Teddy enhanced this view by saying: "Through our dancing I realized how difficult it was for me to relax, how much effort I put into things to the point of exhaustion. I don't know how to balance it but I realize that I need to learn to let go."

**Presence and Passive versus active.** Discussing the dance roles allowed the surfacing of the partners' interpersonal dynamics in relation to the theme of presence. They revealed that they were challenged by the need to be physically and mentally present during their shared dancing. The followers indicated that following demanded that they willingly accept their partner's lead and fully engage with them versus taking a passive position. The male leaders noted in return that their leading role required them to communicate with clarity, and both partners discussed the notion of active presence. Faye's words expressed these ideas: "Accepting him to lead me doesn't mean I'm droopy and passive. I had to assert myself, to be upright and stable, and I felt he needed to be clear without being forceful."

The partners also noted that their dance experience mirrored to them their unconscious active or passive positions they had undertaken in their relationship. Some partners reflected on the ways in which the requirement to fully engage and be present in the dance, especially when they struggled to create a smooth motion, contrasted their tendency to withdraw when conflicts arose in their daily dynamics. Lauren said: "When I

feel have no say I tend to back away and retract and I'm not there anymore, and here I needed to come back and be present otherwise it didn't work. It made me think on the meaning of being present." Some followers also commented that although they were in the follower's role, they faced the need to actively maintain their posture and balance. They disclosed that being physically present demanded discipline and energy that opposed their passive lackadaisical nature.

In this regard, the partners reflected upon their challenges in being active or present and the ways in which these challenges manifested in relational aspects. Such aspects included the areas of housekeeping, parenting skills, and intimacy where their partner's wish from them to take initiative seemed a difficult task that was more than they were able to comply with. As Teddy put it: I felt she was tagging along and it's not about me moving her. She has to walk, I can't do that for her... this issue of her taking initiative or even just being active is a theme we are dealing with in our relationships as well."

### **Shifts**

The couples shared various changes that they started to implement in their lives during the research process. They noted that their experience triggered psychological shifts in the form of feelings and attitudes in their dynamics that were manifested in making unexpected positive efforts toward their partner, or taking actions geared to create transformations in life areas such as work or child rearing.

**Changes in physical/ non-verbal dynamics.** The couples reflected on the ways their experience had impacted their dynamics. Daniel and Faye shared that their movement interaction had mirrored to them the ways in which their reactions to each

other were dominated by their habitual patterns which they wished to change. They recognized an emergence of a shift in their non-verbal dynamics saying: "There is a different motion between us, we danced metaphorically this week."

Billy and Lauren started to make efforts and positive gestures towards each other. For example, Billy confessed that he started to pause and hug Lauren when he came home, contrary to his previous ways of conduct, where he swiftly entered home and followed the demands of his hectic chores. Billy: "I rarely did this before, but now I try. It's different and it brings a new element. Before I would come in straight to my study or complain." Contrary to her reserved and passive nature, Lauren unexpectedly invited Billy to lunch during their work day. Lauren shared she had to overcome her inner voices fearing Billy's rejection and that the outcome pleasantly surprised them both by bringing them together:

Lauren: We talked and he seemed irritated about something. It felt like it won't suit him, but then I said to myself there is no harm in asking, he can refuse and that's o.k., but I can say it. It was a new effort.

Billy: "That was so surprising and exactly what I needed that day. We ended up having a great time together. She never did that before."

**Changes in communication.** the partner's ability to communicate differently and express his or her needs surfaced throughout the session in many occasions. Gabriel, who used to avoid potentially conflicted situations, expressed his need to address unresolved issues: "Sometimes it's hard, I don't like her stance on a matter that doesn't really concern her, so I prefer not to say anything... I know it's also in my character not to say things but now I feel the need to discuss things over, kids, finances..."

Though previously unaccustomed to it, Billy realized the value of positive feedback and started to compliment Lauren. In addition, contrary to his use of distancing in tensed situations Billy also shared that the sessions positively impacted his ability to communicate and reconcile with Lauren when such situations occurred:

I felt I didn't say it the right way and before I would just continue, but now I stopped and discussed it with her; I didn't attack, we clarified the whole thing and the tension evaporated. We wouldn't do that normally, we would just ignore the incident until it would pile up into a huge fight, exactly like not stopping and fixing what's not working when we danced.

**Finding ways to spend time together.** All the couples recognized their wish to engage in mutual activities and recreate a space of their own. Reminded of the pleasure of spending time together Billy and Lauren started jogging together once a week. Lauren also surprised Billy with tickets to a show he liked, ending by spending a day together.

Teddy who was reluctant to do any form of dancing surprised Mimi at home, asking her to practice their dancing. Teddy admitted that seeing "the pleasure that Mimi had when dancing together" inspired him to make the effort, and Mimi shared that Teddy's gestures toward her elevated their connection. They both wished to continue to learn and engage in partner dancing after resuming the sessions.

**Changes in life attitudes and interpersonal dynamics.** Nina and Jonathan commented that they felt a general relational shift, saying, "Even our closest friends recognize that something is shifting." Faye disclosed that she sensed that the process enhanced her wish to focus on the positive relational aspects and welcomed the possibility for changes in her dynamics with Daniel, saying: "I feel there is an acceptance

of the imperfections, a change process of wanting the best possible in these circumstances, a second chance, our intention to be good with each other." Daniel added that the dance encounter initiated an inner process in which he was trying to be more attentive to his own relational needs, contrary to constantly being considerate of others and forfeiting his own needs.

Lauren expressed that her shared dance encounter with Billy reflected to her that she could overcome negative feelings she was harboring as a result of difficult past situations they experienced: "I can really see he wants to be near. It helps me giving a chance for new things, to put past things aside." Another example for taking life-altering measures can be seen in Gabriel's realization of his ability to take actions that led him to ask for a raise (which he avoided doing for a long time) or confront unresolved situations with Ally: "I'm doing things I didn't do before, I asked for a raise, it wasn't easy for me but I did it. I also told her, let's sit and resolve this and that. What we did here initiated all this."

To sum up: The couples noted a trail of shifts in their dynamics that included communication aspects and attitudes, finding a mutual space for shared activities, and positive efforts towards each other. These shifts were described as ones that germinated from their experience.

### **Partner Dancing as a Therapeutic Form for Couple's Therapy**

The last theme discussed the ways in which partner dancing could be employed as a suitable form for couple's therapy. This theme included the subcategories that related to the general dance experience, alleviating negative emotions, enhancing positive relational potential, and reflections about the format as a therapeutic method.

**The dance experience.** All couples reflected on the positive aspects that they experienced in the utilized format. They described their dance experience as one that allowed them to feel satisfaction and a sense of harmonious achievement. They saw it as an opportunity to rekindle their connection by recreating a space of shared humor, laughter, and amusement. Nina: "Both of us have a lot of humor, so when we are in sync on this level it creates fun encounters between us, it brought this feeling back." Some partners mentioned their initial feeling of embarrassment due to their lack of experience in the form of partner dancing or due to their lack of confidence in their ability to express themselves through motion. However, they noted that their initial hesitations transformed into sensations of relaxation and pleasure as they progressed. They also shared that getting in touch with their bodies through their shared movement added elements of freshness to their relationship. Teddy put it best by saying: "I was insecure and thought I would freeze but it was good and at some point I felt I was starting to get in to it... and then everything seemed so easier, I was less stressed and it was flowing."

**Alleviating negative emotions.** The couples reflected that positively engaging through dance allowed them to alleviate their negative feelings and discord with which they came in to the session and promoted their ability to communicate clearly and calmly with each other. Faye's words add to this notion: "We came tired and heavy after an argument we had, but after we danced I felt lighter. The dancing appeased and liberated us from the baggage that we carried and then we could create a calm dialogue." Jonathan also commented: "It's difficult between us lately and this fog evaporated through the dance, it took us out of our negativity."



Furthermore, the couples noted that being in a space which was not exclusively verbal allowed them to put their differences and conflicts aside which contributed in gaining a different relational perspective as Daniel expressed it: "I feel we are better when we dance; it's like the dancing allows opening and understanding things between us." It should be noted that while the couple's experience did not necessarily change their stance on their position in matters they were debating, it allowed them to gain a fresh outlook and communicate with empathy and ease. Ally enhanced this view by saying: "It really brings us closer together, we laugh and we are more relaxed after and can see things from a different perspective; it's a chance for mutual growth."

**Enhancing positive potential.** Regardless of their challenges or struggles, the couples noted that their experience had emphasized the positive aspects in their relationship. They added that engaging through dance and reflecting about the content that surfaced allowed them to acknowledge the potential in their relationship if they mutually cooperate. Billy: "I'm extremely touched seeing our potential of being together. It's easy to focus on the negative, but I realize that if we set our goal to be together or get somewhere, we can do it."

While most of the participating couples were faced with communication challenges or lack of intimacy, they shared that the process gave them a sense of optimism by being reminded of the positive relational aspects that connected them to begin with, as well as their ability to surmount relational obstacles. Nina said: "It's a different experience that reflected our challenges but also brought back some light, being reminded of things we did in the past and the qualities we admired in each other."

Jonathan also clarified: "It is encouraging and hopeful to see that what connected us is still there."

In addition, contrary to intensifying their struggles by focusing solely on negative relational aspects, acknowledging positive relational aspects that surfaced as a result of their dance interaction sparked a discussion about the couples' necessity to make mutual efforts focusing on their strengths as a couple. It also enabled them to address their wish to produce a setting that would help to maintain their sense of closeness. As Nina stated: "It shows me that when we get into conflicts we argue and get estranged. We need to change the situation in order to allow something else to come in. It takes a lot of energy and work but you need to make these efforts if you want to pick yourself up."

**Partner dancing as couple's therapy.** All five couples described the research format (dancing and a reflective process) as a powerful tool that allowed them to gain insights on their relational dynamics. They surprisingly commented on the accurate ways in which their shared dance captured and reflected their interactional patterns. These patterns dealt with issues such as communication, intimacy, and synchronization that were previously discussed. It should be noted that the ability of the experience to reflect such issues was evidenced regardless of the couples' relational issues (for example: Teddy and Mimi focused on the loss of intimacy, while Billy and Lauren faced significant communication challenges).

Moreover, the couples shared that they were surprised to witness the parallels between their dance interactions that accurately mirrored their relational characteristics. They added that they felt more at ease to discuss their relational challenges since they could relate their issues to their felt experience. The couples also stated that observing

their dynamics from a distance allowed them to share their impressions in a non threatening way and reflect on their issues while minimizing friction or being pulled into a cycle of blame and retaliation. Teddy expressed it by saying: "I'm still surprised seeing how our dancing was symbolic to our relational issues and our ways of relating and interacting with each other. Our dancing really illustrated our differences and I could relate to it on another level." Daniel's words also elaborated on this notion:

Everything was in the dance. We wanted to dance together but it wasn't simple, just like our relationship. It's seemingly obvious in the philosophic sense that the dance reflects our relationship but having experienced it, I feel that it was so precise and accurate, and it is really useful as a tool to understand your relationship.

Though the couples described their initial hesitation while entering the process, they also discussed the benefits in the format that was utilized. They stated that by reflecting on their dance interaction they could lucidly and calmly clarify misunderstandings and opposing relational views versus only verbally trying to resolve their differences that often lead to emotional or aggressive reactions. For example: Lauren said: "We could relate to issues and discuss them without added tension. I think it allowed us to say and accept things differently instead of getting into our usual cycle of mutual blame." In addition, the partners mentioned that contrary to conventional therapeutic forms, interacting through dance bypassed their thinking processes and enabled them to reflect on the undeniable sensations that surfaced towards each other through their dynamics. Lauren and Billy's dialogue elucidated this notion:

Lauren: "You cannot argue with the fact that you don't synchronize or that you step on each other. It's clear and you have to resolve this, the dance doesn't create huge emotional conflicts but it reflects them and then you can learn about your reactions and change them."

Billy: "It was like putting a powerful magnifying glass on things and I realized I could implement these understanding not only in my relationship but also in work or with my kids, like how to listen, how to lead, how to let go... I could see the parallels between life and dancing and it helped me to understand the impact of my ways of interacting with others."

Comparing the current format to their conventional verbal sessions, the couples noted that while their experience was enjoyable and fun it was also meaningful and gave them strength to carry on and believe in their process contrary to times when they left their verbal sessions feeling hopeless and drained. Lauren said: "I felt satisfied; it was deep but without wearing me down or feeling exhausted like I felt a lot of times when we left our couple's sessions." They also added that non-verbally interacting with each other added a valuable dimension to their ability to communicate and understand their relational needs. Lastly, the partners also highlighted the added value of relating to an experience in vivo which allowed them to project their reflections on relational areas. Lauren: "it was very powerful and cannot come only from discussing or analyzing things. We understood things through the dance and translated these insights into actions that generated changes in our lives. It was really effective because we could feel it in the here and now, how I'm reacting and what I could do differently; it was not only talking about it."

To conclude: the last theme illustrated the impact of combining shared dancing with a reflecting process, stressing its ability to contribute to a couple's therapeutic process by emphasizing positive relational qualities and acknowledging relational patterns through an undeniable experience. Illustrating this notion, Jonathan's words conclude this discussion: "if two people choose to dance together they both have to participate in order to create a dance. For this purpose they need to engage in a process of learning how to move together, otherwise it won't work. But once it works you feel a synergy where all parts are moving together, it's like yin and yang, exactly like in relationships."

### **Therapist's Feedback**

A pre and post interview was done with the couples' therapists in order to receive their feedback and impressions about the process.

**Pre-interview.** As previously noted, all couples varied in their characteristics: they all had their own unique relational story, they all faced different relational challenges, and they were all in different stages in their therapeutic process. Nonetheless, all referring therapists stated similar reasons for referring the couples to the research including the aspect of timing and that they felt it was the right time to include additional therapeutic means, which they would not have considered at an earlier stage in the couples' therapeutic process. The therapists added that the couples were at a therapeutic state in which the magnitude of their arguments had dissipated and that they had gained sufficient tools to respectfully communicate with each other. Thus, the therapists evaluated that the couples could be open to an experiential process that would potentially allow the surfacing of relational themes, coming from a different angle.

All therapists expressed their profound belief in enhancing aspects of non-verbal communication. They elaborately discussed their wish to strengthen and ameliorate the couple's ability to communicate non-verbally as part of their therapeutic process. The therapists also noted their own relational metaphor of a mutual dance and believed that the sessions could illustrate this metaphor in practice to the participating couples. Some added that they valued the therapeutic aspects that lie in a shared dance and recognized the potential communication and physical challenges that the couples would need to overcome in such an encounter. In this sense they wished their experience could assist in resolving communication circuits as well as strengthening the couples' bond.

In addition, the therapists shared that while they integrated therapeutic exercises that focused on non-verbal physical cues (such as touch, embrace, or eye contact), they sensed that they had limited tools and could further the couple's non-verbal process up to a certain point. Some therapists also added that due to the uneven capacities of the partners to verbalize their thoughts and feelings or due to both of the partners' tendencies to overanalyze their issues, they welcomed the opportunity to allow the couples to move away from their habitual verbal cycles and experience relational aspects in non-verbal forms, hoping it would allow them to deepen their relational insights.

It should be noted that while the therapists recognized the positive results of their couple's (verbal) therapeutic process, some sensed that their couples reached a point of verbal saturation and that solely discussing and reflecting on their issues did not suffice. They therefore wished to allow the couples to experience the layered complexity of their relationship in additional ways.

In this vein, the therapists reflected on the general issue of intimacy and believed that movement could embody one's perceptions that related to touch and sexuality. While these perceptions were addressed throughout the couple's ongoing therapeutic process, the therapists recognized the need for additional experiential tools that could expand the partner's ability to address issues of intimacy. As Teddy and Mimi's therapist put it: "One picture is worth a thousand words." The therapists stated that while the therapeutic verbal process allowed conceptualizing, learning, or providing educational tools, they felt that the couples needed assistance in bridging the verbal and non-verbal languages that they were grappling with.

**Post-interview.** All therapists shared the positive feedback they had received from and were under the impression that their couples had undergone a meaningful experience. The therapists corroborated the ways in which the dance interaction illustrated the couple's relational cycle with precision. They also noted that their process both contributed and confirmed the general therapeutic plan/ goals, for example: Nina and Jonathan's therapist said:

Jonathan is reserved; he doesn't talk and can't compete with Nina's talkative, fast rhythm, and her need to control everything. In these situations he becomes stressed and retreats into his shell. He stays silent until he can't take it anymore and lashes out. When she lets go and is more present he calms down and then he becomes more present. Only then can their dance can become mutual. It's amazing how the dance illustrated that. It's like we are speaking on the same things but through different languages. Hearing their reflections I was pleased to

see that their experiential sessions were in line with their therapeutic process and it also strengthened their therapeutic goals, as I see them.

The therapists' reflections elaborated on the core issues that their couples were debating and confirmed the research themes that emerged. The therapists noted the need to enhance communication and resolve situational conflicts that resulted in silence and detachment. They also discussed the theme of lack of intimacy and the ability of the couples to overcome stagnation and recreate a renewed sense of physical and emotional closeness. Moreover, throughout their reflections the therapists generally referred to issues of interpersonal dynamics such as the partners' different rhythms, their ability to learn to attune to each other, and their issues with the theme of trust and safety. Lastly, the therapists highlighted emotional psychological aspects of control and letting go and the need to create an equilibrium in psychological relational aspects of lead and follow that impacted the couple's relationships, as Daniel and Faye's therapist expressed it:

Faye wants things done her way and they struggle with profound rhythm differences that also manifested themselves in attitudes towards intimacy and sexuality. Her work is to learn how to attune and synchronize ...when she is able to reflect on her rhythm in relation to Daniel's she can enjoy, otherwise she is experiencing constant frustration. In return, Daniel, who often tries to please her but then becomes disappointed and angry, is developing his ability to assert himself and express his own needs.

Ally and Gabriel's therapist also clarified: " Gabriel's basic orientation is to think of others first, and I think that through the dance he was learning how to trust others, how to take and lead in his own way. That's his challenge."



All the therapists noted that incorporating the element of movement added a valuable component to the therapeutic process. Some stated that while they did not refer directly to the couple's parallel experiential sessions they felt the impact in the couple's relation to each other and "in the energy between that felt different" as Teddy and Mimi's therapist shared.

Some therapists reflected that the couples' experiential sessions were used as a point of reference that allowed them to relate to the couple's ability to make mutual efforts, to regulate emotions, or attune to each other in relational matters, especially in conflicted situations. The therapists perceived the experimental process as valuable and insightful both for the couples and for themselves. They noted that they believed the experiential sessions assisted the couples in resonating and internalizing therapeutic insights that were discussed throughout their ongoing couple's sessions.

Furthermore, all therapists described a shift in the couple's dynamics. These shifts manifested differently in each couple and were tied to their own current relational issues. For example, Ally and Gabriel's relational position was described as closer and more balanced. Teddy and Mimi's therapist sensed a shift in the non-verbal energy between them that allowed addressing intimacy issues and integrate additional non-verbal therapeutic methods. Daniel and Faye's therapist expressed that their experience had reflected to them their gaps in ways that they could not overlook. As a result Faye's resistances heightened on the one hand whereas a positive change was felt in Daniel's willingness to rely on his therapist. It should be noted that while Jonathan's and Nina's therapist validated the importance of the content that surfaced in their process, he did not

recognize any impact of their shared sessions, likely attributed to the lengthy time and discontinuity of their experiential process.

In addition, all therapists reflected on the use on non-verbal communication and its profound impact. They shared that the dance undeniably reflected the couple's relational issues and added that relating to a lived experience in the form of movement provided the couples an opportunity to reflect on their dynamics from a safe distance on the one hand, and to experience their own resistances in a powerful way that they could not bypass through verbal chatter on the other. Daniel and Faye's therapist best put it:

Their shift was expressed in Faye's regressed state. She was meeting with herself while being in the setting of their shared movement. She could not refuse to talk about it or try to deflect the conversation like she does here and the dance illustrated their gaps, their differences, the places where she has to adjust and it was overwhelming...and Daniel started to say 'no' generally, in the way of saying yes to himself and his needs.

Furthermore, the therapists described that the couple's experience added an additional dimension to the issues that were discussed verbally in their couple's ongoing sessions and noted that the overall process nourished and deepened their therapeutic sessions.

Lastly, specifically relating to the issue of intimacy, some therapists noted that with the intention to soften intimacy boundaries, they gave their couples homework in the form of exercises (gazing into their partner's eyes, stroking, or hugging each other). While these exercises aimed to enhance closeness and the ability to feel at ease with each other, the therapists stated that the context of sexual intimacy was undeniable, thus often

resulting in creating additional tension for these couples who struggled with issues of intimacy to begin with. In contrast, the therapists noted that the couple's experiential process allowed them to get reacquainted with their own bodies and with that of their partner. They added that the process allowed their couples to experience reciprocal closeness and intimacy while neutralizing the sexual context and being liberated from anticipation, or stress that these dimensions usually created.

### **Triangulation**

To add an additional perspective to the results, a triangulation process was conducted by a board-certified dance movement therapist (BC-DMT) who is also a certified movement analyst (CMA). As a reminder, the DMT received edited filmed sequences of each of the couples' meetings and was asked to give her impression about changes in body language, communication, and other aspects in the couples' relationships based on their movement.

The DMT's impressions corroborated and solidified the research's emerging themes. The DMT noted that the structure of partner dances as displayed in steps, frame, and posture potentially allowed the couples to explore motion patterns of mobility, synchronization and attunement, tempo, connection, rhythm, spatial preferences, and leading and following.

The DMT's impressions specifically highlighted the themes of connection that revolved around intimacy and communication. These were displayed through various examples such as the couple's hold that became closer, their closer proximity in their upper bodies, and their spontaneous physical gestures that included carving hugs or bringing their heads closer. She also stated that the couples' movement showed a

progression in their ability to engage with each other in more complete ways. This was evidenced in an increased mobility in their torso and hips, or in rotating their shoulders.

In addition, the DMT detected an increase of flow and synchrony in the couples' movement as they were practicing; their rhythms were more evenly matched, their gestures were lighter, and in instances of misunderstandings they were able to repair quickly and return to shared gaze. In this vein, the therapist stated that while most of the couples initially demonstrated individual movement patterns, they were gradually searching ways to bridge their own movement to those of their partner. It was clear that throughout the sessions the couple's pathways became smoother, and that their sense of shared space around the body /"kinesphere" (Laban, 1966, p. 10) had deepened.

The dance therapist also recognized motifs of connection and disconnection. She stated that some of the partners' initial position around their own axis demonstrated very little attunement and no eye contact as they were retreating from their partner. Other partners moved away or were struggling to find their own space while being in a shared kinesphere. The couple's challenges to accommodate to each other or express their needs were clearly displayed in the couples' rhythm differences or in their choice to remain silent while they found themselves in uncomfortable positions. A few clarifying examples: Mimi did not change her physical posture and frame while she was being pulled by Teddy in an uncomfortable frame. Nina and Jonathan's communication struggles were also evidenced in Nina's missing out on Jonathan's cues towards her (such as head nods or leading suggestions).

Nonetheless, as the couples progressed it could be seen that they supported each other better and that their physical connection was enhanced. This was evidenced in their

gradual physical rapprochement and in their increased central spatial tension: they displayed more flexibility in their joints, their touch and facial expressions softened, they were smiling more, they shared moments of laughter and were gazing into each other's eyes for a longer period of time, and they demonstrated positive humorous eye contact.

Lastly, the couples' shared movement also evinced the couple's growing ability to attune and respond to each other in reciprocity (displayed in the quality of eye contact, their matching rhythms and their ability to move confidently through space together in direct and clear spatial pathways).

### **Summary**

This chapter described the themes that emerged as a result of the couples' experiential process. These emerging themes, compounded with the therapists' impressions and the peer debrief feedback, offer a unique composition of body and mind in answering the research question. The next chapter will discuss the themes and their meanings, and will draw possible conclusions.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the potential of the PD (partner dancing) experience as a therapeutic process that can be used to reflect upon the dynamics and interactions of couples who are presently in couple's therapy. The research also sought to explore the ways in which the experience of PD can support/ enhance the therapeutic process of couples who are currently in couple's therapy.

Five couples who were undergoing couple's therapy were asked to participate in four weekly consecutive sessions. Each session consisted of a PD experience and ended with a verbal reflection that related to the couple's dance experience and the ways in which they associated it with their relational dynamics. The PD activities and the reflection process were all taught and led by the researcher. Pre- and post-interviews with the couples' therapists were also conducted in order to receive their impression about the process, as well as a triangulation process that was provided by using a board certified dance movement therapist who studied edited videos of the couples' four sessions to note movement pattern changes.

It should be noted that the teaching techniques of PD that were used in the study are conventional teaching methods of PD. In addition, in this study PD was taught to couples who were in therapy and was not used for the purpose of leisure activity. Distinctions between PD as a leisure activity and between the format that was utilized in this research will be discussed further below.

In reviewing the results from the data analysis process, it seems that the method that was utilized in this study revealed content that was fundamentally tied to couples'

relational issues; while each participating couple had their unique relational story and challenges, they all shared the wish to reshape their relationship and deepen their connection.

The thematic analysis yielded eight themes for the entire process: communication, intimacy, synchronization, attunement, negotiating spaces, interpersonal dynamics, shifts, and partner dancing as couple's therapy. This chapter will discuss these emerging themes and their implications in light of the current literature.

### **The Premise of Partner Dances**

PD is a dance-form that can only be danced within the boundaries of two individuals. Through the structure that is dictated by this dance-form, a shared space is created between the dancing couple. If the partners wish to engage in this activity, they are faced with the single option of interacting with each other. Thus, the word interaction, the action that lies between or within the couple, becomes a key concept. In this sense, the couple's overt physical dynamics act as a field that operates on psychological and emotional levels and highlight their ability to engage with each other on multiple levels. In order to achieve a satisfying result in the form of a smooth execution, both partners have to cooperate, synchronize, and attune to each other.

The concept of cooperation and communication was previously reviewed (Bernstein, 1979; Matzdorf & Sen, 2016; Olszewski, 2008) as an important construct in PD as well as in couples' relationships and in therapy (Baucom, Baucom, & Christensen, 2015; Benson et al., 2012). The theme of collaboration and synchronization raised the question of each partner's ability to accommodate to the other's needs or willingness to take part in a mutual relational effort. In this vein, a smooth shared dance can be seen as

the result and reward for both partners' combined efforts. Nonetheless, in order to achieve such outcome, the partners have to embark on a mutual process in which they each acknowledge their unique responsibility and contribution to their desired outcome. For example: Billy struggled with reducing the size of his steps trying to synchronize to Lauren's while Lauren faced the challenge of committing herself in taking a present stance in their dance. Teddy was also confronted with the challenge of not single handedly trying to move Mimi while Mimi experienced the need to hold balance and posture without relying on Teddy.

While the couples' experience reflected their underlying conflicts that dealt with finding ways of connection and synchronization, they also recognized the ways in which the experience had strengthened and validated their union, willingly choosing their significant other in their relational path. The outcome of a flowing dance was perceived as the labor of a mutual effort. Consequently, the couple's shared dance is seen as one that functioned as a reference point for the couple's joint efforts. Such reference point transcends the view of each partner as a separate entity with contrasting desires but acts as one that perceives the relationship as a unit in which both partners have an equal responsibility of allowing it to function at its best. In her discussion on long-term romantic relationships, Malach-Pines (2002) added to this notion by suggesting that merely understanding the relation between couples' unresolved relational issues and the tension in their liaison does not suffice. She clarified that both partners have to accept their individual responsibility and contribution to the underlying situation that they are facing. The theme of cooperation and synchronization that was demonstrated in the forms



of creating a joint movement, contrary to a stagnating one, also comes in line with Eliot's (1992) discussion about the relational dance that requires such elements.

### **The Reciprocal Dance of Cause and Effect**

While the couples' experience reflected their underlying conflicts, navigating through the discomforts of different rhythm tendencies, movement preferences, and their ability to synchronize and connect, they also recognized the ways in which they could not dismiss or bypass such challenges, choosing to dance with each other, as a metaphor of interconnecting and being together. In this context, systems theory in couple's and family therapy takes into account the complex connections between individuals that play a part in the formation of the greater whole (Minuchin & Fishman, 2009). It also stresses the need for a shared responsibility in which all elements that form the larger unit act as inter-dependent participants that affect and are affected by each other in a reciprocal influence (Zinker & Gestalt Institute of Cleveland., 1994). Trying to elucidate this perception, Duncan and Rock (1991) described such interaction between partners using a PD terminology. Duncan and Rock highlighted the need for partners to engage in a mutual effort as well as their reciprocal ability to be attentive to leading and following cues, noting that "When this is done effective...the couple moves as one" (p. 13). Considering these ideas, it can be understood that the couples' dancing experience assisted in redefining their relationship, not as a competition between two adversaries in which only one can win but as a unit that may bring under one roof a multitude of contradicting or complementing needs. Thus, the overall experience assisted partners to conduct a dialogue about their individual needs and taking ownership of the way their acts affected their partnership.

## **Interpersonal Attunement**

In addition, through their movement, the couples gained a somatic perception of their relationship that raised the question of the partner's ability to attune to each other, being considerate, thoughtful, or responsive to each other's needs in ways they were previously unaccustomed to (as previously described in the results: by being considerate of each other's space tendencies, attune in steps width, dance hold, and emit physical cues of comfort and encouragement to each other). Hence, the results highlight the ways in which a shared embodied interactional experience can heighten a couple's awareness and attunement, as discussed by Kossak (2009), who underlined the roles of therapeutic attunement and embodied awareness in enhancing connections, and Erskine (1998), who emphasized the ways in which the concept of attunement comes to play in interpersonal contact. It should be noted that while these concepts were highlighted throughout the results, they are also tied to the ways that the couples had learned to express care and affection for each other. Care is seen here as a basic relational concept that deals with the ability to recognize and tend to the other's needs by choice and not by default, consequently strengthening couple's mutual emotional ties.

## **How Far is still Too Close?**

Engaging in PD also allowed the couples to negotiate and explore their proclivities toward the relational issue of physical and emotional space. The findings demonstrated how being required to maintain a shared physical space promoted a dialogue on what could be perceived as colliding relational desires of distance and proximity. Such dialogue was evidenced as one partner's need to maintain physical closeness (which they perceived as a reassuring sign in the couple's connection)

juxtaposed the other partner's need to maintain some distance that would allow them to comfortably and fully engage with their significant other. Hawkes' (2003) discussion regarding the potential that lies in PD to raise therapeutic themes concerning individuation and separation corroborated this notion, as well as Solomon and Tatkin's (2011) views that portrayed the ways in which movement can be used as a vehicle to unearth relational patterns of attachment, distance, and proximity in a therapeutic process.

The opposing desires of distance and proximity can be paralleled to the human attempt to merge the paradoxical needs of symbiosis versus autonomy and individuation. Esther Perel (2006), a renowned couple's therapist and acclaimed author, shed light on the tension between these two polarities, explaining:

Love rests on two pillars: surrender and autonomy. Our need for togetherness exists alongside our need for separateness. One does not exist without the other. With too much distance, there can be no connection. But too much merging eradicates the separateness of two distinct individuals....when people become fused – when two become one- connection can no longer happen. There is no one to connect with. Thus separateness is a precondition for connection. (p. 24)

Perel's words assist in creating a wider view while underscoring how these two standpoints of distance and proximity feed a relational cycle in which, (according to Perel), one partner's fear of being abandoned meets the other partner's fear of being stifled. Hendricks's (1997) previously discussed views also support this discussion by noting similar unbalanced tendencies in every relationship that can be perceived in physical expressions of union and separation.

The preceding views (Hendricks, 1997; Perel, 2006) validate the suggestion that the PD experience embodied the couple's contradictory needs of distance and proximity while simultaneously allowing them to create a space in which they could engage with ease. It should be noted that the resolution to these primordial longings is not one of “either or” but of coming to terms with both needs and negotiating these spaces contrary to perpetually reacting or being triggered by the same contradictory demands with no outlet in sight. Therefore, rather than constantly feeling their opposing needs as a continuous source of tension, the PD experience allowed the couples to create a lucid dialogue about the ways they could apply their ability to create a mutual ground in their dynamics, as they did in their dance. Such reflective dialogue was witnessed in Ally's reflections to Gabriel, saying: "it's not that if we are [physically] closer it becomes more powerful, it's quite the contrary. I can feel you even stronger if I can maintain a sense of space ... and it's challenging to even express that because these needs are something we are dealing with in our relationship."

### **Balancing Power**

As previously mentioned in the literature review, some feminist theorists (Davis, 2015; Savigliano, 1995) discussed the ways in which PD reinforces heteronormative power relations and negates women's space or expression. Their main claim was that this art form reproduces gender power struggles, such as dominance versus submissiveness, due to the structure of roles in the dance, seen in men leading and women following. In contrast to this notion, the findings in this research highlight the ways in which a couple's dance can mirror various relational forms, needs, or concerns. Thus, this research emphasized how a relational dialogue could be established between two partners

(regardless of the nature of their relationship) through a shared act of dance. During this non-verbal dialogue, the defined attributed roles of leading and following serve only as a reference point that may allow couples to reflect on their relational needs and forces that come to play in their relationship. These aspects might include the need to listen, to be validated, and to convey a clear message, as well as each of the partner's ability to communicate their desires and recognize the ones of their significant other. Therefore, viewing PD solely as a device that reinforces inequality may be seen as a narrow and too simplistic lens since doing so links aspects of leading and following with aspects of power and weakness without taking into account the complex story of two individuals. It should be pointed out that this discussion does not intend to dismiss the claim about relational power differences, but aims to highlight the potential of PD to open a wider lens on the ways couples interact as a catalyst for change.

In this vein, the multifaceted relational narratives of the participating couples cannot be viewed merely from a stance of power differences. Some were about partners who initially loved each other but had lost their way, as in the case of Daniel and Faye. Others revolved around a couple's wish to reconnect, about their lack of sexual and emotional intimacy, (for example Teddy and Mimi), about overcoming their sensed distance that became entrenched while trying to navigate through life's hectic routine (seen in Nina's and Jonathan's case), or about two loving individuals who longed to enrich their relational connection, as witnessed in Ally and Gabriel's reflections.

It should also be noted that, contrary to these aforementioned theories (Davis, 2015; Savigliano, 1995) that stressed the dominant innate component in the leading role, the findings indicated that all the participating men struggled with the notion of leading

as expressed by Daniel, Gabriel, and Teddy, all voicing their hesitation and lack of confidence. Regardless of the need to master the technical aspects of leading, the male leaders expressed their confusion and uncertainty in relation to their ability to assume the philosophical nature of their roles. Gabriel, for example, reflected that leading, in the sense of affirming himself and his set of needs was an estranged and difficult task to accomplish.

In his discussion termed “the drama of new masculinity,” Bukobza (2017) described how postmodern female perspectives have redefined the perception of masculinity and, as a result, reshaped women's expectations of men. For that reason, Bukobza stated that men in our postmodern era are left in an ambiguous territory, forced to comply with contradictory positions of avoiding the displays of vulnerability on one hand and ridiculed or destabilized while being perceived as uncaring or feeble on the other. Therein Bukobza asserts lies an entangled cycle where the proliferation of demands from men results in a feeling of conflict and confusion to the point of emasculation. With this notion in mind, the researcher suggests that learning to assume the role of a leader with both assertiveness and sensitivity while engaging through dance with their significant other can be seen as a clarifying and empowering mechanism. Such mechanism triggered individual and relational processes that these men in this study had taken in their lives, evidenced in various aspects such as asserting themselves in the workplace or refusing to continue to maintain a silent position in household or relational matters. In this sense, Gabriel initiated conversations with Ally about issues he previously refrained to address, such as financial concerns as well as his viewpoints on matters of that revolved around their children. Contrary to alienating himself, Daniel also started to

express the need for his wishes to be accounted for, and Billy shared that as a result of the experience he felt reassured and more confident to voice his ideas and desires with both clarity sensitivity, and care without feeling dismissed.

Moreover, contrary to the previous view of PD as an arena that reinforces women's submissiveness (Davis, 2015; Savigliano, 1995), the female followers did not demonstrate a narrowing of their expression while being in their dance roles but related to their experience as a liberating one that allowed them to rest and feel secure and cared for in the arms of their partners, as expressed by Faye's reflection saying that she longed to feel held while letting go of constant thoughts and responsibilities, or simply "laying my head on him and feeling that I'm cared for" as Nina put it. While some female partners were confronted with their ability to be fully present during their interaction with their partner, others demonstrated their challenges in relinquishing control, as seen in Nina's tendencies in leading herself, being challenged to wait for Jonathan's leading cues, or in Ally's reflections regarding her struggles in letting go of control and relying on Gabriel. As a result, the female participants became aware not only of how their ability to let go shifted the dynamics in enhancing their partner's capacity to fully assume their leading role but also of their own satisfaction of feeling a balanced equilibrium in their partnership versus single-handedly carrying the whole weight. As previously mentioned, the mechanism of PD can reflect relational imbalances in the various forms they may appear, but most importantly allows attending to such imbalance, wishing to create a more equilibrated dynamics.

These findings echoed Olszewski's (2008) discussion regarding the ability of a shared act of dance to raise collaboration and mutual dialogue between partners versus

the reinforcement of traditional gender dichotomies, as well as Hawkes' (2003) previously mentioned theory regarding the underlying interpersonal issues that may surface as a result of dancing with a partner, such as experiencing roles of passive versus active, guiding versus following and listening, bonding and separating, decision-making, and trust.

### **Aspects of Communication**

A fundamental relational aspect that was specifically highlighted throughout the findings dealt with the ways in which the couples' experience positively impacted their ability to communicate in multiple ways. In this regard, Weeks and Fire (2014) described the topic of communication and the lack of it as a frequent dividing issue between partners in the process of couple's therapy. The experienced couple's therapist Claire Rabin (1991) also stressed the need for communication between couples and asserted that in order to traverse relational changes and tend to the demands of conflicts and opposing needs, couples need to engage in a lasting and reciprocal dialogue that leads to mutual growth. Hendrix (2008), the founder of Imago relationship therapy, elaborated this view by focusing on the partners' ability to show flexibility while communicating and exploring their own perceptions in relation to the ones of their partner. Moreover, in their discussion about communication and relational conflicts, numerous couples' therapy theorists (Faller & Wright, 2018; Gottman, 1999; Johnson & Brubacher, 2016; Perel, 2006) specifically focused on the issue of conflicts that may arise due to poor communication skills and misunderstandings. These theorists support the crucial notion that states that a couples' ability to deescalate conflicts and repair after emotionally charged situations determine the resiliency of their relationship. Johnson and Brubacher



(2016) elucidated this notion: “It is not conflict that leads to relationship dissolution so much as it is the failure to repair and reconnect following relationship ruptures” (p. 92). In this sense, the findings of this research highly demonstrate that the couples' ability to expand their range of communication through the dance experience allowed them to tap into their unmet needs and to articulate their sensorial experience in ways that promoted empathy and understanding instead of escalating gridlock situations with criticism and distancing, as demonstrated by Teddy and Mimi who were both surprised to discover the misguided conclusions they attributed to their partner's movement. Teddy, for example, attributed Mimi's heavy lean on him as lack of thoughtfulness, disregarding his needs. Mimi, on the other hand, interpreted Teddy's tight grip as a signal for his wish for her to come closer. Through their dance experiences Teddy and Mimi both realized that the daily scripts that each of them had often written in their own minds left their partner in uncharted territories, oblivious to their own pain or discomfort, and playing a role in a conflict which could easily have been avoided had they communicated their feelings with each other. The triangulation process also corroborated these findings by describing the progression in the couple's process as learning to bridge habitual individual movement patterns to a gradual joint movement, repairing quickly while entering into a shared gaze and exhibiting flow and synchronicity.

While relational conflict clearly creates instances of disconnection, the results from this study revealed how experiencing a mutual interaction through a shared dance may nourish a couple's capacity to bridge such instances and, as a result, experience the rewards of regaining connection. Such rewards were evidenced in the releasing of tension, promoting of the feeling of enjoyment within the couple's unit, and enhancing of

sensations of proximity. The findings also showed that the couples' PD experience, compounded with their ability to reflect upon the relational content, not only strengthened their ability to communicate their needs but also promoted their realization that communicating with their partner was a necessity they could not ignore, regardless of the efforts it demanded from them.

Weeks and Gambescia (2016) added a valuable layer to the comprehension of couple's communication difficulties by relating to couples' "tendency to focus on negative aspects of the relationship or to underemphasize the positive attributes of each other" (p .47). In this relation, it should also be noted that the couples' PD interaction was not free of confrontations or emotionally charged situations due to the previous mentioned challenges of negotiating spaces, assuming dance roles, and synchronization.

Nonetheless, the experience allowed the partners to acknowledge and focus on the positive qualities in their significant others. It also allowed them to recognize their strengths as a unit that enabled them to reach a mutual outcome, wishing to harness these qualities into their relational dynamics. Faye's words best elucidated this notion: "It felt really good, Daniel was so precise in his touch and we found the right way where we could both 'be' individually and together. When we found this synchronization we were really good together. I wish we could be reminded of this quality and take this into our daily lives."

### **The Intimate Truth That Lies Within The Body**

While the findings highlight the ways in which the couples' experience broadened their spectrum of verbal communication, it also strengthened and emphasized the importance of non-verbal communication aspects that cannot be fully explored in

conventional verbal therapy sessions. Perel's (2006) words heighten this view:

"Traditionally, the therapeutic culture has favored the spoken word over the expressiveness of the body...The body often contains emotional truths that words can too easily gloss over" (p.xyi). Thus, exploring the non-verbal dynamics in PD allowed the couples to relate to nonphysical cues that they were emitting, such as "gestures, facial expression, body posture and movement" (Satir, 1983, p. 95). As a result, the couples were able to communicate feelings, thoughts, and physical sensations; experience mutual pleasure and closeness; and address relational matters such as touch and sexuality. In this sense, Ally and Gabriel discussed how the experiences opened a space for physical and emotional interaction that heightened their shared sensed closeness, as Gabriel explained: "It's not like just cooking together or watching a movie together. I'm touching her; I'm looking into her eyes. I can feel her movement, her hand on my arm, I see her smiling at me, and we don't usually communicate like this." These previously noted aspects were highlighted as ones that constitute the concept of intimacy (Register & Henley, 1992) and come in line with Patrick and Beckenbach's (2009) discussion that noted the ways in which intimacy could be perceived in different levels such as verbal, emotional, and physical. These authors also pointed out the ways in which intimacy is related to emotional expression and self-disclosure.

Corroborating these views and the ones of Cole (2014), who stated the ways in which intimacy can be constructed through an embodied connection, the results demonstrated how interacting through a shared dance and processing the surfacing content allowed enhancing all levels of intimacy.

Furthermore, the triangulation analysis clearly exhibited a progression in the couples' ability to engage with each other in more complete ways that included various expressions of intimacy such as the narrowing of their distance, leaning of their heads on each other, embracing, or engaging in a shared gaze. These results assist in validating the ways in which dancing together can allow for detecting couples' issues with creating connection and intimacy as well as Petrella and Rovers's discussion (2014) on the healing roles of touch and physical expression in couple's therapy that can potentially heighten people's sense of security and attachment. Hartfield's (1982) definition of intimacy as a "process by which a dyad, in the expression of thought, affect, and behavior, attempts to move toward complete communication on all levels" (p. 271) solidifies this discussion.

While noting a stratum of components that the issues of intimacy and closeness enfold, such as addressing unmet needs (Popovic, 2005), the discourse about intimacy cannot be complete without relating to the seminal relational aspect of touch and sexuality. As a result of their experiences, couples (such as Teddy and Mimi or Daniel and Faye) were able to address their pain and frustration once their experience had mirrored to them the gap between the existing levels of relational intimacy and sexuality and the ones they desired. Nonetheless, reconnecting to libidinal desires through shared touch and movement allowed them to gain a sense of faith and optimism, being comforted that their ability to connect on a physical level was not irrecoverable, as Faye expressed: "I haven't felt it for such a long time that I didn't know if it was there anymore. It felt very intimate with him, and it is very important for me to feel his presence like that in our relationship including in our sexuality. I feel it opens something between us.... We

forgot this place but it's there if we liberate it. I want more; I want to feel I'm a woman again, not only a mother. I see the potential." Montagu (1986), who explored the significance of touch, supports this discussion, claiming that "the true language of sex is primarily non verbal...unsure of touching as a way of sharing with others, we have allowed fears and discomforts to limit the rich possibilities for nonverbal communication" (p .204). Montagu's ideas converge with the findings that highlight how the couple's PD exploration positively impacted their sense of physical and emotional intimacy. Papart's (2015) previously discussed views in Chapter 2 on the erotic élan that can develop between dancing partners as a result of a multi-senses experience also contribute to the understanding of these research findings regarding intimacy.

Snyder's (2000) exploration of erotic intimacy in relationship adds yet another layer to the current intimacy discourse. Snyder differed the sexual arena (that contains elements of attraction and reproductive arousal, linked to the sexual act) from the erotic one, which he related to our ways of interacting with our environment and with ourselves. In this relation, Snyder referred to the phenomenon of being intimate as a "mutual revelation of inner experience in relationship ... [in which] movement occurs" (p.39). Evidently, the findings suggest that engaging in a space of verbal and non-verbal exploration created an impetus for revelations that extended into the relational erotic-sexual-intimate margin. It should be noted that, parallel to the paramount sexual aspect that lies within the concept of intimacy, the rare possibility for one to be held in the arms of their significant other can create a sense of connection that encompasses all senses without being exclusively linked to the sexual sphere. Such rare precious moments in a

couple's relationship augment not only physical aspects of connection but also emotional ones.

While the issue of the lack of intimacy/sexuality has been widely discussed in couple's therapy (Gurman, Lebow, & Snyder, 2015; Johnson, 2008; Rabin, 1991), the researcher argues that experiencing intimacy and discussing it verbally are two different dimensions, especially when dealing with stagnation on these matters. During therapy, couples can articulate their frustration or dismay in relation to lack of intimacy and sexuality. In other cases, due to their difficulties on these issues, couples might use their verbal capacities in order to evade an open meaningful dialogue. Whether deflecting intimacy issues or repetitively discussing them to the point of rumination, actual progression may be difficult to achieve while being bound solely to the verbal expression. It should be noted that conventional couple's therapy is not estranged to incorporating exercises that combine non-verbal cues such as sharing eye contact, speaking to one's partners while holding hands, or regulating breathing (Murphy, 1979; Petrella & Rovers, 2014; Solomon & Tatkin, 2011). Nonetheless, as revealed by the participating therapists, their range of means to address intimacy issues through live therapeutic experiences is limited. Even while providing homework to couples in the form of holding and caressing each other (without reaching a sexual act) in order to augment their physical and emotional closeness, such experiences that are done in the couple's privacy of their own home are not free from a sexual context and thus may add unnecessary tension to the couple who is already experiencing intimacy issues.

In this relation, the research findings and the feedback provided by the couple's therapists show that the creation of a PD therapeutic space that includes engaging both

physically and verbally assisted in freeing the tensions and anxiety that may be associated with sexuality, yet it simultaneously allowed the couples to address these sensitive intimacy issues in undeniable ways. Consequently, it could be implied that the structured frame and technique of PD eliminates the overtness of the sexual act while allowing focusing on intimacy issues within the frame of physical touch and connection.

Contrary to couples' ability to avoid coping with issues of touch and intimacy (through verbal chatter), Satir's (1991) model also crystallized the notion of tapping into undeniable sensations by incorporating body work in the process of marital therapy, claiming that "having emerged, feelings and bodily responses that may have been out of awareness can never again be not known" (p. 286).

As evidenced, the couple's visceral experience allowed them to get in touch with their longings as well as their challenges in being physically and emotionally connected. They also became aware of the attributes of being fully present, explored synchronization, and were able to authentically express their vulnerable relational wishes. Since these recognized aspects were noted as ones that take part in the constitution of a satisfying sexual relationship (Faller & Wright, 2018), it can be implied that the entire process may support the foundation of couple's intimacy and sexuality. Johnson's (2008) views that described how enhancing a couple's bond by forming a meaningful communication and connection can lead to the formation of a fuller and satisfying sexuality and intimacy support this idea as well.

### **Beyond The Realms of Leisure Activities**

Throughout their experience the couples noted the feelings of enjoyment and mutual pleasure that can be argued to arise in various joint leisure activities. While the

literature has discussed the relationship between enhancing couples' relationships quality and participating in novel activities (Reissman, Aron, & Bergen, 1993), Holman and Jacquart (1988) studied the relationship between leisure activities and marital satisfaction and demonstrated how communication was a crucial variable during the leisure activity. Holman and Jacquart's study showed that practicing leisure activities while having low communication did not show any associations or had a negative association with marital satisfaction, contrary to situations when communication between couples was perceived as high. Though these studies show the importance of leisure activities for couples, they raise awareness to the idea that without positive communication skills or a strong relational connection, practicing in leisure activities would not be sufficient to promote satisfaction or strengthen couples' connections. Therefore, in order to contribute to couples' relationships, additional considerations must be taken other than simply participating in joint activities. While none of these studies focused on the experience or various impacts of shared embodied experiences, it should also be noted that the current PD research format that utilized PD as a part of a therapeutic treatment plan is different by nature than suggesting to a couple to participate in PD as leisure activity. While PD can generally contribute to overall wellbeing (Guzmán-García et al., 2013; Lima & Vieira, 2007; Roberson Jr & Pelclova, 2014), questioning a couple about their PD experiences (done as a leisure activity during the course of conventional couple's therapy) can fall short in revealing the multitude of therapeutic aspects that lie within such frame and cannot be paralleled to a live therapeutic process that is facilitated by a trained DMT who is experienced in PD. In that event, the combination of awareness to embodiment concepts (for example: breathing, grounding, flow, connectedness) with the structure of



PD creates a shift from a simplified perspective that might focus on technique and steps to one that focuses on the emotional-psychological meaning of the encounter.

### **The Tipping Point of New Interactional Events**

This research suggests viewing PD through a broader frame of reference that allows the surfacing of different layers of relational content, including the potential to enrich and reconstruct a relational bond. Such framework perceives PD as a device that may offer a new relational experience based on “new interactional events” (Johnson, 2004, P.52).

In her portrayal of a couple's relational dance, Johnson, the founder of Emotional Focused Therapy (EFT), noted the importance of new emotional experiences that have the potential to reduce alienation and gradually strengthen a couple's relational bond and sense of security. Through a therapeutic cycle which she termed "the EFT tango" Johnson (2016) described how reflecting on the couples' present emotional process, exploring new emotions, setting up enactments (corrective interactions), and processing and validating these new emotions through a reflective process could enhance a couple's connection. While EFT implements these theoretical foundations mainly through a verbal-emotional therapeutic encounter, this research offers a therapeutic method that applies the concept of creating a new relational experience in an embodied practice. Thus, the therapeutic process is based on a live interaction that functions as exploration groundwork.

Similarly, couple's therapy theories such as EFT often involve the creation of enactments, which set a situation that generates couples' interaction and can serve as a reference point for the couples and the therapist. Aponte (2016) elaborated on the nature of enactments:

An enactment is meant to bring the story of our clients' pathology into our presence for us not only to witness it as it happens, but also to experience it. People cannot convey the fullness of their experience through narration...the data still lacks the body that can only be supplied by experiencing clients' live interaction... the more of themselves that is present with us, the more gates are accessible to our interventions. However, they cannot open their pain and vulnerability to us with words alone. (p. 33-34)

Thus, the PD experience can be described as an enactment that facilitated the surfacing of emotional background while opening a space to clarify the couple's dynamics in order to motivate change. In this relation, this research clearly demonstrates how through a non-verbal dance experience that is characterized as a partnered one by definition, couples can discover new relational ways that offer them a reference point to observe and reflect upon their interlocking issues. In addition, the act of learning to dance together applies in practice the metaphorical relational concept that deals with one's ability to be with another in a way that vividly mirrors the couple's underlying relational cycle.

The findings exhibited numerous powerful moments of awareness that arose from the PD interaction itself, such as Lauren's realization of the price she paid in avoiding expressing her needs or Nina's recognition that her ability to let go enabled Jonathan to take a more active and communicative stance in their relationship. While these experiences require time and processing in order to manifest a lasting change in couple's daily dynamics, they did allow the couples to express renewed feelings such as optimism, sensing they could overcome painful past events or conflicts.

Herein lies the pivotal concept of hope, as one cannot overlook the fact that couples seek therapy when they experience hardships, at times, as a last resort they turn to in order to shift their dynamics. In this process therapists meet two ailing individuals who wish to disentangle a vicious cycle in which they are caught, a dynamic in which they may face animosity and encounter a range of emotions such as frustration, confusion, doubts, anger, or anguish. In order for the couple to untie the web of connections that bind them in their negative relational duet they enter into a process of therapeutic excavation in which they will be confronted with their vulnerabilities and pain. They may tap into their childhood and family origins as internalized models that trigger their reactions to each other, and they will face the need to take ownership of their attitudes and behaviors that affect their relational unit. Naturally, these processes are emotionally charged and may result in leaving couples emotionally drained or possibly sensing a degree of despair (as revealed by some participating couples). Therefore, due to the obstacles that couples need to overcome in the therapeutic process, it is essential that couples maintain a sense of hope; they need to be reminded of the reasons that connected them to begin with, and they need to realize that these aspects have not vanished but can be recreated by joint efforts. Sensing such potential can support their endurance and willingness to make the sizable efforts to better their connection.

As exhibited in the results, the format that was utilized in this research not only mirrored the couple's triggering issues that may escalate conflicts into volatile situations, but also allowed the de-escalation of tension and emphasized the positive aspects in their relationship, validating their bond and their strengths as a couple. Experiencing such

renewed experiences can be seen as a positive doorway in maintaining hope that one cannot spare in a process of a relational change.

### **Limitations and considerations**

While this research has generated promising results, several considerations and limitations need to be accounted for. Though the results exhibited the ways in which the process fostered the uncovering of relational content through the couples' experiences in PD, it would be interesting to explore the impact of a lengthier process that exceed the four sessions used in this research as well as recruiting a larger number of participants. In addition, while the couples who aimed to strengthen their relational ties did manifest changes in their dynamics and relational issues, as supported by the therapists' feedback and the peer debrief analysis, the question of the lasting effect of the sessions still remains unknown. Therefore, future research with prolonged engagement that would incorporate therapists' feedback throughout a lasting continuous period after the completion of the process could add valuable insights regarding the impact of the method employed on the couple's therapeutic progression.

It should be noted that while the research was open to all couples with no exclusion, the diversity shown in the sample was limited. As previously mentioned in the introduction, this research was carried out in Israel, a country that has a culturally complex population with different ethnicities, nationalities, and religions. However, due to the religious and social norms that some of these groups carry (for example: religious Jewish women who cannot touch men other than their husband, or social norms of the reserved Ethiopian culture), this study could not have integrated these couples. It can be suspected that implementing the same design in other countries could allow the

integration of a wider range of racial backgrounds that would enrich the results. Future research could also include more diverse populations such as same-sex couples (who did not apply). Integrating same-sex couples could add meaningful information regarding the use of the PD in couple's therapy, dealing with relational constructs such as questions of gender roles and intimacy.

Recognizing the limitation of the lack of diversity, it should be pointed out that the importance of this study lies primarily in the ability to acknowledge the relational state of the participating couples. These couples encapsulated layers that are part of the general theme of relationship. Though each couple has their own relational dance, this study clarifies the significance of creating a novel framework that can promote modes of communication where partners can touch, explore intimacy, and develop new ways of relating to each other. In addition, the notion of enriching relationships, which was previously discussed, adds the importance of finding preventative ways for the deterioration of the couple's unit. Therefore, deconstructing and examining layers of relational dynamics through movement and especially a shared dance can be seen as a potential tool to assist different models of relationships in therapeutic processes.

Lastly, it should be acknowledged that the researcher of this study carried several roles, which included the ones of teacher and researcher. Though seemingly a threat to this study's credibility, several steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness, such as keeping a detailed journal of the researcher's thoughts after every session, corroborating the results with a process involving movement analysis, and getting impressions from the couple's therapists. In addition, since one of the fundamental underlying assumptions in Expressive Therapies relies on artistic expression and inquiry as a source of knowledge,

one cannot disconnect the artistic process that occurs in the presence of the person who facilitates it from the reflective one. Furthermore, like any phenomenological study, this qualitative experiential research aimed to capture the participants' experiences and therefore focused on the couples' experiences that resulted directly from their live PD interaction. Consequently, the threat of researcher's compliance was also reduced since none of the questions intentionally focused on whether the experience had an effect on the couples' therapeutic process but rather on the ways they experienced their dance interaction and the relational content it unveiled.

### **Conclusion**

This research explored the ability of the art form of PD to serve as a vehicle to enhance and support the therapeutic process of couples who are in the midst of couple's therapy while uncovering overt and covert layers that relate to their dynamics. Looking at the importance of intimacy, connection, and communication in couples' relational stages, as well as other related themes, was demonstrated throughout this research. The researchers' phenomenological lens that was open to the experiences that surfaced allowed couples to reflect upon their relational dynamics as they had perceived it. Furthermore, the process enabled both partners to verbally and physically express their needs in ways they were not accustomed to. Consequently, the interaction on the dance floor promoted couples' awareness regarding the dynamics in their relationships, as complimentary or contradictory to their dance experiences. It also offered them a way to negotiate and embody their relational story in multiple dimensions.

While different authors (Dermer et al., 2008; Murphy, 1979; Petrella & Rovers, 2014; Solomon & Tatkin, 2011) suggested implementing therapeutic physical motion

exercises in the process of couple's therapy, the results in this research suggest that the unique framework of combining PD with the reflective process that was conducted created a holding situational space that facilitated the ability for couples to learn and explore basic relational concepts. Moreover, in light of the results, it can be argued that creating a therapeutic space where these couples engaged in a shared dance unearthed their difficulties in being emotionally and physically connected with their significant other. In other words, the embodied experience that was experienced through the dance activity allowed the couples not only to sense their wishes or difficulties with their relational connection but also to identify and verbally share them with their partner.

In this sense, this research's findings clearly exhibit that the somatic framework that was used allowed a meaningful process of introspection while uncovering couples' attitudes and acts that impact their relational cycle. Thus, the couple's experience contributed to their overall therapeutic process by allowing them to reflect on their dynamics from a safe distance, but in an undeniable way due to the elements that surfaced as a result of their non-verbal interaction.

Contrary to the widely used relational metaphor of two partners dancing through life together (Dermer, 1979; Johnson, 2008; Murphy, 1979; Perel, 2006), the format that was utilized in this research also highlighted that the ability to construct a mutual dance, as a symbolic sense of one's ability to fully engage in a relationship, requires substantial efforts but is one that rewarded both partners with considerable gains, such as validating their alliance and imbuing them with the hope of repairing and overcoming obstacles.

Nonetheless, one should bear in mind that couples may not always find the path that will allow them to reconstruct their relationship. Couples may also realize that they

have exhausted all their resources, coming to terms that they should part, to separate ways in order to find their bliss. Based on the findings, the researcher does not contend that the utilized format can inoculate relationships or provide a therapeutic antidote for such cases. The process of the participating couples demonstrated that rather than adopting the use of PD as a remedy-driven perspective, PD can be employed as psychological playground that stimulates and advances a couple's therapeutic process. This may result in various outcomes that can impact the relationship.

While the current literature has extensively discussed various theories and the need to integrate approaches concerning the process of couple's therapy (Benson et al., 2012; D. K. Snyder & Balderrama-Durbin, 2012; Wile, 1981), the existing literature demonstrates a serious lack in theoretical knowledge and research dealing with dance movement therapy in the realm of couple's therapy. Interestingly, McGinn Hurst and Wagner (2017) demonstrated some clinical use of movement in couple's therapy, still the research is very lacking on this issue. Dance movement therapy grounds itself on the philosophical perspective that perceives our bodies as archives imprinted with accumulated memories and experiences (Shahar-Levy, 2004). According to this view, the sum of our experiences and these motor-shaped embodied memories carry our personal untold narratives that movement can reveal. Therefore, movement can serve as a primal mode of inquiry, insight, and tool for therapeutic interventions. In this vein, utilizing a PD intervention could be formed as a model/manual to evaluate and intervene in couple's therapy. In addition, due to the seminal non-verbal aspect that acts as an exploration tool, it would also be useful to consider the applied format as a therapeutic method for couples'



who either struggle with verbally expressing their needs or for those who use their verbal capacities as a shielding defense mechanism.

A special consideration should attribute the research findings to the utilized structure of PD itself that inherently integrates relational aspects of joint movement such as holding, walking, leading, and following, contrary to a general instruction to engage in dance or movement (Dermer, 1979; Hendricks 1997; Keleman & Adler, 2001), or paying attention to non-verbal interactional cues (Hendricks, 1997; Johnson, 2004; Solomon & Tatkin, 2011) that may not result in the same outcome.

Recognizing the impact of the format, it would also be worthwhile to consider incorporating PD elements in training programs of dance therapists and the ones of family therapists. Gaining such knowledge could be used to further therapeutic processes and treatment plans, whether as a collaborative process, as adjunct, or as a main therapeutic method.

This research can be seen as a milestone paving the way for future studies that would develop the field of movement therapy and specifically create a model using a couple's shared dance in the process of couple's therapy. Contrary to other forms of couple's therapy that focus on assisting the couple in need through a verbal process, the method proposed in this study acknowledges the power of movement to (a) detect relational and psychological content as a direct result from a mutual dance interaction; (b) it provides a unique path that is endowed with capacities to cultivate and further couples' relationships. The PD structure in this study that weaved a joint dancing experience with a meaningful reflective process offers a meeting point in which the participating couples accessed the abyss and darkness grounded in their relational distress, yet it also opened

skylights as a doorway for future manifestations of connectedness. Such structure may assist those who would like to enrich their experiences beyond the scope of conventional treatment means, or those who have tried conventional ways to resolve relational hardships but did not prevail.

**APPENDIX A****RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

You are invited to participate in a research project intending to explore the connections between couple's therapy and partner dances (coordinated movement/dance as a couple such as tango, waltz, rumba, and salsa). During this research participating couples will engage in a partner dance activity that will include learning and experiencing aspects of the dance frame, dance hold, synchronized walking as a couple, and modified dance variations according to their pace and ability. The results of this study will help therapists learn more about the ways partner dances and dance/movement interventions can assist couple's in the process of couple's counseling and further the therapeutic field of dance movement therapy in building novel treatment plans targeted for couples in need.

Your participation as a couple will include participating in 4 sessions, each lasting 90 min. In each session you will be taught and engage in a partner dance activity and a conversation, during which you will reflect and be interviewed about your experience. The four research sessions will occur completely independently of your ongoing couple's therapy sessions and you can withdrawal from the research at any time and without repercussions or impact to your ongoing therapy

In addition,

- All sessions will be audio and video recorded. The audio and video tapes will be reviewed by the researcher and short video clips will be reviewed by another dance therapist for deeper insight and reflection.
- Former knowledge about partner dancing or any other former dance experience is not required.

- You are free to choose not to participate in the research and to discontinue your participation at any time.
- Identifying details will be kept confidential; only the researcher will have access to the data collected, and the filmed footage will be used only for educational purposes (such as professional presentations or training).
- The entire data will be kept securely up to five years and destroyed at the end of the five-year period.
- The researcher may present the outcomes of this study (including video clips) for academic purposes (i.e., articles, teaching, conference presentations, supervision).
- The researcher will contact the couple's therapist prior, during, or after their participation to receive information about the couple, including their history, therapeutic process, and treatment. All contact between the therapist and the researcher will be done after obtaining informed consent between the couple and their therapist.
- Participation in this research poses minimal risk to the participants, no greater than any leisure activity through movement. While being aware of the potential therapeutic value for the participating couples, it should be noted that the author recognizes that the intent of this research is to explore the ways in which partner dances could be structured as a therapeutic intervention or model. Should participants experience any discomfort they would be advised to consult their therapist and follow their ongoing sessions.

My agreement to participate has been given of my own free will and I understand all of the stated above.

☐ I agree to allow short video clips to be used for professional presentations or academic/educational purposes.

I will receive a copy of this consent form.

_____	_____	_____	_____
Participant's signature	Date	Researcher's signature	Date

*There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. Contact the Committee Chairpersons at [irb@lesley.edu](mailto:irb@lesley.edu)*

### **Contact**

For any further questions or a request to participate in the research, please contact the researcher Rami Eckhaus via email: [reckhaus@lesley.edu](mailto:reckhaus@lesley.edu), or Advisor: Dr. Mitchell Kossak ([mkossak@lesley.edu](mailto:mkossak@lesley.edu))

**APPENDIX B****RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT FOR THERAPISTS**

You are invited to participate in a research project intending to explore the connections between couple's therapy and partner dances (coordinated movement/dance as a couple such as tango, waltz, rumba, and salsa). During this research participating couples will engage in a partner dance activity that will include learning and experiencing aspects of the dance frame, dance hold, synchronized walking as a couple, and modified dance variations according to their pace and ability

The results of this study will help therapists learn more about the ways partner dances and dance/movement interventions can assist couple's in the process of couple's counseling and further the therapeutic field of dance movement therapy in building novel treatment plans targeted for couples in need.

Your participation as a couple's therapist will include being interviewed about couples who are in an ongoing treatment with you and who will participate in this research. Two interviews will be conducted, each lasting up to one hour. The first interview will be carried prior the participation of the referred couple in order to gather information about their ongoing couple's therapy. The second interview will be carried after the referred couple will have terminated their participation in the research in order to receive your impression about the impact of the process on their ongoing treatment

In addition,

- Interviews will be recorded.
- You are free to choose not to participate in the research and to discontinue your participation at any time.



- Identifying details will be kept confidential; only the researcher will have access to the data collected which will be used only for educational purposes such as professional presentations or training.
- The entire data will be kept securely for five years, and destroyed at the end of the five-year period
- The researcher may present the outcomes of this study for academic purposes (i.e., articles, teaching, conference presentations, supervision etc.)
- All interviews will be done after obtaining informed consent between the participating couple and yourself as their therapist.
- Participation in this research poses minimal risk. While being aware of the potential therapeutic value for the participating couples, it should be noted that the author recognizes that the intent of this research is to explore the ways in which partner dances could be structured as a therapeutic intervention or model. Should participants experience any discomfort they would be advised to consult their therapist and follow their ongoing sessions.

My agreement to participate has been given of my own free will and that I understand all of what is stated above.

I will receive a copy of this consent form.

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Couple's therapist signature	Date	Researcher's signature Date
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**APPENDIX C**  
**INITIAL COUPLE'S THERAPIST INTERVIEW**

- (a) How would you define the couple's relational situation?
- (b) Can you describe the couple's main issues or struggles? In what way would you define their focal difficulties prior to participation?
- (c) Can you briefly describe the couple's therapeutic process/ goals of their therapeutic process?
- (d) What are the reasons for referring them to the research? (In case the reasons include situations of gridlock or stagnation could you describe this situation?)
- (e) What do you wish that this intervention could bring to the couple and to the therapeutic process?

**APPENDIX D****ENDING COUPLE'S THERAPIST INTERVIEW**

- (a) What (if any) were your impressions of the couple after their participation in the research?
- (b) Did you recognize any changes in their relational situation after their participation?  
How so?
- (c) How would you define the couple's current main situation/ struggles/ focal relational issues?
- (d) In what way, (if any), do you think that the couple's participation in the research impacted the therapeutic work, the content in the therapeutic sessions, and the therapeutic encounter with you as a therapist?

**APPENDIX E**

**INITIAL INTAKE FOR PARTICIPATING COUPLES**

- Can you state your age, city of residence, occupation?
- How many years have you known each other?
- How many years have you been married?
- Do you have children? If yes, can you state their ages?
- Can you share your reasons for participation in the research?
- How would you describe your current relationship?
- Can you describe any life junctions or transitions that you experienced as meaningful?
- Can you share what are common areas/ topics in your relationship that bring you closer/ that you agree on?
- Can you share and describe the main challenges/ struggles/ conflicts that you are experiencing and/or experienced in your relationship?
- Can you relate and describe the aspects that you would like to enhance, change or improve in your relationship?



**APPENDIX F**

**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

- (a) Can you describe your experience in partnered dancing?
- (b) What did you discover through this process?
- (c) Was there anything new / exciting / difficult for you in this experience?
- (e) Were there any challenges you encountered when dancing together? If so, could you elaborate on how you coped with these challenges?
- (f) Are any of these challenges similar to the ones you have encountered in your relationship?
- (g) What was it like for you being in your relational role (leader/ follower)? Did you learn anything new about your relationship? / Did the experience reveal anything new about your relationship?
- (h) Were there any themes that resonated from this experience that you could relate to your relationship or to yourself?
- (i) Did this experience have any effect on your interaction with your partner outside the sessions?
- (j) In what way does the knowledge or insight you have gathered through this process impact your relationship?

**APPENDIX G****RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT BETWEEN THERAPIST AND CLIENTS**

You are invited to participate in a research project intending to explore the connections between couple's therapy and partner dances (coordinated movement/dance as a couple such as tango, waltz, rumba, and salsa). During this research participating couples will engage in a partner dance activity that will include learning and experiencing aspects of the dance frame, dance hold, synchronized walking as a couple, and modified dance variations according to their pace and ability.

The results of this study will help therapists learn more about the ways partner dances and dance/movement interventions can assist couple's in the process of couple's counseling and further the therapeutic field of dance movement therapy in building novel treatment plans targeted for couples in need.

As part of my participation in the research I declare that I authorize my therapist\_\_\_\_\_ to provide information to the researcher Mr. Rami Eckhaus pertaining to our history, therapeutic process, and treatment.

I will receive a copy of this consent form.

_____	_____	_____	_____
Participant's signature	Date	Couple's therapist signature	Date

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