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Dance/Movement Therapy as Influence on Sense of Self: A Community Engagement Project

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Dance/Movement Therapy

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Abstract

This community engagement project seeks to explore the influence of dance/movement therapy and authentic movement techniques on one's sense of self. This project focused on these techniques as an approach toward self-actualization and finding one's essence. This study considered the potential implications of these practices on populations whose bodily experience can be perceived as a barrier toward self-actualization, such as in eating disorders and trauma. Six expressive therapy students from Lesley University participated in two sessions of dance/movement therapy. This included: a movement-exploration warm up, authentic movement, and a visual artistic representation of their perceived essence based on the experiential. Following these sessions, participants reported experiencing embodiment, allowing permission for stillness, attunement, connection, and present awareness. They acknowledged the influence dance/movement therapy and authentic movement practices have on the sense of self and one's essence and recognized the varying ways in which these phenomena emerge. Their insights shared that these phenomena can be understood and explored, however one's sense of self cannot be defined nor can the essence be materialized in absolute form.

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Introduction

“Movement, to be experienced, has to be ‘found’ in the body, not put on like a dress or coat. There is that in us which has moved from the very beginning. It is that which can liberate us.”

-Mary Whitehouse

Throughout most of my young life, my sense of being has held misplaced and discontented energy within my body. The only state in which I could experience deep satisfaction and stillness was ironically amidst the practice of dance and movement. At the age of 24 years old, I was diagnosed with Bipolar I Disorder. I experienced the manifestation of my condition within my body as a restless, manic and unsatisfied energy. After my diagnosis, I took some time to reflect upon my experience and felt relieved. I came to accept this label and embrace it as part of my identity. I had begun to reconstruct and evolve my sense of self. All along, my body had found the means to evolve from being a barrier to a bearer of my soul.

I often consider the implications through which the body stores one’s sense of self. The body can be a holder of forgotten memory, trauma, emotion, and life experiences. After my own experience, I am curious how dance/movement therapy influences the sense of self in others; this is especially interesting to consider if one perceives their self to be blocked by their bodily experience. I find it critical to share similar phenomena as it pertains to other populations whose relationship to the body is linked to maladaptive behaviors. I draw connections between this topic and populations with eating disorders and trauma and dare to ask, can dance and movement rehabilitate their sense of self? I plan to observe the use of dance/movement therapy and authentic movement techniques with young college-aged women. I hope to deepen my

understanding of how this work can shape and actualize one's self and be a conduit of one's expression of self.

Literature Review

Throughout this paper, the terms “essence” and “sense of self” are inextricably linked. The “essence” refers to the intrinsic nature and indispensable quality of someone's existence. One's “sense of self” involves a more conscious and accurate awareness of their own set of unique qualities that exist in their lived experience. Although I was interested in dance/movement therapy and authentic movement practices to propel self-actualization, the complexities of such an endeavor would require much more beyond the scope of this community engagement project. For the purpose of this project, a focus on one's sense of self and their perceived essence would suffice and could serve as a byproduct during the working stages of the authentic movement experience toward self-actualization. In order to best address these phenomena, I began with various concepts and definitions related to the self and sense of self-based in psychological schools of thought. I then moved on to the role of self-actualization in the development of the self-concept. This included concepts in philosophy concerned with making meaning and enhancement of one's life, as well as psychological theories that surround the possibilities of one's maximum potential. These views considered the value of the arts as a driving force towards self-actualization. I recognized the role of embodiment as part of the relationship between one's body and lived experience. I then moved forth with the consequences of deficits in bodily awareness and psychiatric conditions that bar actualization of self.

Sense of self.

“You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. ... No artist is pleased.

[There is] no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others."

-Martha Graham

The conceptualization of one's sense of self can be considered in many forms. Jung viewed the mind as innately endowed with the mental representations of instincts and the primary content of the psyche was the archetype. Archetypes served as what Jung referred to as "inborn forms of intuition" which made up the collective unconscious (Urban, 1992, p. 412). Fordham expanded and contributed to Jung's studies on the self by introducing what he referred to as the "primary self". Urban (2005) wrote, "As a postulate, the primary self is a psychosomatic integrate, that is 'empty' of phenomena, so that it is 'nothing but' potential" (p. 575). Fordham explained that the primary self is also a period of development. This potential awaits what Fordham referred to as the process of "deintegration" and "reintegration". These processes are responsible for internalization and actualization. Deintegration refers to the repeated engagement of an experience, while reintegration is the assimilation of these repeated experiences overtime into the personality. My curiosity led me towards the deintegration and reintegration of dance and movement to inform actualization of self.

For the purpose of this community engagement project, I referred to the sense of self conjointly with the idea of "self-concept". Markus and Wurf (1987) shared the developing model of the "dynamic self-concept" as a collection of self-representations, while the working self-concept is that subset of representations that are accessible at any given moment. Their view suggested that the self-concept is multifaceted, as "a set or collection of images, schemas, conceptions, prototypes, theories, goals, or tasks" (p. 301). Not all representations that are part of

the complete self-concept will be accessible at the same time; the working self-concept can best be viewed as a continuously shifting and active link to self-knowledge (Markus and Wurf, 1987).

Schlegal, Hicks, Arndt, and King (2009) were interested in whether the cognitive accessibility of the “true self-concept” would predict meaning in life (p. 473). Participants enrolled in an introductory psychology course completed a true and self-concept measure. Based on this measure, the “true self” was defined as: “ ‘those characteristics that you possess and would like to express socially, but are not always able to... only those traits you are able to express around those people you are closest to’ ” and the “actual self” was defined as “ ‘ those characteristics that you possess and are often able to express to others in social settings’ ” (p. 476). To assess meaning in life, participants completed the five-item Presence of Meaning subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire. In the first, second, and fourth studies, authors found that individual differences in true self-concept accessibility predicted meaning in life, while in the third and fifth studies priming traits related to the true self-concept increased perceptions of meaning in life (p. 473).

Self-actualization.

“You must have chaos within you to give birth to a dancing star”

-Friedrich Nietzsche

Making meaning out of one’s life and self-actualization is primary in existentialist thought. Heidegger viewed transcendent function as the unveiling of one’s being for authenticity to take place (Gildersleeve, 2014). Gildersleeve (2016) used Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s Will to Power and Jung’s writing on complexes to give new meaning to Jung’s transcendent function:

Nietzsche says only values that are an enhancement to life are valuable because life's enhancement is the essence of life and the Will to Power expresses the essence of life which 'supports, furthers, and awakens the enhancement of life'...the transcendent function can also be explained as aiming to unify the ego with the unconscious (complex) by 'looking ahead and through to the scope of something higher'. (p. 49)

The Jungian and Nietzschean model of the *telos* of "the Self" are opposed. In Jung's model, "the Self" is predetermined and must be discovered, whereas Nietzsche's *Übermensch* must be created (Huskinson, 2004). Both of these models are concerned with attaining one's highest self, but exemplify different ideas on the process of the developing self and appear to be mutually exclusive to each other. I was curious about the role of dance and movement as part of the developmental process. Much of Nietzsche's focus revolved around the "Will to Power", which he believed was the main driving force for humankind – to achieve one's highest position in life. On this perspective, Huskinson (2004) wrote,

Nietzsche views art as the vehicle through which individuals can accept the temporality of their existence; art moves individuals to a psychological attitude that awakens and reinforces the sense that life is intrinsically valuable and meaningful despite the pains involved. Such an aesthetic experience, or 'tragic world view' ... is crucial in enabling individuals to regard both their own existence and the existence of the world in general as joyous and wonderful. (p. 12)

Viktor Frankl, a pioneer of logotherapy ("therapy through meaning"), based his philosophical model on what it means to be fully alive and the central theme of "will to meaning". Frankl emphasized human's own responsibility and freedom to find meaning in what they think. Specifically, Frankl believed humans could find meaning in three ways: (a) through

the creation of something, i.e. art; (b) an emotional experience; and (c) attitudinal meaning, where even meaning can be found in the most hopeless and unchangeable situations with chosen attitude (Landwehr, 2017). Further, he stated that human beings ontologically share three dimensions which are not reducible to one another, and must be integrated, which is the *soma* (body), *psyche* (mind), and the noetic (spirit) (Reitinger, 2015).

This extends Jung's transcendent function as not only the union between the conscious and the unconscious for individuation. Jung (1992) posited that the unconscious is compensatory in relation to the conscious mind and not contrary to one another. Rather, the two complement one another in order to form a "totality, which is the self" (p. 177).

Active imagination was Jung's suggested technique to conjure unconscious material, through the "freest possible play", so that one can to dive into the locked energy of the emotional state (Gildersleeve, 2014, p. 303). Jung stated that the emotion must be made as conscious as possible for active imagination to occur. For Heidegger, this required that the individual must develop an understanding of their *Dasein*, or their "thrownness" in the world as separate and incomparable to others (p. 299). *Being-with-others* and following other's every day of existence is appealing and numbing compared to the burden of responsibility to exist authentically.

Understanding one's *Dasein* opens up interpretations of possibilities for existing in the world and can encourage discovery of one's potentiality.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-actualization is the ultimate need and motivating element of realizing one's maximum potential and possibilities (Tripathi and Moakumla, 2018). This theory of self-actualization recognizes that an individual is always 'becoming' and does not remain static and is relative to the need for personal growth and to pursue fulfillment. This is a continual process of becoming and enhancing quality of life rather than one of perfection in

which one gets a happily ever after (Tripathi and Moakumla, 2018). It is when lower needs are satisfied and as such, one can focus their energy and efforts into pursuing self-maximization. In this view, individuals are motivated by a “unifying directional tendency towards self-mastery” rather than influenced by behavioral stimuli and reinforcement nor impulses and instincts of the unconscious (Tripathi and Moakumla, 2018, p. 499). According to Maslow, self-actualization can be reached through multiple endeavors and interests, such as creating art, and this instinct leads people in different directions (Tripathi and Moakumla, 2018). Given the above perspectives, I extend these virtues over to that of dance and movement as a vessel towards actualization and making meaning of life and self.

The body.

“The physical body, as an instrument of living, is the most mysterious, most awe-inspiring complex. I think it’s a wonder that any of us manage, in spite of the traumas and complexes and buried things, to function.”

– Mary Whitehouse

The body can serve as the primary mode of how to understand and make meaning of the world. The body is with us every moment from the time we are born until we die. We depend on the body to carry us through the world. One cannot choose to undress the body, hang it away, and then choose another. To an extent, the body cannot simply be altered or transformed to converge with particular versions of the self. The boundaries of embodiment are often accompanied by a sense of dissatisfaction and desire to modify. In an analysis of self-narratives produced by young women regarding their construction of identity within a larger social and cultural context, questions were raised regarding (a) the meaning of one’s body to those who live in it; (b) processes in which understandings of self and body arise, and (c) how the former may

transform through embodied practices (Budgeon, 2003). Budgeon (2003) wrote, “in order to understand the ways in which young women actively live in their embodied identities, we need to develop an approach which can envision a body beyond the binary of materiality and representation – the body not as an *object* but as an *event*” (p. 36). This perspective emphasizes both the boundaries which exist from the inexorability of the body, while also recognizing the potential of the human experience.

The concept of interoception and interoceptive awareness is based in the embodied process. Herbert and Pollatos (2012) defined interoception to include two forms of perception: “proprioception (signals from the skin and musculoskeletal apparatus) and viscerosception (signals from the inner organs)” (p. 693). Evidence suggests that interoceptive awareness is critical for the intensity of emotional experience and the higher order processing of emotional stimuli (Herbert and Pollatos, 2012, p. 696). In their study of arousal focus, Barrett, Quigley, Bliss-Moreau, & Aronson (2004) found that people who were more sensitive to the sensation of their heartbeat emphasized feelings of activation and deactivation when they reported emotional experiences over time, versus those who were less sensitive. Pollatos, Gramann, and Schandry (2007) observed a positive relationship between interoceptive awareness and the experienced intensity of emotions. Subjects were separated into groups of high or poor interoceptive awareness based on their performance on an initial heartbeat perception task. Those with higher interoceptive awareness were found to have enhanced amplitude measures in response to pleasant and unpleasant images. Further studies also provide evidence for the reverse: “deficits in the generation and/or representation and processing of physiological arousal are profoundly associated with disadvantageous and more risky decision behavior” (Herbert and Pollatos, 2012, p. 697). These studies investigating interoceptive awareness elucidate the embodied learning

process. Awareness of body signals seems to be inextricably linked to the emotional experience of the self. I would like to extend my curiosity regarding the relationship between these physiological arousal deficits to the behavior and consequences of such and conceptualize these as a barrier to the body and self.

For some individuals, the body becomes a barrier against one's ability to self-actualize or create meaning in their life. Here I contend instances for which the body can be perceived as a barrier, such as in eating disorders and trauma. Often these conditions internalize and externalize into other behaviors, such as self-harm and risk-taking. Noll, Horowitz, Bonanno, Trickett, and Putnam (2003) used a longitudinal, prospective design to investigate the relationship of childhood sexual abuse to subsequent physical and sexual victimization and self-harm of females with trauma histories. In this study, self-harm was considered if it included incidents of attempted suicide and efforts to inflict pain or injury (i.e. self-mutilation and cutting behaviors). Abused participants were not only significantly more likely to engage in self-harm behaviors than comparison participants but almost four times more likely. Self-harm as a coping response to dissociation was also considered a factor. Even when accompanied by other forms of child maltreatment, sexual abuse was the strongest predictor of self-harm. Osuch, Noll, & Putnam and Winchel & Stanley (as cited in Noll et al., 2003), offered the following explanations for self-harm behaviors: "attempts at communicating internal pain, ways of claiming power over one's body, a means of affect regulation, efforts to end feelings of depersonalization, self-stimulation, and enactment of feelings of worthlessness or shame" (p. 1466). Given these explanations, I considered that dance/movement therapy techniques might offer a meaningful alternative to these behaviors and would engage discovery of one's sense of self. These explanations of self-

harm can suggest a relationship of the barriers that arise between the lived experience of the body and the lived experience of trauma.

According to a meta-analysis of 36 studies, eating disorders have the highest mortality rate out of any psychiatric illness (Arcelus, Mitchell, Wales, & Nielsen, 2011). This statistic demonstrates the rampant power eating disorders have over ones lived experience. My internship this past year involved working directly with women with eating disorders, from ages as young as eleven years old to sixty and above. At my site, I have witnessed patients endorse body dysmorphia and their tumultuous relationship between their body and self. Not only is the eating disorder characterized by a preoccupation with food, body image, and weight, but I have also noticed its influence on their use of space and movement. A common phrase I have often heard patients express around the milieu is that they do not deserve to take up space. Isolating behaviors and hiding in corners or small spaces is a common occurrence. An obsession with shrinking physically, mentally, and emotionally has been a common theme. There are six core issues according to Rice, Hardenburgh, and Hornyak (as cited in Padrão and Coimbra, 2011): “the importance of experiencing pleasure, sensory awareness, overcoming denial or detachment from the body, differentiation from the environment (developing body boundaries), body integration, sense of personal impact (initiating movement in space), and individuation” (p. 133). The Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI) is a standard questionnaire to assess behavioral and psychological traits specific to eating disorders, such as bulimia, the drive for thinness, body dissatisfaction, as well as interoceptive awareness. Interoceptive awareness is included as a subscale measured with the EDI, and research has provided evidence that interoceptive awareness is impaired in patients with eating disorders (Padrão and Coimbra, 2011). In my own experience, patients expressed distress when facing internal bodily sensations, such as in deep

breathing and mindfulness meditation. This is especially when the eyes might be closed. Patients have shared feeling unsettled, vulnerable, and triggered while focusing on internal sensations and experiences of retraumatization.

Dance/Movement therapy, Authentic Movement, and contemplative practices.

“Dance, when you're broken open. Dance, if you've torn the bandage off. Dance in the middle of the fighting. Dance in your blood. Dance when you're perfectly free.”

— Rumi

The practice of Dance/Movement Therapy in examining and understanding emotional states and drives has been at the forefront of past and current research within the Expressive Arts Therapy field. One particular method of exploring emotional states within Dance/Movement Therapy is the practice of *Authentic Movement*. The origin of this practice has roots in Jungian ideas of what he has termed *Active Imagination*, which permits patients to express parts of the unconscious. This includes parts of the unconscious that flow from the emotional state (García-Díaz, 2018, p. 17). In the 1960s, Mary Whitehouse developed the discipline of authentic movement after integrating her studies at the C.G. Jung Institute in Zurich with her dance experience (Stromsted, 2018, 4). In authentic movement, there are two roles: the mover and the witness. The mover closes their eyes and centers their attention inward, towards an emotional or physical impulse, sensory experience or image. The mover allows this internal experience to be expressed through movement that is not forced and is not bound by judgment or resistance. The role of the witness involves being a present and nonjudgmental observer towards what happens to the mover and to themselves. The experience can be shared between a large group of individuals, within a dyad, or the mover alone who also serves as an *inner-witness*.

Interested in articulating authentic movement as a medium of transformation, Stromsted sought leaders in the field “whose approaches and areas of specialization offered a diversity of perspectives of authentic movement” (2001, p. 39). The goal of this research was to “identify and describe the central elements in authentic movement” that facilitate a transformative experience in women (2001, p. 43). Stromsted selected four practitioners of authentic movement based on “rational and intuitive criteria” to be coresearchers for this study. Data analysis procedures involved conducting two interviews with each practitioner to discover patterns or themes that emerged. Each coresearcher was sent a copy of the transcript and a summary of themes for feedback to allow for validity. Following each interview, the author listened to each recorded tape and engaged their own body in processing information with authentic movement. The author created a series of three drawings and spent fifteen minutes in free association writing about each drawing. Stromsted created a visual chart of major themes and coresearchers’ names which allowed to her to analyze areas of overlap and differences in responses. Later, themes that emerged were consolidated into thirteen “meta-themes”. Some of these meta-themes included “attitude toward the female body”, “strength of the body ego”, “will, surrender, and sacrifice”, “presence of the sacred”, and “finding one’s voice”. The author also found that the elements described in the meta-themes reflected a natural order and a sequence. Stromsted’s meta-analysis approach found much cross over between responses, however her method was limited to the lived experience of four individuals and primarily focused on the woman experience. These findings help to synchronize collective experiences and phenomena of devotees of authentic movement and suggest connections between development and transformation of sense of self.

García-Díaz (2018) was interested in exploring the effects of the role of the mover based on self-reported emotional experience and the effect of the affective trait (both positive and

negative affect) on the emotional experience practicing the role of the mover. The sample size consisted of 57 individuals and 33 individuals had prior exposure to authentic movement. Two random experimental groups were formed: Group A was subjected to the authentic movement condition (AM) and Group B a voluntary movement condition (VM). A pre- and post-test measurement was used. Subjects filled out self-report scales on the Affective Trait and a self-reporting questionnaire for mood assessment. Results revealed that the AM mover reported significantly more changes in emotional state than subjects in the VM group. Individuals who reported high positive affect, reported subjective experience of sadness-depression increase, while happiness decreased. Individuals with low positive affect reported the subjective experience of anxiety decrease. García-Díaz posits that these changes suggest the mover is tapping into inhibited or suppressed emotions. Given this descent to deeper emotions, I am curious if this descent extends to one's sense of self as relative to the emotional experience.

Although authentic movement has roots in modern dance and the practice of dance/movement therapy, authentic movement can essentially be considered a deeply meditative practice. Movers are asked to close their eyes and focus on internal sensations and listen to bodily impulses. Relevant to the practice of authentic movement, Haimerl and Valentine (2001) studied whether or not changes occur in people's self-concept at different stages of development within their chosen practice of Buddhist meditation; positive development was expected based on previous empirical findings between meditation and psychological correlates. Their second objective was to extend this understanding by using the integrative model of the self-concept and equally accounting for the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal dimensions. Results were highest on the interpersonal scale and lowest on the intrapersonal scale; greatest changes based on meditation experience was on the transpersonal scale. This suggests that progress in

Buddhist meditation can lead to growth in intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal components of personality and self-concept.

Through the use of altered consciousness induced through authentic movement (ACIM), Deets (2015) was interested in contributing knowledge to the phenomenology of understanding consciousness. The goal of her study was to develop a model that is appropriate for analyzing the “experience of the moving body” based on the understanding of the realities constructed by participants. Results yielded 21 themes including community, ecstatic emotional experience, changed relationship to one’s body, elevation, and transformation of the self (Deets, 2015). Processes of these were: (a) tools (anything that could “aid in the production of trance”); (b) direction of focus (external or internal); (c) active or passive means of entering trance; (d) connectedness to self or others, and (e) internal and long-term outcomes (Deets, 2015, p. 192). This article captures the experience of the embodied consciousness and suggests how this experience can be available to everyone. The experience of the embodied consciousness can then be introduced to all and bring long-lasting changes in individuals across all mediums of human development.

Hong, S.-C. et al. investigated the efficacy of dance/movement therapy in reducing the negative psychological symptoms of mild depression in adolescents and how to identify the underlying mechanisms of these effects. Data was collected through an inventory of emotional distress and measurements of plasma serotonin and dopamine concentrations after blood withdrawal. Results reveal that the 12 weeks of dance/movement therapy improved negative psychological symptoms and significantly modulated serotonin and dopamine concentrations in subjects with mild depression. The finding of the changes in these neurohormones suggests possible therapeutic effects of dance/movement therapy on depression.

In their study, Padrão and Coimbra (2011) gathered seven female patients diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, ages 15 to 56 years old, to participate in a 6-month body oriented psychotherapeutic intervention project. Their goal was to challenge their natural movement and postures and the intervention involved inviting the participants to “assume or to take the risk of performing what is felt to be both desired and feared” in a safe and supportive therapeutic group environment through “guided or free thematic movement/expressive dance”. At the end of the study, Padrão and Coimbra (2011) reported notable changes in participants’ movement patterns as well as verbalizing “more comfort with their own bodies and more willingness to gain weight” (p. 142). This suggests that such an intervention can help break down conceptions of the body as a barrier once held by an eating disorder.

Leseho and Maxwell were interested in understanding the relationship between dance/creative movement and “healing, growth, or survival”; particularly how it supports women during difficult life struggles. The interview question focused on the “resiliency of the human spirit” and participants were asked to describe a story of how dance/creative movement has contributed to their “survival and growth” (2010, p. 17). Themes collapsed into overarching categories of “empowerment, transformation, and healing”. The researchers conclude that the consistency of themes across the findings might have a broader application to different contexts in working with women. Researchers note that wording of the interview question may have led participants to share positive stories or reflect on a positive area of their healing or life journey; their focus delineates conceived contributions toward beliefs of self-growth.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of adolescent girls with a history of internalizing problems during participation in an 8-month dance intervention. Inclusion criteria involved experiencing somatic symptoms, as well as mental health problems

such as anxiety and stress. The intervention emphasized enjoying the movement. Material was mostly choreographed and creative movement was also encouraged. The researcher's intention was to offer an opportunity for the participants to "have a positive dance experience without external pressure, to enjoy music, culture, and socialization with peers... and to enhance body awareness" (Duberg, Möller, and Sunvission, 2016, p. 3). Central understanding regarding the experiences of the participants suggested an overall theme of "Finding Embodied Self-Trust That Opens New Doors" (Duberg et al., 2016, p. 5). From this main category drew five generic categories: (a) An Oasis from Stress; (b) Supportive Togetherness; (c) Enjoyment and Empowerment; (d) Finding Acceptance and Trust in Own Ability, and (e) Dance as Emotional Expression (Duberg et al., 2016). This study asserts the notion that dance interventions promote access to and enhance personal emotional coping resources. A safe space that promotes a non-judgmental and supportive atmosphere, enhances emotional expression and can thus lead to embodied self-trust and openness for life.

Using a qualitative arts-based inquiry, Margolin (2014) was interested to explore how creative movement impacted adolescent girls. Margolin first addressed her own role and relationship with dance and spirituality to inquire "body-self discovery, rupture, healing, insight, and ecstasy" (p. 143). Her approach involved a basis of Jungian active imagination, authentic movement, spiritual concepts of self and body-self, as well as creative movement through a feminist perspective that emphasizes female embodiment. She concluded that the participants' reflections exposed how inner-directed movement serves as a release and brings light to feelings of grief, anger, guilt, and fear that is stored in the body; dance and movement can unlock the emotion of the mover. Further, she stated that emotional connections were found between

participants as well. This work served to reinforce notions of creative movement as a gateway to tap into areas of body-self that reappears in the female experience.

In this qualitative arts-based research article, Adams (2016) explored “modes of physically daily practice, somatic writing, and an emerging sense of spirituality within an autoethnographic framework” (p. 107). The primary approaches Adams (2016) used in this venture stemmed from her own contemporary dance training, Pilates, somatic writing, Gyrokinesis, and authentic movement. Adams transferred her somatic experiences of these approaches to “prose and poetic narratives”, which then served to inform her spiritual awareness of the values which base her physical practices. Adams (2016) described experiencing sensations of “openness, connectivity, compassion, and acceptance of the human condition” (p. 122). She also went on to say that as her “physical capacities decrease”, she builds an understanding of her presence and gratitude as part of the spiritual world and that one’s journey must be nurtured through giving time for personal experimentation to pave their path (p. 123). Further, she endorsed the inevitability of new questions arising as a result of her arts-based process. This embodied mindfulness and movement practice provides insight to a lifetime of work for my thesis topic. Her study provides a strong basis and personal example of how various somatic practices, including authentic movement, elucidate areas of spirituality and humanity.

Dosamentes-Alperson and Merrill (1980) were interested in testing whether or not certain recurrent phenomena in the clinical approach of experiential movement psychotherapy would be observed and obtained under controls. They hypothesized whether participants in the two experimental groups (experiential movement psychotherapy groups) would shift toward “greater self-direction, increased reactivity to their own feelings, greater expression of their feelings, greater self – acceptance and improved relations with others”, as well as examine changes in the

participants' range of expressive movement (Dosamentes-Alperson and Merrill, 1980, p. 63). Results from all scales suggest significantly greater increases in the measured personality characteristics in the experiential movement psychotherapy group compared to controls. This article helps to inform my topic by providing quantitative measures of reported change in individuals' expression of self and with others.

Methods

“What is the power of dance? What is the medicine of being in the body? We don't have to figure it out. We can let it teach us the way.”

-Julie Leavitt

For this community engagement project, I chose to engage participants over the course of two sessions within one week of each other. The sessions took place at Lesley University's Porter Campus in University Hall in room 3-009, a small dance studio with hardwood floors and full-length mirrors. After sharing my thesis topic and potential plan with peers, who were Expressive Therapy students at Lesley University, many expressed an interest in my community engagement project. I followed up and contacted several of these students via email. Six students were selected and all identified as women with various cultural, national, and ethnic backgrounds and ranged in age from twenty-eight to thirty years old.

Throughout the duration of both sessions, authentic movement and dance/movement therapy techniques were explored. Sessions began with an introduction or discussion reviewing material and experience. This was followed by a guided movement-exploration warm up for participants to grow more comfortable moving throughout the space and to prevent any physical injury that could occur during authentic movement. Attention was drawn to the use of breath to

initiate movement improvisation among sections of the body and then gradually the body altogether.

For authentic movement, participants were divided into dyads by pulling names out of a hat. These dyads would remain the same for the second session. The mover was given 10 minutes to move and a one-minute warning before their time would cease. The mover was given five minutes to speak on behalf of their movement experience and five minutes was given to the witness to speak on behalf of what they felt during. Aligned with traditional authentic movement practice, I chose to not play music so that the movers could keep sensations of the body as the main influencer. I sat on one far side of the room throughout the whole movement sequence with a view of all movers.

Prior to the authentic movement section, guidelines were reviewed and stated as follows:

1. Participants would be split into dyads.
2. Eyes will remain closed from the beginning until the end.
3. Moving can be stillness, internal or external movement, or sounding that is prompted by physical, emotional, external or internal impulses.
4. The mover will be mindful of sudden or large movements and the possibility of making physical contact with others in the room. For everyone's safety, movers should open their eyes slightly if they are making large or strong movements.
5. After movement has ceased, mover will speak verbally on behalf of their experience first.
6. Witness will observe the mover with non-judgment, conscious and full attention.

Witnesses will be mindful of when their attention wanes. Witness will not interpret or

analyze movement, but instead notice emotional, internal, or external responses as they watch.

I recorded my observations of the participants' movements, their verbally shared insights and my own internal and external responses as witness by notepad and pen.

Participants were then prompted to create a visual artistic representation in response to the movement experience. The prompt for the visual artistic representation was as follows: "create an image of what you conceive to be the essence of yourself that has been translated into movement". My rationale for this was to give participants time to further process meaning out of the authentic movement experience as it pertained to sense of self. Art materials were provided, including paint, chalk pastel, oil pastel, and canvas paper. With their permission, I asked to take photos of their artistic pieces so that they could reflect on them in the following session.

These sessions concluded with my own experience of authentic movement to explore this phenomenon with my thesis consultant as witness.

Results

The following results share participants insights, experiences, and my observations from my community engagement project that involved dance/movement therapy and authentic movement techniques.

First session. I began the first session of the engagement with a brief introduction to explain the purpose of the session and rationale for my thesis. I asked all participants to introduce themselves one by one and share their name, preferred pronouns, expressive therapy modality, occupation, experience in dance or other movement modalities, and familiarity with dance/movement therapy and authentic movement. The participants reported experience with dance and familiarity to dance/movement therapy, and authentic movement varied greatly. Only

one participant reported having a fair amount of experience with authentic movement. The introduction followed with the movement exploration warm up. I asked the group to find a space in the studio they feel most comfortable, to close their eyes or keep a low gaze, and to focus on their breath. This focus on the breath became the driving force through which I based initiating of all parts of their body in the warm-up. I included imagery such as, *“take a deep breath inward, and let that breath travel through every fiber of your being... allow that energy to move through you...”*. I prompted them to focus on gently moving areas of tension throughout the body and offered suggestions to move successively from the head to the feet. During this time, I played ambient music with a strong steady beat: “Watching the Storm” by U137 and then “Worry” by Sad Souls. I immediately noticed that most of the participants stood in stillness or moved slightly for the majority of the duration. Laban Movement Analysis terms can help to describe some of the effort qualities in the participants’ movement. Laban Movement Analysis was developed by Rudolf Laban and is both a theoretical and experiential way to observe, describe, prescribe, perform and sometimes interpret human movement (Konie, 2011). I noticed participants gradually increased in Time¹ and in use of the Far Reach Space² of their Kinesphere.³ Participants did not travel significantly throughout the space and stayed in the same place which they started. Participants were then asked to slowly bring their movements to a close and return to a circle. Attention was brought to the breath again as I considered the different levels of activation that may have occurred before the warm-up compared to now. I wanted to draw awareness of the moment and furthered this by asking to remain in stillness.

¹ The speed or slowing of pace, in which Time is characterized by qualities of “sustainment” or “quickness”.

² As far as the mover can reach when accessing space.

³ The mover’s own personal movement sphere/space which surrounds the body

Among many of the moments that ensued throughout authentic movement, I choose to share those which I had felt most notable and deeply. While witnessing one individual, I noticed myself breathing more deeply and sustained compared to when witnessing others. The muscles around my face and head began to relax. Later I overheard this same mover share with her witness that she was struggling to shut off her brain. Another individual who had earlier shared political tensions and warfare in her home country began to sob heavily towards the end of her movement and carried this into her dyad. At this moment, I chose to intervene and join this dyad. I came to the mover and asked her if I could hold her while she cried. As I put my arms around her and her head nestled between my chest and shoulder, I mouthed to the witness that we would not say anything right now. I intended to allow the participant to be seen in this moment of vulnerability. As she let go of her grasp, she began sharing her fears for her family's safety and disgust towards those at home who supported this possible war. Throughout my witnessing of all individuals, I noticed many moments I felt a yearning to help or comfort individuals and a strong inclination to intervene.

During the conversation between the mover and witness, I walked through the studio to listen and compare what I witnessed to that of others. Some shared that they experienced time had lapsed very quickly, while one participant hyperbolized that the last minute of moving felt like the longest minute of her life. Another mover shared with her witness that any strong feelings she was about to have were lessened by engaging in movement. This dyad also shared mutual feelings of encouraging one another during their role as witness and experiencing kinesthetic empathy. In another dyad, one mover stated that she experienced feeling color and was able to allow herself to fully explore the extension of her outstretched arms and an open chest. She elaborated that she was surprised by the cohesion of her breath and vocalizations of

sighing. Her witness shared that during this moment she felt that the mover had found something.

Once the mover and witness dyad section was complete, one participant noted that we had reached towards the close of our allotted time and needed to depart. I requested five minutes to complete the visual artistic representation portion and another five minutes for a final discussion. During the final discussion, participants shared the overall difficulty of conceiving their essence following the experiential and identified several barriers in practicing authentic movement. Many of these barriers included a sense of conscientiousness: participants stated they struggled with following the practice as was expected of them. Some barriers described included: (a) feeling obligated to move for the witness; (b) letting go of thoughts; (c) beliefs that one should cry or have a strong emotional response, and (d) being conscious of possibly distracting others with sound. Participants reflected on new insights as well. One participant shared that she gained insight into her actions being characteristically ego-oriented, and this was manifested through finding purpose in doing things with the intention of gaining approval and validation from others. This person also emphasized she felt her sense of self was heavily influenced based on her interactions with others. She had witnessed the mover who cried and shared that her movement evoked indescribable emotions she is not typically able to express individually. She elaborated that it was both validating and liberating to witness someone else display emotions that paralleled her own. One participant shared that during the experiential she found herself embodying a new way to reflect and was grateful for this. Another participant shared that she found herself regressing in a childlike manner, with an inability to sit still.

Second session. Due to the time conflict that occurred in the first session, I decided that the second session would start with a debriefing of what the participants had gathered following

their authentic movement experience together. Themes regarding staying present, being attuned, embodiment, intuition, and stillness were discussed. One participant shared feeling more attuned and embodied overall. She shared that she carried the practice of having her eyes closed during an in-class movement assignment and received feedback that she appeared to be embodied. She elaborated that this brought her a sense of stillness from within herself. Following this statement, some participants shared similar insights, such as permitting oneself to experience stillness both inward and physically. Other participants shared experiencing the struggle between how one should practice authentic movement versus how the body wants to practice it. For one participant, this served as a metaphor for how she believes she should be versus being who she feels or wants to be.

During the warm-up exploration, I used a similar format and directive as the previous session. Unlike the previous session, participants immediately began moving and quickly transitioned into movements that accessed the Far Reach Space of their Kinesphere. Both inspired and attuned to this experience, I came close and entered the space with the participants. I mirrored their movements and shared contact with each of them and encouraged others to mirror one another as well. This moment was unplanned and served to heighten an emotional experience. I observed participants smiling as they moved, traveling across the room and using space in the room overall.

The same format for authentic movement was used and guidelines were reviewed that may not have been explicit in the previous session. Guidelines for this authentic movement experience that were not reviewed previously or needed reinforcement included: (a) making sure there was eye contact between mover and witness before and after the movement; (b) stillness and sound were acceptable responses throughout movement experience; (c) the witness would

share their felt experience without judgment, preferably with the use of “I” statements, such as : “I noticed when” or “I saw”, and “I felt”, and (d) mover and witness would not engage in a dialogue, only one would speak during their allotted time.

While witnessing the dyads, my urge to interact and move with the mover was much more heightened. As one participant leaned their body back with their arms wide open, I desired, imagined, and felt myself placing my hands behind their back and wanting to hold them. I also noticed that as participants engaged in self-touch during their movement, my instinct was to self-touch as well – in the form of rubbing my temples or forehead, for example. One participant spent a sufficient amount of time with her arms up above her head and her head hanging low, parallel to the floor. I saw a considerable amount of tension strewn across her upper body, and I desired to pull her up to rise even more and release it. Her hands dropped and slowly began to touch, and she appeared to breathe deeply into her gut and I felt peace and stillness within myself. Her witness described sensing steady energy prior to dropping her hands. The mover explained that today was not a day for her to experience anything intense and expressed feeling dreadful. She mentioned that she was surprised with her body’s desire to stand up despite those feelings. Another participant’s movements brought out both a fear and excitement within me. She began on the floor in a rocking motion and gradually arose and began whirling with her arms spread out. I saw a freedom in this movement and began giggling. Soon, she started rolling across the floor feverishly and I feared she would collide into another mover. I felt my body tensing and holding my breath, hypnotized and as the moment I wanted to intervene she had ceased this motion. I noticed myself thinking ahead that this could be disastrous. She shared that she had been experiencing a lot on her mind as she was nearing the end of several responsibilities. Her witness stated that she felt a building and release of tension and feelings of

turbulence within her own body. After my one-minute warning to bring their movement to a close, all participants had lined up in a diagonal configuration across the room. Each one ended in a standing pose facing the same direction. I felt a powerful stillness inside the room.

After the dyads, we spent approximately 10 minutes creating an image based on the same prompt of what one conceived to be the essence of themselves that has been translated into movement. After they were finished, I shared the images of their artistic representation from my mobile phone. I asked the participants to go around to look at each person's image and simply observe it, without passing judgment or interpretation. After this moment of reflection, I asked all participants to stand up with their art placed in front of them and take a moment to acknowledge other's images. Everyone walked around in a circle and took turns to observe and be witness to these images until they stopped in front of their own. I asked them to continue to keep their eyes open and focus on their images, first looking at their image in separate parts, such as textures, colors, shapes and thoughts about sensations when they are creating. I asked them to notice their body's response to this image of their perceived essence or self-concept, maybe concerning their stance in space or how their breath is traveling through them. From there, I transitioned to relating the parts of the images to the participant's parts of self: "*What are the parts you direct your focus to most? What parts do you work through the most? Maybe there are parts of you that you perceive to be more positive and others may be more neutral... now, take all of these parts away, what do you see?*". Participants each shared one word in response to this question. Some words were: spill, evolution, space, nothing, improvise, and flow.

The participants and I transitioned into a discussion about their perceived essence and personal views regarding essence, sense of self or self-concept after their experience with the community engagement project. A few participants shared that the task of creating an image to

reflect their perceived essence after movement was daunting, and that one had to let go of and accept what came up for them. One participant elaborated that she began to challenge this thought and grounded herself in the present moment and that there is nothing more essential than what she is doing in the here in now. She also pondered the assumption that it would be hardest to conceive of one's essence in a less familiar modality, due to their lack of fluency. However, she argued that one's essence might be captured in its most raw and pure form this way and this intrigued me. Another participant shared that her sense of self is contingent on her self-presentation. Participants shared various insights, these include: (a) there might be multiple essences; (b) the essence can only be accessed in fleeting moments; (c) essence must be shared with others to be experienced, or in connection with others, and (d) the hope that as one's identity changes that the essence does not. Overall, participants stated that they do believe dance/movement therapy and authentic movement techniques can influence one's sense of self.

My Authentic Movement exploration. Following both sessions, I was curious and wanted to personally explore the authentic movement practice and a connection to my topic of interest. My thesis consultant and off-site dance/movement therapy supervisor Julie Leavitt served as my witness. Julie Leavitt serves as an adjunct faculty member at Lesley University and is a board-certified dance/movement therapist as well as a body-oriented spiritual director. After I moved for approximately seven minutes, I shared my experience with Julie – I spent much of the time stretching tight spaces within my body and struggling to wake up and return myself to the world. I felt like I wanted to shake some things off and to accomplish this I needed to breathe in deep, hold it in for a moment, and then release. My head felt heavy and I could only relieve this by running my fingers through my hair, rotating my head side by side, or giving into gravity and resting it against the floor.

Julie noticed that from the very beginning I moved slowly in an undulating way and that she found her body beginning to wake up in that manner. She elaborated that she wanted me to have all of the room that I needed to do that. She felt moved in an internal place of listening while also moving in an unpredictable undulating pattern. She witnessed my body moving around the room, starting from my pelvis and through my spine, through my legs, and over my legs. By this time, she felt that she was witnessing one body, rather than body parts; a body that was working as one unit. She heard my breath and shared that if she had to choose one word for the whole movement experience, it would be “attuning” or “attunement.” She witnessed me attuning and listening within and all around for what would be next and what was there; almost asking how to best embody the moment. She mentioned that there were two moments when I came near her, sat with my back to her, and I took a breath. She felt a sense of “holding” – a longing for me to be held in the space and the moments.

Discussion

Dance/movement therapy and authentic movement techniques were explored with a group of six Lesley University students to experience its perceived influence on sense of self. Participants endorsed various views regarding their perceived essence, self-concept, or sense of self after these sessions. Participants shared the idea that one can have multiple essences and that these essences are apt to change over time, as aligned with Fordham’s idea of primary self and as a period of development (Urban, 2005).

Similar to the thematic development of Adams (2016) own work, wherein several modes of practice were utilized, spiritual awareness became informed overtime. Participants shared an ability to release judgment toward their artistic representations and authentic movement experience by accepting possible outcomes. This idea of acceptance was likened as essential to

the experience of the here and now. Some participants reflected that the essence could only be experienced when shared and connected with others. These themes overlap with Adams (2016) reported sensations of “acceptance of the human condition” and “connectivity” and “openness.” Adams also goes on to emphasize the arrival of new questions. For myself, this included the spiritual aspect of the work and how the continued practice can bring about self-actualization.

Margolin (2014) explored creative movement as an inner-directed approach to healing one’s emotional wounds and suggested that this opens the self for reflection and conscious integration. Just as she suggested, participants both reflected and integrated concepts of their essence and/or sense of self within the context of dance/movement therapy and authentic movement. Participants endorsed the perception that one’s essence is inherently elusive and may be accessible only certain times (Markus and Wurf, 1987); for example, during connection with others (Schlegal, Hicks, Arndt, and King, 2009). This connection is inherent in the mover-witness relationship of authentic movement. The presence of a witness during authentic movement may actuate an experience of connection and create an environment to awaken one’s essence (Stromsted, 2001). Participants all shared that dance/movement therapy and authentic movement practices can be an influence on sense of self; however, they noted that one’s essence could not be defined.

When I shared my visual artistic representation prompt with Julie she asked me to elaborate on the intention of my words. I shared what I had learned through the process: the essence cannot be purely materialized but can be understood and explored through expressive practices. The participants’ conclusion on the undefinable nature of the essence somehow mirrored the way I phrased the visual representation prompt. I subconsciously refrained from instructing participants to create an accurate image of their essence and instead asked them to

create on the basis of their perception. Participants aligned with the idea of a *perceived* essence. At that moment, Julie exclaimed: “That’s because you are Jewish! ... no graven images...”. She referenced Exodus 20:4 (King James Bible)⁴ of the Old Testament and remarked upon the Judaic belief and practice in which God commanded there be no image or likeness of Himself or the spiritual realm. I reflected upon my own lived experience as a Jewish individual and had not considered my spiritual philosophies would emerge and align within this work. Based on this view, the essence would be regarded as part of the spiritual realm. I internalized this as a message that my subconscious was unable to ask others to actualize images of one’s essence. I recognized this investigation become rooted in my own spirituality and I found myself drawn to the connection between the spiritual and enigmatic quality of the essence.

Engaging in expressive therapies extenuates an understanding of sense of self, but participants suggest that the essence may not be fully captured. Implications of these findings toward self-actualization may require continued and deep practice of these forms. Although an intention of authentic movement is to unleash the workings of the unconscious, this community engagement project facilitates the possibility of other facets of awareness within the self. If explored further, I would consider focusing on the continued practice of authentic movement and one’s development of their *inner-witness*. The participants reported the ability to experience embodiment, attunement, stillness, and intuition after one week of authentic movement sheds light and a touch of hope for those barred by their relationship between body and self.

⁴The second of the 10 Commandments in the Book of Exodus: *Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.*

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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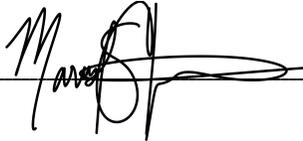
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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor:  _____

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