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Reflections on the Embodied Voices of Six Egyptian Muslim Women

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An Artistic Inquiry

Editor's Note: *This is a brief description of an artistic inquiry by Nancy Toncy, one of the co-authors of this article. The inquiry began with a series of in-depth verbal and movement interviews with a number of Egyptian Muslim women living in Cairo, Egypt. The data gathered from six of these interviews was used as inspiration for dances that would embody the unique voices of the women, as well as themes that seemed to be common among them. The conversation presented here was creatively constructed by Toncy and Hervey (her thesis advisor) based on many such conversations between them about Toncy's methods, her process as an artist and a researcher, Hervey's interest as witness and advisor to the project, the challenges Toncy faced, and the evaluation of the form in which the findings were finally expressed.*

Nancy: I chose artistic inquiry as my research method for several reasons. Movement has always been the form in which I expressed myself authentically. Verbal communication, whether in Arabic or English, has always been anxiety-provoking, never really revealing my truth. Instead words sometimes blocked my creative process. Also, after more than ten years of dance, performance, and choreography, it was only reasonable to incorporate those artistic strengths for this research project. I always trusted my own body more than outside resources for knowing and understanding. Artistic inquiry enabled me to use my body primarily to gather, analyze, and present embodied data. Culturally speaking, Egyptians use body language and non-verbal gestures in their daily communication, so bodily experience was central to my relationship with the women. Finally, since the research question was about the women’s experiences in their bodies, the data collected were non-verbal, thus analyzed kinesthetically and presented in a dance to preserve their authentic and holistic value. It was anticipated that the women (the co-researchers) would co-create the project with me by actively participating in some of the research design and procedures.

Lenore: As your thesis advisor, I supported your choice. I knew you were a skilled and expressive dancer. I also knew you would give the project the kind of intensive time, energy, and scholarly commitment that would insure its success. I was excited about witnessing an artistic inquiry process that might result in a solid example of a method that I have been espousing for years. The opportunity to explore the cross-cultural application of dance/movement therapy methods was also too good to pass up.

Nancy: I began with an understanding of artistic inquiry from your research class and book (Hervey, 2000).

Lenore: That included an operationalized definition of artistic inquiry as a form of research that includes any or all of the following in some degree:

(1)Dance-making (or any art form) to collect data, dance-making to analyze data, and/or dance to present the findings.
(2)Acknowledgement and description of the researcher(s) creative processes.
(3)Aesthetic values of the researcher(s) that inform decisions and shape products made throughout the research process.

Leonore, how did your understanding of artistic inquiry change once you got going?

Nancy: It became more internal. I think art is inside each one of us. It became a discovery of the truth in myself; an intrapersonal dialogue/agitation. My heart had a lot to do with it. It grounded me to the truth of what my body really wanted to say or do in a given moment. It is matter of letting go to your passion. My heart fueled my body/mind with so much courage to dance and make dances; courage to truthfully present myself whether people liked it or not. Before this experience art was only aesthetic -- to please everybody but myself.

Lenore: I remember you saying you had no idea it was going to take so much hard work. What was your motivation for doing this project in this way?

Nancy: Over time my body has taken on personal, cultural, and familial memories, just like anybody else who is born unique but through life acquires characteristics that make her look the same as everybody else. Dance has changed me by filtering out those aspects of myself that are ill fitting and maintaining only those that complete and satisfy me. Today I am not afraid to say and be the truth, to look to my body for wisdom, and to do my own dance. I found myself curious about other Egyptian women's experiences in their bodies, which raised the central question for this study:

“What are other Egyptian women's experiences in their bodies?” I was interested in the ways in which their dances were similar and different, in the stories their bodies wanted to tell, in the feelings, memories, and images their bodies held and wished to communicate.

In response to cultural and familial norms and values, my mind used to make up stories, and hide secrets in order to live the life I wanted to live. My body only recently began to dance the truth about myself, my self in relation to others and to my culture. As a result, I mistrust others? verbal self-presentations. I need to see the body move to

understand a woman's life experience and make sense of it. I trust the body. Therefore, my purpose was to give this group of Egyptian women, including myself, an opportunity to talk and dance about their lives. Together I hoped we might create integrity in our minds and bodies, given the chance to be ourselves, to listen, and to dance together. I hoped they could open their hearts and share their own stories their own way. I wanted my body to move and witness theirs. I believed that we needed a chance to discover each other, to empower one another in order to live truthfully and act autonomously with courage, like Isis did. Culturally speaking, embodiment is very important. We need to communicate via body language to understand, feel, and confront one another. If we only speak we will always remain strangers.

Lenore: How would you describe your methods?

Nancy: I gathered the data in Cairo, Egypt. The co-researchers were 12 Egyptian women with Muslim heritages, intentionally selected for their diversity of experience, their interest in the research question, and their availability. None were more than acquaintances to me. Each woman who agreed to participate signed an informed consent form that assured confidentiality and privacy of the interview material. I introduced the nature and purpose of the research to each woman, describing the type of information needed from verbal and movement interviews. I also asked for permission to video or audiotape the whole or portions of the verbal interview and/or movement experience.

The interviews were conducted in a large room in a private, urban home in Cairo. The windows of the room were completely covered to protect them from any exposure that might inhibit their self-expression, especially for those who were veiled. I initially interviewed each woman in Arabic to collect verbal data about her experience in her body. Then six of the women participated in one to three dance/movement interviews to communicate the non-verbal aspects of her experience in her body. Within this context, I was a facilitator and witness, limiting my interventions to reflection, gentle encouragement, and open-ended questions about the meanings and feelings underlying the movement experience of each woman.

None of the women initially wanted to be videotaped, so after every interview, each woman was instead invited to hold the camera and record me as I moved. First, the woman recorded my kinesthetic response to her movement. Moving the impulses, sensations, and feelings that I experienced in response to each woman's dance gave me insight into my unconscious reactions to her material. This in turn led me to understand her experiences and therapeutic issues in greater depth. My somatic countertransference (Lewis, 1984) thereby contributed to both data collection and analysis. Next, she recorded my effort to recreate her dance in my own body. The dance/movement therapy techniques, known as mirroring, echoing, or kinesthetic

attunement, leading to kinesthetic empathy, helped me to understand her movement and its message, thus it too contributed to data collection and analysis.

Lenore: I think this was one of the most exciting outcomes of your research. Your creative problem solving led to the use of dance/movement therapy techniques in combination with video-recording yourself when the women would not allow themselves to be video-recorded. As a result you have introduced an innovative and ethical research method for future exploration.

Nancy: It also increased the co-researchers? trust in me and in the research process. The women asked questions, gave me feedback, and made corrections about my movement, thereby giving them a more active, creative, and empowered role in the research. Subsequently, three women agreed to be videotaped in their last movement session.

When each movement experience was complete, I journaled in detail, including all events and my responses to them. Data were preserved in the form of audio-tapes of the verbal interviews, video-tapes of me moving at the end of each session (recorded by the women), video-tapes of the few women who agreed to move, and thorough writing about the entire research process.

Lenore: After all the data were collected, how did you transition into dance-making?

Nancy: At first I tried picking one movement from 'Y' with another movement from 'R' then adding one movement from 'M' to complete a movement from 'K' etc.

Lenore: You used initials to refer to the women.

Nancy: Yes. But the process of taking single movements from here and there to aesthetically organize them together based on their flow, matching rhythms, or complementary shapes did not feel authentic to me or fair to the women. It broke the wholeness of the movement phrase and interrupted the meaning it conveyed. I then realized that my focus was solely on the aesthetic presentation, which made me angry at myself, saying: “Who do I think I am, cutting people?s lived experiences like that to satisfy my own aesthetic and artistic values”?

My vision was to choreograph a dance that could truly speak for all our voices, validate the uniqueness of our embodied experiences, and reflect our common themes. So, I went back to the video of the women and started dancing many times with the women to hold and feel the intensity of the embodied material until it internally stimulated me and initiated a creative process. With each revisiting of the data, I studied the woman?s shape, rhythm, use of space, quality of movement, body

attitude, and movement vocabulary until I internalized as accurately as I could her kinesthetic language and "reached a visual and kinesthetic saturation" with her dance (Hervey, 2000, p. 61). In this embodiment process, I was also continuously checking back and forth to be sure that my recreation of the dances matched the original versions I had witnessed and experienced. I eventually selected movement phrases from each woman that I felt portrayed a holistic sense of her.

Lenore: That's interesting. In other kinds of research these are called meaning units, or segments of data that cannot be broken down any smaller without losing their meaning.

You presented your first dance at a creative arts therapy conference. It was really a series of vignettes that recreated the women's movements almost exactly. I found it a very deeply moving presentation of their authentic movement, but what was missing was your voice. Your body was simply a medium through which the women spoke. The data was still in its raw form. In order for the data to be analyzed, it needed to become a dance. You needed to bring your aesthetic decision-making to the creative process. How did you finally get to that, while still respecting the wholeness and authenticity of each woman's dance?

Nancy: My challenge became to create a dance that was beautiful to watch yet was genuine to the original data and authentically expressed co-researchers' embodied voices. So, I went back again to witness and move with the videos of the women, but this time I was searching for authentic movement phrases that "came from somewhere deeper, more subjective and more personal," as you have put it (Hervey, in press). Movement that spoke the truth about the woman?s here-and-now reality. Unlike before, I became interested in the completeness of the movement phrase that "conveyed a whole feeling, story, memory, or an image" (Hervey, in press). I realized that if I could dance the authenticity in their movement, beauty would naturally unfold.

I repeatedly moved the selected holistic phrases to internalize their genuine quality. Next, I tried to arrange the phrases in a way that had smooth transitions, and to maintain a beautiful flow so they could talk and dance with each other. Embodying their authentic experiences was exhausting because I was taking in another's conscious as well as unconscious material. I needed some time to recuperate from their movement and come back to my own. I tried to simply breathe, stand still, roll on the ground, or walk in space before diving into another woman's story but this recuperation felt strange to my body because dancing has always been the renewal of my energy. To get inspired, I listened to The Secret Garden, the music that most co-researchers chose during the movement interviews. When my body got filled up with self/others intense emotions, memories, and stories and was ready for a

breakthrough, I began improvising my response and creating my own dance that came to flow in and out of the women's dances.

The process of embodying their authentic movement was illuminating in that I realized that although each of us had our own unique embodied voices, we all sang the same song, therefore some of the common themes we shared were aesthetically presented in the dance. For example, the veil became a central metaphor, representing the wind, wings, lover, boundary between self and others, God, a soothing blanket, and the hijab (the veil worn by Muslim women).

Lenore: The final dance was performed publicly for an audience of primarily friends and colleagues. You used a small proscenium stage, lit simply with warm lights passing over a cool blue veil that looked like it was hanging from the sky, infinitely long, giving it a feeling of divine origin. You decorated the stage with Arabic calligraphy, lit candles, and burned incense, encouraging a feeling of intimacy, and of Arabic culture. The dance was followed by a conversation with the audience during which they asked you questions and shared their responses. There were several women in the audience from Middle Eastern countries, who understood and identified with parts of the dance.

As an audience member I had a stronger reaction to some parts of the dance than others, and in many cases these were movements that came from your own story. For instance, at one point you seemed to be pulling something out of your mouth again and again, reaching deeper into your body each time. For me this was such a powerful symbol of trying to find an authentic voice; and becoming aware that some words coming out of our mouths are in fact not true statements of self. Often the women?s movements became like a background chorus supporting these very powerful personal artistic statements.

Lenore: What were the most powerful parts of the dance for you?

Nancy: The most powerful was the whole introduction piece. Every movement carried its own story, its own dilemma; carried my embodied voice. I danced about separation, oppression, spirituality, pretension, truth, humiliation, travel, sensuality as powerful. The least satisfying part for me was the end. I knew I wanted to exit as a bride and I wanted to invite other women to dance with me but I could feel that the whole end piece was missing the kind of passion that created the beginning. Yes I exited as a bride, but not the way I wanted to.

Lenore: Yes, I can see that. You were also working against deadlines to perform on a prescheduled date, and start a new job at the same time. I sense that you could have

used more time to end it with as much passion, creativity and aesthetic strength as you began it. Creative and research projects often run into these kinds of limitations.

I think your inquiry has a lot of value for the profession in both its content and its form. You have made it clear that the findings from this research are not intended to be generalized to all Egyptian and/or Muslim women. But I found it an opportunity to look through these cultural veils of separation at women whose experiences may be very different from my own, and yet be able to relate pretty easily.

Nancy: I hope that readers and audience members will subjectively derive some understanding through their own personal reactions to the experiences of these particular women.

Lenore: The project also provides a high quality example for other students who wish to use artistic methods of research. The written portion of the project provides a description of your artistic, creative, and aesthetic processes. It is clear to me that the dance of these women's experiences (yours included) revealed essences, subtleties, and flavors that could not have been conveyed as richly in writing alone. Although the dance could certainly stand by itself, I believe the combination of a brief written synopsis (like an abstract or program notes), the dance performance, and the spontaneous verbal interaction with audience members to be the richest and the most enlightening presentation of these findings.

Refernces

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