How Choreometrics Reflects Self-identity and Self-concept Through Cultural Dance: A Developing Method

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How Choreometrics Reflects Self-identity and Self-concept Through Cultural Dance:

A Developing Method

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Dance/Movement Therapy

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Abstract

This arts-based autoethnography research aims to analyze the researcher’s personal reflections of cultural embodied experiences through the connection of Thai cultural dance movements, cultural patterns, and expressive behaviors in Thai cultural contexts. These also reflected the researcher’s personal-identity and self-concept. As cultural dance has impacts on social structures and human behaviors both physically and psychologically in social interactions throughout the developmental lifespan, the researcher was inspired by the concept of Choreometrics to look closely at personal dance experiences in relation to Thai culture. This autoethnography is a case study of the researcher who identifies as Thai and reflects her experiences through the lens of an international student in the US. This paper also indicates how cultural dance/movement pieces can be effective therapeutic tools for an individual’s reflecting and enhancing self-identities and self-concepts in different cultural environments. This case study may be beneficial for therapists to recognize the layers of one’s sense of self through cultural embodiments for current and future international students as well as for different types of immigrants or refugees in therapy sessions.

Keywords: Expressive behaviors, movement, cultural embodiment, embodied experience, sense of self, cultural context.
How Choreometrics Reflects Self-identity and Self-concept Through Cultural Dance

Introduction

“นาฏศิลป์ไทย: เอกลักษณ์ของเราทางวัฒนธรรม”

“Thai dance reflects national identity and cultural autonomy”

—The prime duty of a Thai dancer is to embody traditional culture to protect our nation as a culture warrior, and to expand gratitude of Thai culture through dance as a cultural ambassador—

Growing up as a Thai dancer, I not only learned graceful dance movements in order to perform on the stage, but I also took in and stored various valuable aspects of my culture within my body, allowing my expressive movements to proudly represent my culture. For me, dance was not only for myself, but it was for the country, my Thai culture, and my national identity. As King Rama V stated, “Civilization of the nation is to have our own identities” from the history of surviving colonization that Thais remember as common knowledge and internalized within their souls. Therefore, all kinds of Thai dances are valued as inherent to the Thai nation; we Thai people are proud of who we are.

Thai cultural values and perspectives are stored in the dance performances that have been passed down through generations. Further, I learned that these national identities are not only within the dances, they are everyday movements that act as expressive behaviors of people and their interactions in Thai culture. As the Choreometrics project, the measure system of dance across culture and human life notes, “Danced movement is patterned reinforcement of the habitual movement patterns of each culture or cultural area” (Lomax, 1968, p. xv). This inspired me to look at my personal experience in relation to Thai culture through a professional lens of artistic, educational, and therapeutic perspectives of dance/movement therapy.
Throughout my time growing and living in my native and different cultural contexts, I have learned that there are many layers of the self which are formed by embodied experiences in different contexts. I discovered that Thai cultural dance has significantly influenced my movement and expressive behaviors, including my personal identities and self-concept. While studying and living in the US, I found Thai dance to be more therapeutic for me than it had once been. In my process of self-transformation in a new culture, Thai dance brought me back my sense of self. It helped me to feel grounded and improved my flexibility and resilience in creative ways. As Lomax (1968) noted that “a song from home brings a rush of feeling to the heart and tears to eyes of a traveler” (p.6), so do movements from home. I believe that in order to go further, we have to know where and who we are. When dealing with changes in life, we sometimes feel lost and wish to go home where we felt safe and comfortable. Through the process of this creative exploration, I found that Thailand, my home, is like a soul within my body. This sense of self within my body leads me cultivate resilience in changes of life.

**Literature Review**

**Choreometrics**

Choreometrics is a record system for observing cultural patterns and expressive behavior through dance and movement styles across cultures. The underlying belief is that “danced movement is patterned reinforcement of the habitual movement patterns of each culture or cultural area” (Lomax, 1968, p. xv). Lomax asserts that dance is a universal form of human expression and believes that a given style of dance represents everyday movements of people as part of a cultural reinforcement pattern and may possibly be a manifestation of people’s communication and social interactions. He also claims that the differences in dance movements are not just aesthetic forms but embody important cultural features, such as gender roles, typical
modes of production, and environmental adaptations, which can trace the cultural history of human societies. According to Lomax (1968), there are social features related to styles of performance that symbolize cultural traits and are observable in dance and music: productivity, politics, class, sexual mores, balance of dominance between males and females, and social cohesiveness (p. 6). Nevertheless, it is also essential to consciously explore the deeper level of human beings in their cultural contexts and examine historical and cultural heritage, race, ethnicities, religions, belief systems, perspectives, gender identities, cultural values, etc. One can therefore understand cultural patterns and expressive behaviors of people within a given culture through their cultural art forms (Orozco & Blando, 2010). To my knowledge and experiences in traditional dance, different styles of movement and performance are related to cultural components understandable in their cultural contexts. These include different religions, subcultures, social class and status, genders, and special occasions.

The Choreometrics project, which began in 1965, focuses on looking at dance as a reflection of different ways of living, lifestyles, and how people interact with one another in work settings in cultures around the world. The central focus was a parallel between physical work actions and danced movements that were observed from parts of body, rhythms, and dimensional space based on a coding sheet. Moreover, it has found that different kinds of art performances in a given culture show the ranges of behavior appropriate to that specific cultural context. When taking part in social interactions, one also has to be concerned about acceptable boundaries and appropriateness. Therefore, based on my background as a traditional dancer and my personal experiences of Thai culture, I believe that cultural art forms bond to lifestyles or habitual patterns. These art forms and cultural links form a solid foundation for the Choreometrics project.
Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that a dancer’s movements might not always be directly related to their everyday life/work, and there are many layers to emotional and creative responses of dancers and choreographers. There are many cases where dance postures and behaviors are intentionally different from work postures and work behaviors in order to make dance become extraordinary (Kealiinohomoku, 1974). According to Williams (1974), Choreometrics does not emphasize the nature of the dance enough; instead, it focuses on the mechanical motions of human danced actions. Choreometrics focuses on ways of production and indicates that dancing does not negotiate insights or mediate meanings; however, it effectively organizes a joint motor activity. In fact, there are more in-depth internal messages such as thoughts, feelings, and needs expressed by dancers, choreographers, groups of peoples, or organizations though dance and movement.

Dance is combined with gestures, postures, movements, and qualities and characteristics of movement as an expressive response to one’s own life as communication within a cultural context. However, specific contextual information is always required to support the insight of body communication, including dance (Birdwhistell, 2010). After critiquing the work of Birdwhistell, Hall, and Lomax in the 1960s and 70s on human communication and body movement work, Farnell (2003) affirmed that “without such contextualizations we are unable accurately to situate kinesics, proxemics and Choreometrics theoretically or methodologically within the historical development of the field” (p. 43). It seems that Choreometrics focuses only on physical motions based on the coding sheet (Lomax, 1968) to identify cultural patterns within group interactions and determined the movements of production within the culture, while I am aware that without consideration of the specific context, occasion, or purpose of the dance,
including the voices of the dancers or movers, the understanding of dance as an aspect of expressive culture and behavior can be misinterpreted.

After researching this project and other related topics, I found that there are multiple aspects of the Choreometrics project that can be learned and developed both for current and future knowledge. Many studies agree that the lack of a participant’s opinions from a given culture invalidates the foundation the art form was built upon. It has also been noted that there is a lack of methodologies and theoretical insights for defining and analyzing the connection of musical and dance styles within the social structure and expressive behavior of native peoples (Hanna, 2019, Williams, 1974, Kealiinohomoku, 1974). Alter (1979) emphasized that instead of looking for universal cross-cultural relationships between dance and movement patterns around the word, the Choreometrics coding scheme and theoretical framework can be utilized successfully to study dance in specific cultures. From my point of view as a student, I have benefited from using the Choreometrics’ framework to analyze dance in my own culture.

According to Miriam Phillips (2018), the recent study on re-imaging and re-imagining Choreometrics that presented intertwining methodologies of a dance ethnology approach has to include movement analysis, participant/observation in the dance event and contextual analysis, historical research, social/cultural research, and interviews. These interviews should include a worldview of people within a given culture and embodied experience through dancing. From my own perspective, these methodologies are developing, practical, and logical approaches for a cultural outsider to respectfully and consciously study and analyze traditional or folk dance performances and cultural patterns of a given culture or country.

Dance Ethnography and Anthropology of Dance
Dance ethnography or dance writing calls upon local contextual information about cultural and social values, religious, beliefs, symbolic codes, and historical structures to explain the significance of a dance event within the all-inclusive cultural process. An anthropological research method is presented as self-reflexivity, which in every dance researcher and writer’s cultural background influences their perception and interpretation of their experiences (Sklar, 1991). Since dance has cultural and national identity influences that are essential to understanding its critical meaning in relation to human lives and history and crucial to understanding human behavior within a cultural context, it is important to look at dance through the lens of anthropology.

According to Wulff (2015), dance was recognized and established for methodical anthropological exploration in the 1960s. Wulff stated that “dance is an expression of wider social and cultural situations, often indicating transition or conflict, as well as unity- dance and movement are understood in relation to theories of the body and gender, and to ethnicity, nationalism, and transnationality” (2015, p. 666). Kaeppler (2000) also stated that dance is a structural movement system. It is also a cultural form that results in the creative use and manipulation of human bodies in time and space. Additionally, movement analysis from an anthropological point of view involves all structured movement systems, including those movements associated with religious and secular rituals, ceremonies, entertainment, martial arts, sign languages, sports, and games of a given cultural context. Therefore, these structured movement patterns can be systems of social and cultural knowledge in a specific context. In other words, these movement systems are socially and culturally constructed to be a process and product of actions and interactions that are related to parts of a larger activity or system in a society (Kaeppler, 2000).
More importantly, Kaeppler’s (2000) study suggests that it is essential to look closer and pay more attention to the movement theory and philosophy of movement from the society’s perspective where the movement or action takes place. This assures that studying and understanding dance, movement, and human behavior cannot be done without contextual and background information.

The contribution of anthropology to dance often leads to crucial considerations in the humanities and social sciences, mainly to an understanding of culture and diversity. To perceive this more clearly, it is important that one be able to understand that dance and movement are not only shaped by society but vice versa: the complex system of the varieties, styles, and categories of dance and movement also influence and shape society (Wulff, 2015).

**Culture and Human Behavior**

Correspondingly, cultural psychology is the analysis of the psychological and behavioral tendencies of people that are rooted and embedded within their cultures; it also aims to understand the shared interaction and/or interweaving between psyche and cultural contexts (Poortinga, 2008). Shweder (1995) also noted that cultural psychology is the study of the way cultural traditions and social practices normalize, express, and transform the human psyche (p. 41). This shows that sociocultural environments and identity cannot exist independently without human beings taking meanings and resources from them. Meanwhile, every human being’s mental and emotional life is transformed through the process of capturing and using meanings and resources from some sociocultural environment (Shweder, 1995, p. 42).

Prominently, the main ideology of cultural psychology is that as mind and culture are inseparable and mutually linked, it is important to understand how local cultural practices shape psychological processes. Therefore, as people are shaped by their culture, their culture is also
shaped by them (Ratner, 2008). Eom and Kim (2014) also reported that cultural psychology has made a stimulating set of discoveries that show that people are both products and co-creators of their culture. The people who incorporate certain cultural or social models into their minds successively act according to these models, constructing, maintaining, and adjusting cultural realities that shape their psychology. This cycle of shared structure therefore indicates that the human psyche is a cultural product and a cultural producer at the same time. Throughout the last couple of decades, many studies have found evidence for the concept that culture is an inseparable feature of human experiences, and thus, a central element to consider in understanding human behaviors (Eom & Kim, 2014).

According to the Bourdieu’s (1991) theoretical concepts of cultural capital and habitus, cultural capital is predominantly developed through an individual's primary learning and is unconsciously influenced by their environments. The habitus is particular to one’s cultural individually. Habitus concerns ways of perceiving, thinking, and understanding the world as the resource of knowledge and is gained from an individual’s specific culture (Huang, 2019). Moreover, habitus is a way in which individuals engage in certain practices or are drawn to certain activities and perspectives that express the cultural and historical values of a given area, such as specific professional careers and fields of education and how they incorporate those values into their lives. The values then constitute part of the self and later serve to develop personal attitudes, characters, and personalities (Webb et al., 2002).

Furthermore, the dispositions that are reflected in an individual’s behaviors and actions also form part of that individual’s unconscious and are absorbed into their cultural history. According to Bourdieu, the habitus is incorporated at the level of an unconscious set of bodily
movements, dispositions, and styles. The values and imperatives drawn from different contexts and conditions are demonstrated accordingly in these bodily dispositions (Webb et al., 2002).

However, as the values and dispositions or characteristics gained from one’s cultural history are generally durable and relatively continuous with the person across contexts, the habitus can incorporate changes both from within and across different contexts and conditions, and that history is always open to change and development (Huang, 2019). This is another theoretical concept that allows me to understand how human behavior and actions are influenced by cultural contexts across the lifespan. However, an individual’s personal history and experience are more complex, and no one should make assumptions.

**Cultural Embodiment**

In order to understand an individual’s behavior respectfully, it is necessary to cautiously consider not only that one’s behaviors and dispositions are shaped by one’s home culture, but that there is a continual relationship or attunement of one’s own feelings and behaviors within a community of others. How one personally incorporates those cultural values and perspectives is very important. Therefore, it is better to focus on interactive cultural and embodied human behaviors because these will establish the standard of one’s own personal actions (van Alphen, 2018, p.124).

According to embodiment theory, humans use their bodily experiences and processes as mechanisms to understand the emotional experiences of the self and others. The embodied cognition theory (EC) proposes that cognitive processes are compelled by perceptions and motor progressions and that the body or physical actions of organisms shapes their cognition (Borghi & Caruana, 2015).
Voestermans and Verheggen Chichester (2013) emphasized in *Culture as Embodiment: The Social Tuning of Behavior* that behaviors or actions, perceptions, and emotions are communally coordinated between people and shaped and styled within their community. Van Alphen (2018) also emphasizes that “…cognition depends on the embodiment of the organism and meaning depends on the interactions in which embodied organisms engage together” (p. 126). This fundamental integration is completed by the social and expressive human body in interactions with others. In social interactions, one is responsible for controlling the body’s posture, gesture, and movements accordingly to the group’s standard for physical communication, to feel comfortable with the sense of belonging within the environment. This occurs in conjunction with the meanings or cultural values of the group’s behavioral practices. Additionally, meanings can be presented in artistic activities, such as dancing and making music, in the group that the group members understand (Van Alphen, 2018) as part of their cultural knowledge (Geertz, 1973). Therefore, cultural values and the meanings that are created and maintained become a source of group identity and the basis of agreements that affect people’s relationships and their sense of belonging. More importantly, the quality of relationships between group members plays a significant role in forming expressive behavioral patterns and dynamics in society. This impacts people’s sense of safety and comfort in their environments as well (Greenwood, 1994).

This cultural embodiment concept shows that an individual’s embodied behaviors, including values, perceptions, and identities are shaped not only by certain cultural contexts but at a deeper level from their personal experience or relationships with their environments.

**Culture, Self-identity and Self-concept**
Identity is a persistent sameness within oneself (Erikson, 1994). Self-identity refers to constant and prominent characteristics of one’s self-perceptions. The psychological sense of self-identity is mostly grounded in precise and conceptual representations, such as one's own memories, personality traits, beliefs, and attitudes from and within one’s own cultural contexts (Wren, 2002). These are related to self-concept and together offer the answer to the question, "Who am I?" Self-concept refers to consistent self-knowledge and applies to one's attitudes and dispositions. Furthermore, well-defined cultural identity positively leads to self-concept clarity, and self-esteem, which indicate individual well-being. There are psychological benefits of cultural identity especially for individuals confronting cultural identity confusion and challenges (Usborne & Taylor, 2010).

In social anthropology, the concept of identity was used mostly in the context of ethnic identity. This equates the self with others and brings the consciousness of sharing certain characteristics with others in a group. Therefore, the self is constructed through characteristically collaborative social interactions among many individuals in a cultural society (Kitayama, Duffy, & Uchida, 2007). According to Geertz (1966), culture is not only a model of but also a model for. In psychological anthropology, cultural concepts focus on the group rather than the self as an actual reflexive center of the person (Sökefeld, 1999). Given the importance of the concept of culture in anthropology, it is clear that the cultural conception of the self and the actual self cannot be easily separated.

**Self and Expressive Art Process of Dance/Movement Therapy**

Expressive art therapy is the emotional intuitive process of discovering oneself through the creative process in any art form that comes from an emotional fullness. The focus is to use art
by going into one’s inner state to discover ways to express oneself through visual art, movement, sound, writing, or improvisational drama to explore a depth of personal insight (Rogers, 2000).

Dance/movement therapy is one form of psychotherapy that uses body movement as a medium for expression and communication with the self and others. Physical behaviors and movements are not only expressions of the body but also incorporate personal messages, thoughts, and feelings stored from an individuals’ life experiences. Through the lens of dance/movement therapy, the focus is to strengthen the core of dance and movement, which manifest as the interconnection of body, mind, and soul (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2015).

As dance reflects the native culture, Chang (2015) also points through the dance/movement therapy perspective to the term psychophysical habitus and its concept as the whole series of embodied unconsciousness links to mind and body movement, which also includes aesthetic preferences. In the creative process of self-discovery, dance and movement can stimulate sensations, lead to soul-searching and/or self-analysis, and bring self-awareness to exploring insights and knowledge from personal and cultural embodied experiences. Through self-identification of sociocultural background, one can understand how one’s own racial, ethnic, cultural, class history and environmental contexts are defined in one’s body and movement styles. This also allows one to understand how culture has influenced their perception of the world.

International students, immigrants, or refugees often experience profound feelings of loss. As immigration to the United States has been steadily growing, there are increased mental health concerns within migrant groups. These concerns demand that mental health specialists understand and effectively work with the unique needs of migrants in culturally responsive ways (Chung, Bemak, & Grabosky, 2011).
Dance/movement therapy is uniquely equipped to treat patients from diverse cultural backgrounds precisely because its foundation is that body movement is the basic mode of communication across cultures. Furthermore, it utilizes behavior as the product of relationships, at times conflictual and always subject to change, between experiences of the self and social role expectations, between life’s inner and outer reality, and between the constructs of one’s own mind and the processes centered around human interactions (Pallaro, 1997). Another essential core in clinical dance/movement therapy practice is that a D/MT student or practitioner has to engage in personal identity work to be able to be self-aware to effectively attune with the potential clients where they are in their cultural contexts (Chang, 2015). There are communicative meanings in each danced movement that demonstrate a personal and social pattern and a root of human life in a given cultural context. In dance/movement therapy, more importantly, the intention of movers or dancers offers a key, as the movers verbally and non-verbally communicate and express the meanings of their own personal and cultural movements. Movement continues with the goal of roles actively communicating and connecting as both speakers and listeners. Concurrently, kinesthetic empathy, another core concept considered to be one of DMT’s major contributions to psychotherapy (Levy, 1992), progresses in the therapeutic relationship. A dance/movement therapist empathically opens clients’ inner senses of movement to acknowledge, understand and, elaborate their feelings with the aim of relieving their suffering (Fischman, 2015).

In dance/movement therapy, it does not matter what kind of dance or movement people do and how well they do it, cultural dances related to their backgrounds can bring conceptions-of-self experiences through body movement. Dance/movement therapy embodies core concepts (Koch & Fischman, 2011) that allow people to access cultural perspectives sensitively. Creative
self-embodiment allows one to feel and understand self and cultural identities in layers that cannot explained in words. An embodiment in a therapeutic process that focuses on the therapeutic relationship to support self-awareness. People perceive and shape relationships with their own cultures through body movement. More importantly, DMT allows one to understand what that movement psychologically means based on their experiences within their own cultural context as well as in new cultural environments. Moreover, this increases respect and appreciation for the uniqueness of different cultures.

Dance is part of human expression in every culture. Expressive arts and dance/movement therapy can be integrative and inclusive interventions that are beneficial to support clients’ needs. While dance/movement therapy is expanding globally, it is important that a clinician be able to respond and provide a client with integrative interventions that appropriately support their culture. There is a healing quality within dance and many cultures that celebrates this healing lineage. Arts and dance forms of each culture can also bring familiarity that allow one to creatively explore a state of unconsciousness through that ritual process in a safe space. Later, one will bring those deep-rooted beliefs, perspectives, and behaviors to the state of consciousness to make sense of them in their own personal contexts. As Chang (2015) states, “Incorporating a global and international range of aesthetics and lifestyles would facilitate local, indigenous, and multicultural adaptations of movement observation, taxonomy, and diagnosis that then expand the body of knowledge of the field” (p. 310). Implementing the meanings and values of a cultural dance can expand clinical dance/movement therapy both inclusively and multiculturally.

As explained by various aspects of psychological and anthropological theories, cultural contexts have influenced peoples and shaped their artistic and expressive behaviors. To explore
the concept of Choreometrics and develop the research method in the Thai cultural context specifically, autoethnography can be appropriate to inform personal embodied experiences about dance and culture in specific context in narrative forms.

**Methods**

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experiences in order to understand a greater cultural experience. I applied autoethnography to examine my personal experiences in relationship to Thai dance (Ellis, 2004). In my self-exploration process I developed experiential dance movements that incorporate different Thai dance styles and improvisations to internalize my authentic self. This case study focused on my personal experiences in expressive behavior and self-identities as a dancer, dance teacher, and dance/movement therapist, in relation to Thai culture.

To collect and record the information in this creative process and self-exploration through experiential movements, I danced and internalized the movements and information about Thai culture and perspectives and then reflected on my personal experiences in relation to Thai culture. I organized the process into four parts:

1. **Self-Observation Process Within Thai Culture**—After dancing, I internally observed my body movements in relation to Thai classical dance and Northern Thai folk dances (male and female characters/performances) in my cultural and dance backgrounds.

   Although Laban movement analysis (LMA) was applied to Choreometrics’ coding system and expanded into group observation (Lomax, 1968), in this project, I did not use the Choreometrics’ coding sheet since I observed only myself. However, I used some of LMA language in order to describe the Effort and Space qualities of movement from observing and sensing my own movement (Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980). I also used other additional words for
more expansive qualities of movement to describe what made more sense for my movements as they were translated culturally. I wonder if this might resonate with D/MTs who practice in non-English speaking cultures to utilize a baseline of Body Effort Space Shape (BESS) of LMA and then expand to meet the particular cultural needs to represent more fully the culture and understanding.

2. Cultural Experience Reflecting Process—I reflected and compared Thai dance movements to my personal experiences in accepted expressive behaviors in Thai culture. This reflection and comparison are related to Thai cultural perspectives and values as well as Choreometrics’ social features, which note the following social features: 1. Productivity range, 2. Political level, 3. Class stratification level, 4. The severity of sexual mores 5. Balance dominance between males and females, and 6. Level of social cohesiveness (Lomax, 1968, p. 6). This reflecting process examines styles of cultural dances and performances and symbolizes societal traits through journaling and creative art-making.

3. Self-discovering and Process of Creating – this process offered a free space for self-exploring in creative artistic dance and movement improvisation. The focus was to mindfully internalize the relationship between my cultural experiences and practices in Thai culture to reflect who I am today.

4. Personal Identifying and Reflecting Process – this process of reflecting was the process used to identify my authentic self through drawing and journaling.

Ultimately, to make sense of the information I gathered, I conceptualized meanings, thoughts, feelings, and values of the relationship between Thai dance performances and expressive behaviors and social interaction movements within Thai cultural contexts. Later, I organized my thoughts and used my self-reflection in narrative form to create an
autoethnography to reflect the concept of Choreometrics and hypothesize that dance reinforces human expressive behavior in Thai culture. Further, I reflected how these cultural values, perspectives, and expressive behavior patterns in Thai culture have shaped my self-identities and self-concept throughout life.

**Discoveries**

After processing my self-exploration process, I found that Thai dance is manifested in various cultural forms and translates human movement into expressive behavior. My personal movement patterns in social interactions in daily life are influenced by Thai cultural patterns that also reflect and relate to traditional Thai cultural dance movements. I also discovered that this process allowed me to perceive and identify the layers of self through cultural embodied experiences throughout my life. This has allowed me to reflect upon my self-identities and self-concept.

**Thai Culture**

Thai culture is deeply influenced by the Buddhist religion. The belief system and values of Buddhism play a very important role in Thai people’s lives. The most critical morals and principles that Thai people hold to are gratitude, respect, self-control, and a non-confrontational attitude. Thai culture is also family-oriented, and this value and concept plays a significant role in social interactions. Furthermore, Thai arts and performances are mostly inspired by and reflected through cultural beliefs and religion. Both classical and folk forms of Thai cultural dance and arts are based on our Thai cultural roots and national identity.

**Thai Dance and Thai Cultural Contexts**

After exploring the concept of Choreometrics, I looked closer at my personal experiences and background through the professional lenses of dancer, dance teacher, and dance movement
therapist. I discovered that the interconnection between traditional dance and art forms have an impact on cultural and social aspects and reflect back on one another both directly and indirectly. In other words, arts are inspired by both social issues and humanity and they reference culture and society. Thus, I appreciate that expressive arts offer a great medium for social change. I was taught that traditional dance is part of my nation’s identity. In the process of dance training, I also learned and embodied parts of cultural values, perspective, beliefs, histories, etc. These dances and movements proudly pass through generations in order to remind us of who we are. More importantly, I perceived the interrelation between Thai dance movements and everyday movements as expressive behavior in social interaction in Thai cultural contexts. I also analyzed the dance movements of Thai classical dance and different folk dance styles that have been associated with the greater culture and subcultures. Cultural features such as religions and belief systems, political and national values, gender roles, economic-social class statuses, occupation and lifestyles, and power dynamics of aging play an important role in expressive behaviors and specific social manners. I am aware that a single dance performance cannot represent all forms of human behaviors and their expression of a whole culture. There are several forms of dance in different Thai regions that are performed for different purposes and embody particular messages for different occasions. Therefore, to understand the messages behind various body movements, it is necessary to feel particular features of the dance while studying the history of dance of each culture.

**Thai classical dance in the Thai cultural context.** Thai classical dance known as Natasin was a prerogative of the royal court, which has preserved and recreated the original for centuries. Thai classical dance is defined as the highest class of Thai art form. There are two major forms, which are known as Khon (a male dancer) and Lakorn (a female dancer). In the
beginning, both were exclusively used for royal court entertainments, and it was not until the
College of Dramatic Arts for Thai dance, drama, music, and arts was established that they were
performed for others. The goal is not only to protect the value of Thai classical dance as a high-
level art form, but also to conserve Thai identities for the next generations. In the beginning,
dance pioneers and teachers were part of the royal court and claimed high social status; therefore,
several rules and principles, including training in both academics and the arts have remained
conservative and maintained by Thai traditional beliefs and principles. Students have been
trained and are expected to have polite manners such as language, actions, and behaviors,
including appropriate body movements in different social interactions. These movements can be
seen both in general contexts and in Thai classical dance and drama.

From my experience, Khon is about Ramayana, which is directly related to the
gratefulness and morality of the king. The gestures and postures were combined and presented as
a Thai classical dance language that has a specific meaning for the character based on their class,
gender role, age, and relationship. These aspects are not only present in the dance, but also
reinforce people’s actions in society. The values and rules of Thai classical dance formed my
personal movements and behaviors. The movements of female characters in dance performances
are usually described as Bound, Sustained, soft and gentle. These movements are related to
social manners or etiquettes that the society has settled on as expectations of women’s
movements, such as walking, sitting, postures, and gestures in communicating and interacting
with people in different roles, as well as expressing emotions that seemed to be contained. On the
other hand, I learned the movements of male characters and embodied different qualities that are
more free: flowing, strong, and direct in communication. These movements also take up more
space in my Kinesphere—this word refers to the furthest reach space around one’s body from
one’s center. Thus, I felt more power and independence in my body. Nevertheless, every movement and its qualities are shaped by social constructs. The value of self-control reflected in people’s behaviors in all social classes in Thailand allow people to be aware of and respect others’ boundaries in social interactions. I noticed that this might not seem to be fully and freely expressive; however, based on my experiences, I personally believe that this is a quality of self-awareness that can be a good way to create and maintain a healthy relationship in society at all levels along with encouraging bodily safety and comfort while interacting with others in general.

**Thai folk dances in Thai subcultures.** There are four different regions of Thailand and each has its own culture, beliefs, perspectives, and language accents. Their folk songs and dance styles are unique. In my process of self-observation, I considered the influences of my northern Thai subculture as my original background. Northern Thai folk dances were created from different contexts than the classical form. They incorporate graceful, aesthetic, and meditative movements inspired by people’s cultural lifestyles in the geographic area. The dances allow people to tell their stories and to pass them down to future generations. In the north of Thailand, the rhythm and accent of the dances is slower than in other parts of Thailand. The messages behind movements are usually about gratitude, beliefs, celebrations, duties, jobs, activities, and lifestyles of the people in the area.

Movements in Northern Thai female folk dances show Sustained, Light, Indirect, and Free-Flow of Effort qualities. From my experiences, I believe these to be related to the standards of woman’s behaviors, actions, and interactions. Meanwhile, male folk dances present people’s working styles and martial arts, so the movements are quicker and stronger. Therefore, there are connections between dance movements and everyday movements since the performances present part of people’s working and lifestyles. The Effort qualities of dance are also related to the Effort
qualities of everyday movements. I find that the expressive qualities mirror the theme of freedom associated with northern Thai culture. Northern Thailand is known for its slow lifestyles. Movements take into account relationships with others. Although nowadays in local areas people might not be concerned with higher social class and status, my attitudes and actions are still controlled appropriately in order to express respect to family members and elders, as well as to present leadership and protection for those who are younger than I am.

**Thai contemporary dance in Thai contemporary contexts.** Additionally, studying Thai contemporary dance forms and styles has expanded my perspectives of dance in Thailand. In this process, I started from internally embodying words that related to my identities using the theme of “Who am I?” Then, I continued responding to my internal messages through body movements that were presented as both Thai dance postures and spontaneous movements as improvisations. There is not currently a particular form of Thai contemporary dance. However, the past few years have seen several new dance performances. Interestingly, one can maintain Thai traditional dance postures while incorporating more creative forms and qualities of body movement not limited by the class and gender of the performer to express emotions and messages. This might reflect the change of cultural beliefs, perspectives, and people’s needs. Thai contemporary dance movements are freer, quicker, and more energetic. Furthermore, facial expressions communicate emotions in tandem with body movements. For instance, the main female character presents qualities that are more Strong, Quick, Direct, and Free of Effort, in addition to using a larger space of their Kinesphere within social interactions when appropriately needed. The changing perspectives of women’s behaviors honors women’s independence as society has become more appreciative of women’s rights and more aware of social justice. Some
of these cultural aspects are evident in how Thai Contemporary dance reflects the everyday lives of people today.

When people’s lifestyles change, so do the arts. I have looked at examples of female characteristics and behaviors in cultural contexts reflected in different kinds of Thai dance and performances. There are also other perspectives of gender roles and cultural and social features, such as class, political and religious perspectives reflected in dance performances, and other art forms. Folk dances were created to express people’s spontaneity and authenticity; they will eventually offer valuable information about the history of Thai culture. Culture is dynamic in that cultural viewpoints and practices are designed and systematically change over time, both within and across generations. The arts can change the world and reset society’s standards to create a space for everyone. New performances can offer a voice and stimulate the creation of new standards that will one day be part of tradition. Although the post-modern world has influenced Thai culture and our lifestyles have changed, I believe that any present moment has value in its cultural context. All styles of movement or dance forms can offer messages and expression via non-verbal communication.

Both Thai traditional dance and contemporary dance offer a look at essential aspects of social structure, human behavior, and social interactions. Though traditional Thai dances have been part of society for decades the connections between Thai dance and human movements are still applicable. Moreover, specific body movements are considered to be social manners and have been part of the educational system for a long time. I believe that students will benefit from an awareness of their interactions with others and maintenance of appropriate boundaries. Although the power dynamics of age are important in Thai culture, these have maintained peace
and respect in relationships and social interactions in which we value family, perceive fellow Thais as family members, and treat everyone with love and compassion.

**Cultural Embodiment and Self-identities**

The central organizing theme throughout this entire journey of self-exploration is my personal development and learning as a dance/movement therapist. This process also reflects my own embodied experiences as a Thai dancer, dance teacher, and person in different contexts throughout my life. The more I understand the changes of culture though the evolution of dance in my culture, the more I understand the series of changes in my life. Internally reflecting on my own experiences of cultural dance movements has allowed me to connect and enhance my self-identities and self-concept. In addition, it has allowed me to perceive that having a strong sense of self lets me support and maintain my self-awareness and locate myself both within and outside of my own cultural context.

The self-discovering process in creative movement improvisation and choreography has led me to explore my self-identities. My movement patterns, personal emotions, and thoughts have been influenced by my cultural practices throughout my life. I have found that the cultural features of Thai traditional dance performances have allowed me to understand who I am. I have grown aware of my way of thinking, personal values, beliefs, and perspectives, which have been mirrored in my expressive behaviors, certain body movements, and body languages in interactions with others in my own and different cultural contexts. I have also realized that my strong connection with my own culture and its values, personal values, and morals are part of my body. The values and appreciativeness of traditions and culture, including the aesthetics of dance, instill a kind of a pride not only in my own cultural context, but in many different cultures. For a Thai dancer, these values are evident in the posture of the cultural warrior. Thai
dance postures reflect certain expressive behaviors and actions in social interactions in daily life. These form part of the Thai identities not only of the dancers, but of most Thais who value and respect unique Thai identities and incorporate them into their lives spiritually and behaviorally. Social and cultural features in Thai contexts can affect self-identities and self-concept and increase self-worth.

Reflecting on Thai values has reminded me that pride and shame within one’s culture or country can also affect psychological perceptions of self. I found that the form and system of social interactions that shapes relationships and connection between people also affects emotions. These include a sense of safety and feeling of belonging in the environment and relationships, which have therapeutic aspects. The process of dance/movement therapy allowed me to bring self-awareness through body sensations and internalize my relationship with cultural contexts I have lived in throughout my life. Moreover, I found that understanding my own personal movement both in the process of discovering at the unconscious level and reaching the stage of consciousness has allowed me to reach self-actualization. As movement brought memory through bodily sensation, I felt that my body was tense and had no space for breathing. I heard my teacher’s voice criticizing my Thai dance skills and telling me not to Ten (เท้น) or dance in western styles. She directed me to leave the western dance club. I did not fully understand her reason at that time. I had to accept, learn, and fix myself accordingly without being able to express and explain my thoughts or even realizing my feelings. I had never realized that part of the criticism of my dance training in my early teens affected my self-esteem whenever I moved or danced in western styles, although I liked to do this. This clearly affected my personal movement preference in daily life as well. What surprised me is that I never realized the wound of this criticism when I was living in Thai culture since I thought it was my teacher’s goodwill
toward me. It might be because I am now living in a different context where I experience new dynamics of social and cultural constructs or that I have just learned what trauma is, which did not seem to exist in my culture at that time. I have better understood how my personal experiences are linked to cultural features in my life. I have learned that being aware of what is in the body has helped me to become aware of external and internal changes. The process of knowing the self changes throughout time and space. It is a learning process to become flexible and resilient, to cope with uncertainty and insecurity after unexpected changes. This embodied process offers an effective intervention to keep the sense of self emotionally and behaviorally intact. I believe that self-awareness and consciousness inform the old and new within the body. Sensory experiences can become learning tools and offer a positive way of dealing with life changes.

**Discussion**

This arts-based autoethnography research explored and reflected the connection of my personal bodily experiences and Thai cultural features through Thai cultural dance. It also allowed me to reflect upon and enhance my self-identities. I looked at the concept of Choreometrics through a dance/movement therapy lens and took into account Thai cultural contexts. Cultural dance movements mirror and reinforce human expressive behaviors in the everyday. Cultural dance performances strengthen cultural values, beliefs, and perspectives and make them visible as embodied instruments to connect and reconnect people both spiritually and interactively. This shared experience increases a sense of belonging and safety within the group in addition to creating and developing the sense of self and identities. Developing the senses of self-identity and self-concept can also offer one the capacity to maintain and increase self-compassion and self-esteem as well as to promote self-development more effectively. Therefore,
cultural dance is at the root of human life. Its values and meanings in context are beneficial to people’s well-being.

At this point, my personal reflections together with literature from anthropological, psychological, and cultural embodiment perspectives all correspond. I believe that the Choreometrics project’s framework offers an effective tool to explore a specific culture. Using my personal experiences in dance and expressive behaviors in Thai culture as a backdrop, I also agree that “danced movement is patterned reinforcement of the habitual movement patterns of each culture or cultural area” (Lomax, 1968, p. xv). Altogether the DMT lens allowed me to understand human behaviors and movements, interconnection between people, culture, and the arts has also allowed me to perceive a whole person in their own cultural context as a big picture.

As a therapist-in-training, I am aware that the Choreometrics project began in 1965. However, it is currently being reimagined to meet today’s needs of understanding one another. I found that the foundation and purpose of the Choreometrics project can be implemented to learn and explore cultural structures related to an individual’s identities in dance/movement therapy in many ways. Choreometrics has provided the lens to observe body movements and behavior across cultures through dance. Having experiences that embody one’s culture through dance can enhance one’s body knowledge for observing, witnessing, and assessing the self in a diverse society. An individual’s relationship with their own culture and how they identify themselves must be taken into account, as it is crucial to demonstrate respect.

A list of recommends further steps and questions that could be fully explored follows:

1. Should there be bias found in this research, it may be beneficial to survey others for their opinions about their experiences and relationships with their own cultures.

One might ask what role dance plays in a specific culture.
2. Rather than assuming that an individual’s behaviors are based on their culture, the process of self-exploration allows one to understand personal relationships with their own culture throughout their lives and to understand their personal-identities and self-concepts in order to be aware how they perceive and make sense of the world.

3. It would be interesting to explore this concept to see how non-trained dancers and those who are trained in other forms of dance perceive their own movements in relation to Thai cultural dance forms in Thai cultural contexts.

4. It would be interesting to explore how traditional danced movements, postures, and gestures that have their own inherent cultural meanings offer authentic or spontaneous senses in expressive movements for the dancers or movers.

5. Costumes and symbolic objects used in the performance can be part of object relations that have an impact on one’s relationship with their own culture.

6. It would be interesting to explore dance and culture in the US and see how dance is related to the social construct and reflects a dancer’s values and perspectives, including personal movements in social interactions in US cultural contexts.

This research thesis emphasizes my personal experiences through the lens of my own cultural background of Thai cultural dance while living in the US as an international student. Potential future directions to explore the topic of body awareness through cultural explorations in dance/movement therapy may incorporate multi-cultural perspectives of dance and art forms into clinical practice to help an individual to understand their personal body movements both internally and externally. This process can support an individual to balance and cultivate their own sense of self in any stage of life, especially during transitions and learning how to navigate, adapt, and immerse oneself into a new cultural environment without feeling lost.
Thai classical dance

Male character

Female Character

Male character

Female Character
Northern Thai Folk Dance

Female character

Male character
Creative Dance Improvisation: “the self”
Creative Dance Improvisation: “the self”
References


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

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