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## A Literature Review on Dance Movement Therapy's Effects on Masculinized Adolescents

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A Literature Review on Dance Movement Therapy's Effects on Masculinized Adolescents

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 5, 2020

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Dance/Movement Therapy

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### Abstract

Dance/movement therapy (DMT) is the psychotherapeutic use of movement to better understand the embodied stressors that affect one's ability to express emotion. Studies of empathy, adolescence, and dance/movement therapy are of the most use in researching the connection between body-based therapies like dance/movement therapy, kinesthetic empathy (the body's way of reading cues of others'), and the systemic construct of masculinity in adolescent males. While separate studies exist, there is little research or data on whether DMT theoretical frameworks can impact the minds of adolescent males who have been conditioned according to westernized male gender roles and whose empathic development has been limited due to *toxic masculinity*. In the interest of encouraging further research, the following is a literature review of material relating to building kinesthetic empathy in adolescent males using DMT models and therapeutic approaches.

## A Literature Review on Dance Movement Therapy's Effects on Masculinized Adolescents

### Introduction

“One central masculine norm is the restriction of emotional expression” (Levant & Wong, 2012, p. 329).

Gender norms have been around for centuries, providing a structure and container for the rules of engagement for men and women. While this structure offers a sense of identification within communities, it also creates a mold that projects certain expectations of society. In the 20th and 21st centuries, gender normativism has gone through many transformations, although many roles established at the beginning of recorded history remain the same in their impetus. Specifically, the westernized gender roles of men have created a culture of *toxic* masculinity where emotional expression has been suppressed. Within that emotional suppression lies empathic connection, or the ability to understand something from another's perspective and establish connection to that feeling, often times physically, is a term that is referenced in many platforms around the globe (Gonzalez, 2019; Koch, 2017; Peck, Maude & Brotherson, 2015).

The relevance of teaching empathy in American males is poignant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because those constructs have shaped how society supports and reacts to the emotional needs and behaviors of adolescent young men. Dance/movement therapy (DMT) is one theoretical framework that can offer a different perspective in accessing empathic responses. In the absence of face-to-face communication, some researchers, parents, academics and doctors argue that empathy in adolescents is at risk of being underdeveloped. Dance/movement therapy (DMT) is the psychotherapeutic use of movement to better understand the embodied stressors that effect one's ability to express emotion.

The importance of dance movement therapy in building kinesthetic empathy lies in the DMT's ability to utilize nonverbal communication as a way to understand others. Dance movement therapy acts like a bridge between or as a means to effectively build empathic relationships in adolescent boys because it allows for movement as the communicative catalyst instead of previously defined verbal language. It can help those who have preemptively been inhibited by the constraints of westernized male masculinity models. Dance movement therapy can be considered an intermodal approach as well, since it often integrates other expressive art forms like music, play, and drama to physically take on roles and characteristics of others.

The Westernized model of masculinity has primarily included the inhibition of emotional expression and physical expression. This is embedded in the epidemiology and epistemology that behaviors are often inherited even subconsciously from one generation to the next. Insert a quote about how role modeling as parents affect children's behavior without the physical for the verbal explanation.

The following literature review points to research that supports the study of how movement is parallel to emotional regulated response. It is in this investigation of dance as non-verbal communication that poses the question of whether or not therapeutic frameworks that integrate brain and physical body engagement can be effective in regulating emotional responses. Societal expectations related to cisgender adolescent males are the focus of this literature, as the topic of masculinity are at the center of the discussion. Multiple studies say toxic masculinity limits adolescent males' ability to develop empathy. Integrating dance/movement therapy efforts into therapeutic practices such as social learning theory, social-emotional learning and cultural relational theory practices can aid in the development of empathy in adolescent males.

### **Literature Review**

**Verbal versus non-verbal communication**

In this digital age, face-to-face communication is not necessary in the exchange of information or even personal connection. For example, in-person conversations can be done by email, phone or text, work departmental meetings can be done via Zoom or Skype, and one can purchase any goods online versus going into a store. In an adolescent's world, valence (positive and negative) verbal exchanges are no longer limited to during the school day or during after-school programs and activities.

Verbal and written language often take precedence over non-verbal communication for those who are able to speak and type freely. This shift in communication marks a poignant transition in how humans interact, and one could wonder how this affects the interpersonal relationships of human beings, especially adolescents. Specifically, how does this communicative shift affect the developing brains of adolescents and how does this shift in communication alter one's ability to connect to others? Texting and email are chosen forms of communication for many individuals and organizations alike. A qualitative study done in 2015 found that 75% of American adolescents text and 63% text on a daily basis, often citing autonomy and convenience as a main reason for choosing text over a phone call (Blair, Fletcher & Gaskin).

This transition from interpersonal communication to online communication has appeared to be steady since its origin, and since technology is constantly evolving to something more, one could assume that texting and internet communication will only become more widespread within availability and equity constraints. Cyber-bullying, social media posts, and anonymous mobile applications make communication among adolescents' constant, whether in or out of school,

often allowing the anonymous writer a false sense of safety in writing and posting hateful and uncensored language one may not say in person.

### **The importance of empathy and its subsidiaries in the social system**

Movement was at its simplest form as it functioned to give direction, communicate with others, express emotion, and acknowledge in reverence to spiritual gods. “Dance is the conduit for capturing and embodying lived experience, thereby allowing researchers and participants alike to gain a unique perspective on both dominant and non-dominant cultural identities from an artistic and somatic perspective” (Thomas, 2015, p. 179). Thomas emphasizes the empirical study of dance and movement existing through centuries in the form of embodiment of its members. This embodied dance was central to understanding cultural identities, and it still serves as a way to communicate nonverbally in many world cultures.

Empathy, movement, and societal-cultural expectations are all entwined in the world today, especially in the ever-changing lives of adolescents. Empathy is not only developed biologically within the nervous system, but also nurtured by environmental or phenomenological settings and social experiences. In the field of dance/movement therapy, or DMT, there is a lot of focus on kinesthetic empathy, which is “the capacity to participate in the movement of others or with the sensory experience of the movement of someone else” (Gonzalez, 2019, p. 97). More explicitly, Gonzalez states:

Through kinesthetic empathy, we could actually reproduce the movement we perceive in our present muscular experience and awaken such associations as if the original movement had been of our own. Moreover, there is always an assertion that the kinesthetic experience is intrinsically connected to emotional experience. Every movement is affectivity, every affective state is movement (p. 96).

This leads to the assumption that movement is inherently empathic in nature and it is the attunement toward (or attention to) that kinesthetic empathy that can communicate significant emotional responses. One specific skill of a DMT is to practice that attunement and reciprocate the empathic movements of their clients, thereby inviting clients to do the same. This give-and-take relationship is a basis of DMT practice.

### **Gender norms and westernized societal constructs of masculinity**

“It is a time when society’s cultural values are absorbed and emulated” (Block, 2001, p. 117).

Traditional masculine ideologies in the United States have been defined and looked to as the hierarchical establishment that determines a man’s strength, courage, athleticism, and power for centuries (Brooks, 2010; Levant, 2012). These constructs are biological and described in psycho-social development (Waterman, 1982). They are passed down from generation to generation and are often taught through embodied language and non-verbal communication as much as oral traditional dialogue (Lihs, 2018). Anecdotal phrases that allude to what a man *should* or *ought* to be like (Molenaar, 2020) like “be a man,” “toughen up,” or “like a girl” are often verbalized as a common lexicon. In looking at this inhibited expectation of what expression and emotion looks like for a *real* man; one can wonder how stifling expression affects a man’s ability to empathize and understand the somatic lexes of others. Brooks(2010) refers to the generalized notion that men are alexithymic, or lack the capacity for emotional expression ( p. 40) and references Levant(2003) and Balswick(1988) in their descriptions of the “inexpressive male” and how the inexpression is part of traditional code for *real* men (Brooks, 2010; Levant, 2013; Balswick & Peek, 1971).



“Through cross-cultural research one now surmises that culture rather than "nature" is the major influence in determining the temperamental differences between the sexes” (Balswick & Peek, 1971, p. 363). The language of masculinity and its traits can be misused interchangeably between sociological and biological identities. Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1988) emphasize that the salience of gender norms rests in the cultural setting, while biological sexual traits remain unchanged depending on one’s surroundings. They also point out that the personalization of gender is specific to the human species and separates it from other genus forms and that “gender is represented as a continuum of psychological difference” (Hare-Mustin and Marecek, 1988, p. 461).

[I]ndividuals are embedded in cultures (defined as systems of shared meaning in terms of how to regulate which relationships) through their network of social relationships, which implies that we cannot understand individuals’ behavior (such as violence, or collective action) without knowing about his or her social relationships and the broader culture in which these are embedded. The theory assumes that individuals are similar across the globe in their need for and enactment of social relationships, and thus need to be hypersensitive to any anticipated, perceived, or actual changes in their social networks, in order to maintain inclusion and avoid exclusion (van Zomeren, 2018, p. 74).

A large amount of research indicates that societal gender norms surrounding masculinity are proving to be harmful to the social and emotional well-being of boys and young men (Exner-Cortens, et al, 2020). Adolescence in westernized culture has proven to be a challenging stage of development for all teenagers. It can be wrought with turmoil of identity and belonging, but it is also a time of discovery one’s own pathway to success and self-exploration (Block, 2001). How

these changes are celebrated, marked and noted in expectation are dependent on the cultures and pro-social environments in which one lives. Furthermore, cultural gender norms associated with these rites of passage effect and often dictate the life practices and expectations going forward into early adulthood.

Research indicates that the masculinity constructs that some refer to as “toxic masculinity” shapes how adolescent boys (ages 13-18 years) respond and are resilient to social and emotional situations. Research on early adolescence (13-15 years) to late adolescence (16-18 years) is limited and many findings are inconsistent (Allemand, Steiger & Fend, 2015). Despite the lack of empirical research, there are many studies that emphasize the importance of empathy development in adolescence as it relates to long-term effects into early adulthood (Allemand, Steiger & Fend, 2015). There is also association between low empathic development and adolescent behaviors that are more aggressive, violent, conflicting with peers, and bullying in nature and their consequences on adult prosocial behavior (Allemand, Steiger & Fend, 2015).

“Conformity to masculine norms, or the degree to which individuals endorse personally enacting the requirements of masculine norms, is an important conceptual framework for investigating masculinity and its correlates” (Levant, et al, 2020). Adolescent males have a standard to live up to, inherently placed on them by social constructs and anecdotes like “play to win,” “no pain, no gain,” and “boys will be boys.” These standards do not often allow for individual expression contradictory to these ideals, and some adolescents are stifled in their true expression of masculine identity.

There are a variety of assessment platforms available for adult men over the age of 18 years, one being the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI) (Levant et al., 2020). This questionnaire “assesses the extent to which an individual conforms, or does not conform, to

11 masculinity norms found in the dominant culture in the United States. These norms are identified as Winning, Emotional Control, Risk-Taking, Violence, Dominance, Playboy, Self-Reliance, Primacy of Work, Power Over Women, Disdain for Homosexuality, and Pursuit of Status” (McKelley & Rochlen, 2010). While this assessment identifies key norms of masculinity, it does not address the age range of pre-adolescent males. However, as research emphasizes the importance of role modeling behavior among adolescents, it can be discerned that the epistemology and embodiment of masculinity present in a male parent figure can have a significant effect on an adolescent male’s view. Another assessment is the MRNI, the Male Role Norms Inventory, which “captures norms that men should (a) not show vulnerable emotions, (b) dominate others and display physical strengths, (c) be self-reliant, (d) value sex, and (e) avoid engaging in any behaviors deemed to be “feminine.” (McDermott et al, 2018).

In addition to understanding masculine identity, adolescent males are also faced with physical bodily changes and new sensations in reference to sexual arousal. The complex nature of the changing body during puberty often creates a sense of avoidance from any physical expression that may not adhere to these masculinity norms. This can hinder true emotional expression, whereas if an adolescent male’s inhibitory movement or body patterns do not adhere to norm constructs, those urges are stifled and avoided, therefore not dealt with in an emotionally regulatory way. “Due to adolescents’ great preoccupation with the body, understanding the unique characteristics of therapy through movement and dance in adolescence is critical” (Engelhard, 2014).

It is important to talk about female adolescents as well as males in reference to understanding empathy and social emotional learning. Block’s (2001) research looks at adolescent integration of mind and body from a female perspective and her studies focus on the

relational- cultural model applied within a dance therapeutic context to adolescent girls. Her findings suggested that, while adolescent boys were often willing to participate in a variety of athletic activities, the girls exhibited “self-conscious behaviors”, reporting “feelings of inadequacy or apathy toward activities that developmentally they should have had no problem doing” (Block, p. 118, 2001). However, the girls seemed the most confident in dancing (Block, 2001).

Another study that addressed adolescent girls and gender role identification concluded that many adolescent girls in the 21<sup>st</sup> century identify gender according to a “concrete, binary construct” (Thomas, 2015, p. 186). Within this construct, the social behaviors of the girls helped determine characteristics or generalized personality traits. This leads to the assumption that many adolescents still think about gender roles and identify according to the binary construct Thomas (2018) referenced, only then to be marginalized more based on societal measures such as attending public or private school, participation in sports, and social acquaintances.

### **Dance/movement therapy interventions**

Dance and its organized dance rituals existed prior to any spoken language (Lihs, 2018). In movement, norms are based on feeling, not perception. The visual of what one sees in the mirror is secondary or even further removed from what one feels as the driving force of their humanity. Does the activation of movement affect the synapses (or connections) of the brain and do these movements alter emotional regulation?

One can see in the work of Chace and other dance/movement masters that DMT theory is reliant on these synapses. The practice of *mirroring* relies on the mirror neuron relationship that Berrol (2013) identified as “interpersonal” (p. 304) and that they are activated by witnessing certain facial expressions or body language. This activation allows identical neurons to form in

the witness's brain, therefore, leading to an empathic response (Berrol, 2013). Salvia et al. (2016) highlights the connection between mirror neurons and empathy by stating that "This mirror neurons system (MNS) might provide the foundation for social understanding" (p. 1). McGarry and Russo (2011) describe the association of mirror neurons and movement patterns by utilizing neuroscientific terminology:

In order to understand another's emotional movements, we activate the neural areas associated with creation of these movements, which in turn affects the limbic system, enhancing our sensations of the emotions associated with these movements. As a result, we come to better understand other people's intentions by feeling these intentions, or emotions, ourselves (2011, p. 182-183).

Berrol (2006) reiterates that, although some neurons have an automatic response to certain stimuli (p. 307), "others are experience dependent for activation, requiring social and physical recognition and cognitive understanding" (p. 307), which means face-to-face communication is crucial to developing the emotional capacities of empathic understanding between individuals.

Engelhard (2018) reports an example of the power of movement and mirroring in her article, by recounting her experience with a client, Adva (not her real name), who verbalized tension and stiffness in her body while naming sensations that came up during a dance/movement therapy session (p. 13). Engelhard quotes Adva's response to a mirroring stance that occurred between client and therapist, phrased by therapist as "The tension in which there is no movement" (p. 13). Engelhard emphasizes the power of the client in giving "it a name and to make a connection between it and sensation, memory and emotion" (p. 13).

From a dance/movement therapy standpoint, pioneer Marian Chace (1993) believed in the body's instinctive responses to others' movements and often "viewed distortions in body

shape and functions as maladaptive responses to conflict and pain” (p. 77). Chace believed dance was a communicative tool for individuals and used her sensitivity to non-verbal communication as a way “to incorporate the emotional content of the patient’s behavior into her own movement responses” (p.79). This validated her clients through empathic interactions when words may have been insufficient or ineffective.

### **Theoretical frameworks**

Dance movement therapy (DMT) offers a way to free expressions by using the body as a catalyst for moving naturally and harmoniously according to the mover’s intrinsic rhythms. DMT considers the mind and body as one vessel that is ever-fluid and this therapeutic approach allows the soma and psyche to connect in all types of life experiences. Dasgupta (2013) states that “DMT interventions engage somatic, emotional and perceptual processes simultaneously,” and that the “awareness comes from observing subtle shifts in posture, eye contact, breath patterns, and voice changes. DMT theoretical frameworks provide intervention strategies that can aid and intersect with psychological frameworks such as relational-cultural theory and social-emotional learning to best help males in accessing suppressed points of view. These frameworks also offer a safe environment in which to do so that is void of judgmental stereotypes, which enhances DMT’s ability to access all developmental echelons.

One way in which movement and dance can be accessed is through common body language and gesture. The dance/movement therapy (DMT) intervention of *mirroring* was initially practiced by founder Marian Chace and neuroscience supports the claim that mirror neurons develop at a very early age in infants. Mirroring is dependent on face-to-face interactions and studies have shown that these interactions prove to be detrimental to developing both behavioral and cognitive empathy as children and leading into adulthood

Through a mirror mechanism “,” we can simulate in ourselves the same emotional and somatosensory experiences that we observe in others. This direct, interpersonal route of knowledge allows us to resonate in synchrony with others and makes it possible to share dimensions of experience at a nonconscious level, i.e., that of implicit inter-corporeality (Payne, 2017, p. 166).

Specific theoretical approaches like Laban Movement Analysis, the Kestenberg Movement Profile, and Embodied Artistic Inquiry can offer extensive insight into understanding the manifested implications of social masculinity norms.

Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) offers specific ways in which movement and dance can be interpreted or analyzed to reveal hidden emotional expression. LMA is based on the work of Rudolf Laban, a Hungarian-born dancer and movement theorist who developed a system of dance notation during the early 20th century. The Laban system is “an established educational tool for dance and drama teachers to help students understand how movement can be a powerful tool for the expression of character” (Wodehouse, 2014, p. 322). It was during the expressionist era in Germany that Laban gained popularity for his observations of leisure-based gestures: “I gathered very early that it is the harmony of movement in leisure-time activities which is one of the main carriers of inner freedom and liveliness” (Hodgson, 2001, p. 20). The Efforts of LMA define *how* actions are performed and can give context to the intent behind those actions. Laban and his contemporaries who utilized this system of notation, called Labanotation, were able to describe postural movements, gestures, and micromovements (the inherent result of an intentional or unintentional emotional response) in great detail, therefore able to record measurable data from the transient experience of dance.

In studying the methodology of artistic inquiry as a proponent to arts-based research, Hervey(2001) argues that the case for Laban's theoretical approach lies in the qualities of arts-based research that are innate to dance movement therapists. Hervey points out that DMTs possess the skillset to pattern and analyze movement in a way that quantifies research data. "Understanding much of human experience, including art and creativity, requires ways of knowing that can best be described as kinesthetic, aesthetic, emotional, and intuitive" (Cruz & Berrol, 2012, p. 206). Although artistic inquiry has not been extensively researched, it can offer the data many scientists and epistemologists require in their financial studies because DMTs can offer data collected from gestures, sitting and standing postures, body shapes, facial expressions and spatial awareness (Hervey, 2012).

Kestenberg (1967) developed an analytical system in the 1950s that interpreted Anna Freud's psychoanalysis framework in conjunction with Laban's Effort/Shape motion principles (Loman & Sossin, 2016). Freud's attention to psychological motivations was paired with Laban's focus on how the force and relationship of movement can interpret those motivations. Specifically, the Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP) assessed natural and non-verbal behavior in terms of tension-flow attributes (TFA) and their intensities as an individual matures. KMP tracks how those intensities of tension-flow attributes change throughout the aging process and are "influenced both by developmental factors and by individual temperament" (Loman & Sossin, 2016, p. 260). Kestenberg's system further integrates DMT with developmental processes as one's movements and gestures change over time, as stated in Loman and Sossin (2016), "Interpretively, tension-flow is linked to affect regulation: bound flow and fighting attributes are associated with cautious feelings, while free flow and indulging attributes are associated with carefree feelings" (p. 260).



### **Psychological frameworks**

Psychotherapeutic approaches aim to access as many personality affinities as possible within treatment interventions. It is imperative that therapists consider all aspects of developmental echelons, including social, emotional, cognitive, physical and communicative, to get a full picture of a client's needs (Tortora, 2006). One could even argue that non-verbal communication tells more of a story of an individual than verbal language. While there are many theoretical frameworks that can intersect with DMT approaches, there are two specific models that are specifically useful in educating adolescents about masculinity: relational-cultural theory and social-emotional learning theory.

Adolescence is a time for questioning cisgender identity and binary sexual orientation, among others. Erikson argued that the shift of certainties and uncertainties in adolescents' identities was a normal occurrence in the adolescent developmental stage (Erikson, 1968; Becht et al., 2018). However, some research indicates that long term uncertainties in identity can lead to psychosocial and emotional behaviors that hinder developmental growth, especially if not addressed before or during the transition into young adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Becht et al., 2018). Assuming that identity uncertainties include questions in relation to gender roles and status quo constructs, one could argue that this time is crucial for adolescents to learn how to reconcile real emotions with societal expectations. The embedded traits of toxic masculinity further argue the need for this reconciliation. Jordan (2018) contended that our brains and bodies are meant to grow in connection, but our culture encourages a sense of disconnection and independence from one another (Chapter 2, section 6, para. 1).

**Relational cultural theory.** Among other psychological theories, relational-cultural theory focuses on the impact cultural and social expectations have on developing adolescents. In

relational-cultural therapy, “the goal is to increase our capacity for relational resilience, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment” (Jordan, 2018, Chapter 3, Section 2, para. 1). This resilience and empathic empowerment are channeled through shared understanding that the ways in which one is influenced are just as important as the values themselves. In other words, understanding the context and origin of perspectives allows for a bigger growth mindset when considering therapeutic objectives for adolescents in and out of therapy. Furthermore, Jordan (2018) synthesizes a theme of this literature review: “Mutual empathy is the core process that allows for growth in relationship” (Jordan, 2018, Chapter 3, Section 2, para. 1).

While there is a plethora of research devoted to empathy building for adolescent girls and those from diverse cultures, there is little research referencing the relational-cultural framework surrounding masculinity social norms in adolescent boys ages 13-18. The masculinity paradox is addressed in stages of adulthood (McDermott et al, 2019) and in reference to those adults seeking therapy (McKelley & Rochlen, 2010), but there is little study on how the inherited masculine culture is affecting empathy development in adolescent boys. This can be especially significant in the school setting, as more educators look for ways to address changing and challenging behaviors among adolescent males.

Block’s perspective on infusing a pedagogical approach while using the relational-cultural psychological framework is a pointed inspiration for this literature review, offering insight to how the relational-cultural framework and dance/movement therapy can be applied to male adolescents shaped by heteromascline culture. Adolescent males automatically own one major characteristic of privilege and dominance (male as an assigned gender role) and, if the adolescents are Caucasian and heteronormative, own three major characteristics of privilege and

dominance (male, white and heterosexual). This population also owns characteristics of systemic aggression, inherited masculinized expectations, and suppression of emotional expression.

**Social learning theory and social-emotional learning.** Social learning theory, which was initially developed in the 1950s, is compiled of the works of Rotter, Bandura, and Mischel, based in the psychological framework of behaviorism (Hogben, 1988). Social learning theory is also referred to as modeling. In his qualitative study connecting social learning theory and human sexuality, Hogben argues that modeling provides the constancy on which gender norms are followed, especially from parent to child, and is based largely on assumptions about human behavior. There is also an emotional component to this behavioral theory that states many behaviors are based on environmental settings and the ways in which people are taught to regulate their emotional responses in a socially responsible way. Many K-12 educational institutions and community-based organizations for children ages K-12 depend on the model of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) that are used for educational training in and out of the classroom. “SEL is becoming (or has become) part of a comprehensive strategy to strengthen students’ academic performance, improve school and classroom climate, and lessen conduct problems” (Herrenkohl, 2020, p. 283)

### **Moving away from binary language**

If gender norms are analyzed using the same language that originally constructed them, doesn’t the cycle of language connotations and denotations continue with little to no long-term change? This is where dance/movement therapy (DMT) is clinically poised to assist in the process of redefining societal constructs that are considered fundamental. DMT provides a space to express what the body is feeling by using the body as the instrument. No verbal decoding or translation is needed in the vernacular expression.

The process of “mov[ing] away from habitual binary thinking,” (Lipsky, 2009, p. 12) unveils the realization that there are many more options that are not better than, less than, more than, or worse than those in the binary model of gender role exploration. The options are present to those open to hearing them, but the compartmentalization of different ideas being part of the *other* construct is a direct result of how social emotional learning and relational-cultural theory affect the standards adolescents are held to. Hare-Mustin and Marecek deconstructed the challenges presented by verbal language, emphasizing that the *language* should more closely define the ways in which words and sentences are put together as opposed to a “medium of cognitive life and communication” (p. 455).

### **Discussion**

The influence of masculinity norms on empathy development in adolescent males is crucial in a time when standards of normality and status quo are being challenged. Just as the language surrounding gender is changing, so should the movement change. While there are a variety of studies on feminist theory and its effect on the emotional regulation of women, much of the research surrounding toxic masculinity and its language are relegated to talk therapies. Dance/movement therapy offers a different approach where people can attune to what and how they feel and connect that to previously held thoughts and assumptions. Reinvestigating the connection with the body also offers a new exploration for participants of DMT, in a world where the mind and body algorithms are considered to function separately.

The definition of gender is also being redefined in the present day. It is especially important to consider how the projected gender normatives have influenced how society sees the “other” categories including transgender, gender fluid, and gender non-conforming. Due to the history of and attention to the binary gender model, adolescents that identify outside of that

archetypal mold face challenges in forming self-identity. Waterman (1982) applied Erikson's model of identity developmental psychology to a hypothesis that "the transition from adolescence to adulthood involves a progressive strengthening in the sense of identity" (p. 342). If this transition is not given ample time to develop, in the sense of gender identity and a sense of belonging, are those gender non-binary, transgender, or non-conforming adolescents given the equitable opportunity to fully cultivate their sense of self?

Empathy is embodied in the dance/movement therapeutic process because emotional memories are stored within the physical body. Movements indicate manifested feelings of tension, joy, comfort, anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and excitement just in their efforts alone. How one walks can indicate feelings of stability and steadiness, while the way one sits in conversation with another can imply feelings of vulnerability and open-mindedness. Allowing access to DMT could offer adolescent males the opportunity to work through the tensions of societal pressures before those ways of thinking become fixed. This opens up new possibilities to dealing with conflict, engaging in healthy relationships, confronting uncomfortable feelings and knowing when and how to access help and support when needed.

One example of how movement can be empathic in its intervention is to look at the use of rhythm. Levy (1992) states, "Rhythm not only organizes the expression of thoughts and feelings into meaningful dance action, but also helps to modify extreme behaviors, such as hyperactivity, hypoactivity, or a tendency toward the use of bizarre gestures and mannerisms" (p. 22). In explaining Chace's methodology, Levy emphasizes that mirroring is also the form of "inner dance" (p. 3) and nonverbal communication that can be effective.

Mimicry is simply copying the form of the movement without incorporating its meaning.

Mirroring of action and meaning, also referred to as kinesthetic empathy or empathic

reflection, is a powerful tool and one of the major contributions that dance made to dance therapy, (Levy, 1992, p. 24).

This “inner dance” (p. 3) Levy (1992) mentioned is also utilized in reference to trauma intervention. Bessel van der Kolk’s interview with Dr. Frank Putnam (2017) addresses how a community response (rather than an individual experience unknown to others) acts as validation for individuals who have undergone traumatic experiences. Putnam emphasizes that, although all personal trauma affects people differently, there are indications that a community backed reaction to an event, action, or ideology provides a sense of support and substantiation that can limit the severity of traumatic effects. Putnam calls the attunement and connection between a mother and child a *dance* and the *dance* metaphor is used in many cases to express the emotional pendulum of gestural or kinesthetic empathy. These therapeutic objectives of DMT and adolescent males fit with the objectives of SEL in the education systems as well as cultural-relational theory in times of dealing with adversity. DMT’s focus on kinesthetic empathy gives a new perspective and way to look at situations that cannot be handled in verbal language alone. This isn’t to say movement can cure all, but it can be used as a critical tool in teaching emotional regulation and in nurturing the empathy of a developing brain and body.

Expectations influence how people portray themselves physically, so altering those physical portrayals can influence and/or question the expectations that have been put in place. Verbal language has a formula with predetermined definitions, whereas dance vocabulary exists, but in a fluid continuum dependent on where and in what capacity it is being used. Movement has a freedom to it that can be interpreted by others but is only actually known to its practitioner. This is of most importance to adolescent identity development, as adolescents try and negotiate societal expectations with personal standards of success. The physical manifestations of

emotional expression take a toll as well. Rigidity in the body can cause physical pain, stiffness, lack of mobility, and muscle loss. On the emotional and mental level, rigidity in the body can cause or be caused by lack of a feeling of belonging, fear of judgment, suppressed frustration, and an inability to feel comfort in one's own body. This directly correlates to self-identity. Some research indicates that current established norms for cisgender males encourage postures of stoicism, unwavering toughness and ambivalence to emotional expression. The "ought"ness Molenaar (2020) pointed to indicates an expectation of adhering to a specific form or structure. In 2020, some researchers would argue that things are shifting so that the forms and structures adhere to individuals instead. This means perceptions and definitions of masculinity change with the individual and may be open for interpretation, regardless of how the person fits the mold of predetermined gender identification.

There are advances in the field of mental health where masculinity is being redefined in scientific research and definition. Kiselica and Englar-Carlson (2010) introduced the model of *positive psychology/positive masculinity (PPPM)* in response to the literature on the "New Psychology of Men" (NPM) in the 1990s and 2000s. Their framework focused on measures of applying positive emotional psychology to men, whereas other models emphasized the detrimental consequences of traditional therapeutic practice. This demonstrates research to proactively combat the negative effects of toxic masculinity in men. It institutes a model based on: male relational styles; male ways of caring; generative fatherhood; male self-reliance; the worker/provider tradition of men; male courage, daring, and risk taking; the group orientation of boys and men; the humanitarian service of fraternal organizations, men's use of humor; and male heroism (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010). Kiselica and Englar-Carlson, in addition to other researchers, identified these 10 strengths as social constructs that are not exclusive to men, and

are modeled and passed down socially from generation to generation through “male-modeled rituals” (2010, p. 279).

Modeled rituals are the oldest form of organized socialized dance and those rituals still exist not only in the dance studios, but also in classrooms and on athletic platforms. Historically, even male dancers had a profound effect on how dance was perceived. Rudolf Laban, a movement theorist, based many of his early works on observing military formations while traveling with his father. Gene Kelly, an American film actor/dancer from the 1950s, was hailed for bringing a sense of athleticism and manliness to theatrical dance (Lihs, 2018). There is a rhythm to sports, an effort to walk down a school hallway, and a sense of spatial awareness as an adolescent navigates through a crowd of people. Those elements define dance as well. The physical body is the instrument and it provides not only a container for emotions but also a conduit for communication. If adolescent cisgender males were allowed the opportunity to express and learn viscerally, as well as verbally, empathic development would be nurtured by those experiencing the expression and by those witnessing the expression. This is empathy building.

### **Conclusion**

Researchers indicate that toxic masculinity is a learned behavior, modeled and passed down from generation to generation (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Levant & Wong, 2013; Molenaar, 2014). In considering the plethora of research on building empathy, adolescent development, toxic masculinity ideologies, and dance movement therapy practices, it is clear that there is substantial evidence to support the claim that movement-based interventions can greatly affect mirror neurons and empathy pathways (Allemand & Steiger, 2014; Berrol, 2006). Additionally, research on masculine norms in westernized culture and the effects of toxic



masculinity suggest that embodying practices could be meaningful in accessing emotions that are conditionally suppressed by societal ideologies. Dance movement therapy practices employ a variety of postures, movement patterns, and rhythmic sequences that allow participants the opportunity to access inhibited expressions (Levy, 1992; Sandel, Chaiklin & Lohn, 1993)). This can be done by mindfulness and guided visualization, by walking across the room, or by engaging in a mirroring dance done by client and therapist. Within the lens of dance/movement therapy lies a collective of interventions designed and modified for every individual client. That effort allows therapists to attune to the client's developing sense of self, regardless of gender.

The collective field of expressive arts-based therapies continues to grow in the areas of music, drama, dance, visual art, and play. While all of these approaches can frequently intersect in different therapeutic interventions, movement is a constant presence in all modalities. Dance movement therapy can often communicate what words cannot and research shows that new approaches are needed to reach the adolescent population. Future research and collaboration are imperative in advancing this idea, as dance/movement therapy can be a part of embodying the Social-Emotional Learning model. As years pass on and communities reframe cultural identities, this is a profound time to look at how new understandings of empathy and peer interaction can be incorporated with adolescents.

While the research shows the relevance of dance/movement therapy and its integration with cisgender adolescent empathic development, the research possibilities have a much wider scope. While the interest of this literature review is on reframing what masculinity means in the western culture, it is equally as important to study all genders and all cultural identities with movement. This can not only lead to new communication avenues, but it can also lead to a better understanding of what it means to "stand in someone else's shoes". While the topic of empathy

is not new, the world is a much different place in 2020. Empathy needs a boost, gender norms deserve a new reframing, and the toxic vocabulary that has defined gender for years can be altered for the era of *now*. Dance can do that.

Although in analysis we look at movement from the standpoint of an outside observer, we should try to feel it sympathetically within. A mind trained to assist the bodily perspective, instead of combating it, would give us a completely new outlook on movement and therefore on life (Laban, as quoted in Moore, 2014, p. 137).

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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

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Expressive Therapies Division  
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**Student's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ Jennifer TeBeest \_\_\_\_\_

**Type of Project:** Thesis

**Title:** \_\_\_\_ A Literature Review on Dance Movement Therapy's Effects on Masculinized Adolescents \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Graduation:** \_\_\_\_ May 16, 2020 \_\_\_\_\_

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

**Thesis Advisor:** \_\_\_\_\_ Annette Whitehead-Pleaux, R-MT \_\_\_\_\_