The Ripple Effect: ‘Training the Trainer’ on the Impact of Body Image Through a Dance/Movement Therapy Technique

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Capstone Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis describes the capstone project which was a psychoeducation and experiential workshop for fitness trainers. The workshop investigated the impact trainers’ work may have on the body image of their clients through a dance/movement therapy (DMT) technique. The aim was to enhance the trainers’ sensitivity around body image issues of their clients and to create a space for vulnerable movement conversation that may in turn lead to better mental health advocacy for their clients within the scope of ethical practice. The participants of the workshop were six white female identifying trainers ranging from 24 to 35 years of age. The workshop was comprised of a collaborative warm up, a section utilizing the DMT technique of mirroring, a journaling session based on prompts, a presentation of relevant literature and closed with a discussion on the experience. Congruent with the literature, participants reported increased empathy and body awareness. In addition, the trainers shared how the use of understanding their own body image could impact their work with their clients. This paper begins with a literature review of the related topics, is followed by detailed outline of the methods, and concludes with the results, and a discussion from the researcher’s perspective. Future research could include a prospective study surveying trainers’ attitudes toward their own body image pre- and post-workshop to explore impact.

*Key words:* body image, fitness trainer, mirroring, dance/movement therapy
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Introduction

The focus of this research project was to begin a discussion in the fitness community about the ripple effect; how the trainer feels, moves, and speaks about their own body may impact how the client feels about their body and in turn influence the way they interact with the community around them. The focus is to bring awareness to the impact the trainers’ have on clients’ potential existing disordered eating behaviors, unknowingly increasing their negative body satisfaction or the harmful encouragement of overexercising. This was done through researching the available literature on: dance/movement therapy (DMT) and eating disorders, the impact of coaches and fitness trainers on athlete and client body satisfaction, the influence trainers’ online presence has, and lastly how implicit bias has contributed to today’s environment of weight loss and diet culture.

The topic under consideration is if the dance/movement therapy technique of mirroring could be used as a tool 1) for trainers to deepen their understanding of their own body image and the influence they have on their client’s body image and 2) for trainers to use this technique to create more meaningful interrelatedness with their clients. It is becoming increasingly more important to research this topic due to the of the rise in diet culture and the need for eating disorder prevention. It is well known that people go to gyms and work with trainers intending to lose weight, improve their health and well-being (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014) and potentially improve body satisfaction (Brudzynski & Ebbenâ, 2010). A study by Brudzynski and Ebbenâ (2010) found that 58% of exercisers were motivated by body image. Where motivation for working out might come from body image, this could extend into dieting and disordered
eating behaviors. For women entering college there is a higher chance of worsening disordered eating patterns when there is a presence of body dissatisfaction (Cooley & Toray, 2001). Simply losing weight does not necessarily improve body satisfaction. Working out the physical body without attention to mental health may be detrimental and lead to further disordered eating and/or overexercising. Trainers can play an integral role in encouraging their clients in a way that is safe and effective for the whole self, not just the physical body. Trainers not only need to be conscientious of their presence in the gym but also on their social media accounts. The rationale for this exploration and workshop is developed further in the literature review.

I identified research that supports the need for increasing trainers’ awareness of their impact on their clients’ health. The topics discussed are dance/movement therapy, body image, social media, implicit bias, health-at-every-size and the body positivity movement. I projected that the participants would leave the workshop with an expanded view of themselves as trainers and in turn improve their awareness of their own biases and impact in the gym and their presence on social media. The questions that are the foundation of this thesis are: what is being communicated by trainers?, ‘how is it is being received by clients?’, and ‘how can dance/movement therapy be used as a technique for trainers to more deeply attune to their clients experience?’

**Literature Review**

Dance/movement therapy (DMT) is a form of psychotherapy where the mind and body are considered inseparable. The “basic premise [of DMT] is that the body movement reflects inner emotional states and that changes to movement behavior can lead to changes in the psyche, thus promoting growth and health” (Levy, 2005, p.1). The ways in which we communicate, learn from and teach each other are highly influenced by the way our bodies move. In 1971, Albert
Mehrabian published a book that assessed how much nonverbal communication is accounted for in conversation. From his research, he concluded that 55% of communication is dependent on the speaker’s body language, 38% to the tone of their voice, and only 7% to the credibility of the actual words (Mehrabian, 1971). In a more recent study, Sarla (2021) explained that body language and non-verbal communication are unconscious acts that could be more telling than our verbal language. Non-verbal communication is comprised of the “physical attitude of our body, facial expressions, gazes, and body gestures all [conveying] our intentions and purpose while we communicate” (Sarla, 2020, p. 1). Based on Mehrabian (1971) and Sarla’s (2021) studies, it can be implied that the relationship between fitness trainers and clients is highly influenced by body language and movement. When a trainer is communicating to a client, that trainer is also providing physical cues that infer a great deal about their inner emotional experience and relationship to self. In return, the client’s movement is replying with its own unconscious experience. Projection or bias may also contribute to the interactions between the trainer and the client.

According to American Council on Exercise (American Council of Exercise, 2021) and the National Academy of Sports Medicine (National Academy of Sports Medicine, 2021) becoming a personal trainer entails learning about professional responsibility, client relationships, basic applied science, basic nutrition concepts, how to complete assessments, and exercise techniques and instruction. After reviewing the certification curriculums and speaking with the participants of the workshop, it was clear that discussion of body image is in no way part of the learning process. In lieu of this information and of the research explored, the graduate capstone workshop was created to begin a discussion on the impacts of the trainers’ body image on the client’s own body satisfaction.
Dance/Movement Therapy

Dance/movement therapy concepts explored in the present graduate capstone workshop are rhythmic synchrony, kinesthetic awareness, and kinesthetic empathy. Each of the aforementioned concepts are discussed by Ressler and Kleinman (2018) and are well served being integrated into “any practioner’s therapeutic style” (Ressler & Kleinman, 2018, p. 335). The first is rhythmic synchrony, which is the “clinicians’ ability to attune to their clients’ pace and timing in order to address the distress that lies beneath the surface” (Ressler & Kleinman, 2018, p. 335). It is important to note that if the therapist and the client are out of rhythm, care becomes compromised. In the trainer/client relationship, the trainer’s responsibility is to be cognizant of the client’s mental and physical state in order to keep them moving safely.

The second concept discussed is kinesthetic awareness. This is “the ability of clinicians to experience their own feelings and sensations inwardly” (Ressler & Kleinman, 2018, p. 335), and if the therapist is unable to attune to their own body, then there will be a felt experience of misalignment. To apply this to the trainer/client relationship, this can be seen when a trainer is unaware of their own feelings and sensations, and it creates a disconnect between the trainer and the client. Within the scope of practice and certification process of a personal trainer, mental health is not prioritized. The focus is on making behavioral changes, improves physical fitness, and overall health (American Council of Exercise, 2021).

The final concept discussed is that of kinesthetic empathy, which is “the ability, on a body level, to understand and sometimes experience what others are feeling” (Ressler & Kleinman, p. 355). As I led the workshop, it was important for me to use kinesthetic empathy to witness and respond on a body level to my participants in order to keep them engaged and comfortable with what we were doing.
Each of the aforementioned concepts deepen the experience of attunement. Attunement is being wholly cognizant of another person’s experience, needs, and emotions. This extends beyond empathy in that it creates a “reciprocal affect and/or resonating response” (Jerak et al., 2018, p. 56). These dance/movement therapy concepts are relevant to understanding how I, as the researcher, experienced and witness the participants of the workshop and how the participants work with their clients. As the leader of the workshop, I aimed to attune to each of the participants in order to share an experience that resonated with each of them and could potentially extend into their relationship with their clients.

**Body Image**

Body image is one’s perception of their own body and is heavily influenced by many factors (Slade, 1994). Slade (1994) identified these factors as one’s history with sensory input, personal weight fluctuation, an individual’s cultural and societal standards, one’s own attitude toward shape and weight, one’s psychopathology and one’s biological and cognitive factors. Kearney-Cooke and Steinchen-Asch (1990) suggested that body image begins at birth where the parent’s expectations of what their child’s body, sex, appearance and ability are and whether these qualities align with reality or not. Body image is comprised of three dimensions 1) “The picture you have in your mind’s eye of how you look to yourself, 2) How you believe others perceive you, and 3) How you feel ‘living’ in your body” (Ressler & Kleinman, 2018, p. 35). Each of these dimensions plays a role in the complexity that becomes consumed by “disturbances of perception, an inability to recognize signals and sensations in the body and delusional-like distortions of size and weight” (Bruch, 1965, p. 555). These distortions and body dissatisfaction lead to disordered eating and eating disorders.
In the context of the fitness and workout community, a trainer’s unconscious or conscious body image and insecurities may play a role in how they work with their client. It has been found that a trainers’ perspective of the activity or sport can “perpetuate, support or protect [the client] from negative body image” (Sabiston et al., 2020, p. 47). Sabiston et al. (2020) interviewed 13 trainers about their perception of body image concerns, and the results showed that trainers perceived concerns about body image were high in their athletes, though was not overtly talked about. Body image is “the elephant on the field” due to its lack of acknowledgment (Sabiston, 2020, p. 48). Additionally, this study indicated that there were noticeable behavioral changes in the athletes related to negative body image, such as facial reactions, posture, and actively trying to cover the body with loose clothing (Sabiston et al., 2020). Furthermore, another study found that gymnasts who had received weight loss or body related comments from their trainers had significantly higher disordered eating tendencies than those who had not (Muscat & Long, 2004).

It can be assumed that this influence is not present only in the prior mentioned studies, but in many different fitness and training spaces. The aforementioned studies are a few of many that yielded from an online search of Google Scholar that outline the impact trainers can have on their athlete’s body image.

**Social Media**

The external influences on body image extend beyond trainers at practices and in gyms; the influence extends into social media. On Instagram, over 180 million people use the hashtag ‘fitness’ leading most to scroll their feed seeing at least one fitness-related post each time they open their phone (Schwanke, 2017). A related trend on Instagram called ‘fitspiration’ is associated with “[promoting] the ‘thin ideal,’ and appearance-based diets and exercises” (Rounds & Stutts, 2020, p. 1). Of 283 female college students, body satisfaction significantly decreased
and negative mood significantly increased after exposure to fitness content on social media (Rounds & Stutts, 2020). Another study found that just 5 minutes of social media exposure to ‘thin-ideal’ images results in more body dissatisfaction than those exposed to neutral photos (Yamamiya et al., 2005). In today’s society, it is common for Instagram users to follow personal trainers and other ‘fitspiration’ workout accounts online, then leading users to further exposure to fitness content and ‘healthy ideals’ (Raggatt et al., 2018).

Often times fitness trainers supplement their income with sponsorships, ad campaigns and brand partnerships on Instagram. The companies ask them to “[promote] detox teas and weight loss plans that aren’t credible or even healthy” (Leskin, 2019). This encapsulates the danger and harm social media can have to one’s physical and mental health. On the other hand, Leskin (2019) suggested that a fitness ‘influencer’ can have a positive impact if they are not simply motivated by money. In today’s climate with the COVID-19 pandemic, people are further isolated, using social media to connect and are attending their gyms less due to closures. It is implied that further exposure to fitness content could lead to greater comparison. It is becoming increasingly more important to change how fitness trainers use social media for the sake of its large negative impact on the body image of its consumers. As the research shows, social media allows for the exponentially growing and ever prevalent insidiousness of social comparison which can have incredibly detrimental effects on body image.

**Implicit Weight Bias**

Implicit bias is an unconscious bias that may play a role in action or behaviors. This term is used to describe biases that are held about race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, weight and many other factors that are marginalized in our society (Greenwald et al., 2011). Weight bias might impact the way a trainer interacts with their client. Evidence of strong anti-fatness bias
was found in a study of 57 fitness professionals and 56 regular exercisers from England who took a semantic differential measure of explicit beliefs and the Implicit Associations Test (IAT). The tests were designed to uncover unconscious biases and associations of the groups; two of the named associations are thin being equated to good and fat being equated to bad. Additionally, this same study found that the fitness professionals, who have never been overweight themselves, had higher anti-fatness beliefs than regular exercisers. This group of fitness professionals also believe that personal control is what dictates body weight (Robertson & Vohora, 2008). This study highlighted the implicit and explicit anti-fat biases that are held by fitness professionals.

To further explore implicit bias, another study found coach implicit bias plays a role in the style of training or dieting strategy they prescribe to their athletes (Jolley, 2019). Despite personal trainers being able to get health certifications as continuing education credits (American Council of Exercise, 2021; National Academy of Sports Medicine, 2021), they are not Registered Dietitians; therefore, the likelihood of providing false or harmful dietetic advice is present, particularly where there is a high chance the advice is compounded with anti-fatness bias. Another study found that the more often weight bias was felt by the client, the less motivated they were to diet, exercise, lose weight and even found that the clients had lower positive affect. For two weeks the participants recorded experienced weight bias immediately after it was felt, as well as a self-report at the end of each day tracking mood and motivation with regards to their diet, exercise, and weight loss (Vartanian et al., 2018). Not only are biases detrimental to mental health and well-being, but also are less effective in reaching desired outcomes in the training process.
Health-At-Every-Size

The concept of health-at-every-size (HAES) is trending in mainstream media. HAES focuses on “promoting overall health benefits of behavioral changes related to dietary and physical activity and emphasizes self-acceptance and well-being” (Provencher et al., 2007). This approach has been found to increase body satisfaction and self-esteem, decrease depression, reduce binge or restrictive eating behaviors, without losing significant weight. Provencher et al. (2007) studied the short-term health effects of the HAES approach. The participants of this study were a group of 144 premenopausal overweight women placed randomized groups; a social support group, a HAES group or a control group. Attitudes of eating behaviors and appetite were evaluated pre- and post-intervention. The participants in the HAES group found decreases in hunger susceptibility, greater awareness of their physical hunger cues and satiety compared to the control and social support group (Provencher et al., 2007). HAES is an anti-diet lifestyle that embraces the body as it is rather than trying to change the physical appearance of it. The fitness community would be better served using this framework in order to support the mental and physical health of its members.

The Body Positivity Movement

Another trending movement, particularly on social media, is the body positivity movement. Body positivity “aims to challenge the prevailing thin-ideal images in the media and foster acceptance and appreciation of all shapes, sizes and appearances” (Cohen et al., 2019, p. 48). The movement has shifted from its initial intention and has become commoditized, leaving out women over size 14 and encompassed by thin white women who have a positive outlook on their own bodies. Additionally, major corporations have latched on to the trend and begun to profit off of it (Cwyanar-Horta, 2016). The history of this movement is further explained. In the
early 1900’s, health experts were labeling fat women, particularly Black women, as lazy, mammy, deranged, ugly, and other negative descriptors (Dominici, 2020). You, the reader, may see these associations are still ever present our society today. Following this period, Margaret K. Bass wrote an essay titled “On Being a Fat Black Girl in a Fat-Hating Culture” to emphasize her experience of “self-loathing and fat prejudice she faced in the 50s and 60s,” as cited in Dominici (2020, para 6). The movement was then coined by Black fat queer women and femmes during the fat liberation movement in order to hold space for those whose bodies were marginalized and compared to the ideal beauty standards of the time (Dominici, 2020; King, 2021).

Today, one can search the hashtag ‘Body Positivity’ and see an abundance of posts in line with this movement. However, Stephanie Yeboah, from Elle Magazine, stated that the body positivity movement has become non-intersectional and uplifting the opinions of white women “with a small number of ‘token’ people of color to help fill up the ‘look at us being diverse!’ quota” (Dominici, 2020, para. 12). Dominici (2020) argued that it is important to acknowledge and “to remember who lit the flame of its radical roots” (Dominici, 2020, para. 20). Furthermore, Sabrina Stings, Ph.D., discussed how diet culture is heavily rooted in racism; there is a “connection between Black people and gluttony [that] has become internalized and upheld, making diet culture’s rejection of larger bodies inherently racist” (as cited in King, 2021, para. 5). This is highly relevant to the literature and workshop as its premise to create a more inclusive space for all bodies to be acknowledged; this cannot be done without naming the origin of the movements that have paved the way for bettering societies understanding of body satisfaction and anti-diet culture.

The above literature review presents peer reviewed articles and media articles relevant to this graduate thesis workshop. It began with an introduction of dance/movement therapy as a
form of psychotherapy. Rhythmic synchrony, kinesthetic awareness, and kinesthetic empathy were outlined as important components of DMT that would be utilized for being an observer, participant and researcher during workshop. Furthermore, as the premise of this thesis is around body image and body satisfaction, definitions, and theories of the terms were described. Body image was defined, the impact social media has on body satisfaction was explored, implicit bias with regards to weight was discussed and the trending movements of Health-at-Every-Size (HAES) and body positivity were provided. Each of the aforementioned sections of the literature review is critical to understanding the objective of this graduate thesis workshop. The objective being that this workshop was a preliminary step in developing awareness and beginning a discussion with personal trainers on the impact they have on their client’s body satisfaction.

**Methods**

The aim of this workshop was to provide an opportunity for fitness trainers to explore the impact their work may have on body image, to deepen their empathy through mirroring, and to better understand the need for sensitivity around body image topics for their clients. It called on the trainers to deeply reflect on their understanding of body image, their own relationship to their bodies, and how their relationship to themselves can impact their clients. This workshop was designed to begin the conversation and hopefully be a first step in creating longstanding effects on their training values and practices.

**Intervention of Mirroring**

The primary tool used in the workshop was mirroring. Before describing the workshop, I will provide context for the choice of that tool for this intervention. The technique of mirroring is described. Mirroring as a dance/movement therapy intervention aims to expand “emotional understanding and empathy toward others” (McGarry & Russo, 2011, p. 178). The intervention
asks one person to imitate the movement, emotion, and intentions that are implied by another person; this is typically done between a therapist and a client. McGarry and Russo (2011) suggested that the intervention of mirroring activates the mirror neuron system (MNS) which leads to greater activity in the limbic system and in turn allows for greater capacity for empathy (McGarry & Russo, 2011). Pallaro (2007) explained that mirror neurons may explain that one’s ability to witness, understand and respond to another’s emotions is a result of body-based kinesthetic empathy. Not only does mirroring enhance empathy, but it has also been found to increase body satisfaction (Maria Savidaki et al., 2020). The aim is to utilize mirroring to provide trainers the opportunity for self-discovery, understanding of their bodies in relation to others, and to create a dialogue about the impact they may have on their clients’ body image.

Based on the reviewed literature and media, there are little to no resources for fitness trainers on how to deepen empathy toward their clients from a body level. Furthermore, there are no resources for trainers on how to bring awareness to the ways in which their unconscious biases or their own body satisfaction could impact their training approach with their clients.

**Location & Participants**

The workshop took place on February 13th, 2021 on Zoom. The participants were five certified personal fitness trainers from Boston, Massachusetts and one from Kenora, Ontario. The trainers I worked with have experience with a variety of teaching formats from individual, to small group, to corporate trainings, to large fitness classes. I connected with each of them through social media and a local boxing gym. Each of the participants signed a waiver granting me permission to record the workshop for personal use and reflection and destroyed when finished using for research purposes.
**Structure of the Workshop**

To supplement and guide the workshop activities, I created a Google Slide presentation. We began the workshop by discussing what a ripple effect is. Next, the schedule of events was outlined for the participants. The schedule was as follows: a collaborative warm up, the dance/movement therapy intervention of mirroring, journaling, discussion and closure. From there I instructed the participants to keep two questions in mind as they worked through the session: *What is being communicated by you as a trainer?* and *How is it being received by your clients?*

**Warmup**

Following this, the participants were instructed that we would lead a warmup together. They were told that we would do so without using verbal communication but take turns using verbal cues. The purpose of engaging the trainers as leaders in the warmup was to establish comfortability with participation at the start of the workshop. According to Marian Chace, a pioneer in DMT, warmups can be used to expand movement repertoire, establish the group, and elicit movement dialogue. Chace also referred to the warmup as the time to test whether the participants in a DMT group were able to “maintain their individuality and still feel comfortable within the group. The emphasis at this stage was on developing individual and group rapport in order to build trust and openness in the group” (Levy, 2005, p. 25). Each of these points were considered in the development of the workshop structure. The warmup was a total of ten minutes.

**Witness to Mirroring**

Next was the introduction and execution of the dance/movement therapy technique of mirroring. I used instrumental music to allow for further creativity and flow in the movement
that was created. I then put the trainers into partners and assigned either participant A or B. Participant A was instructed to close their eyes. They were asked to take a moment to settle into their space then begin moving. Participant B was instructed to keep their eyes open and begin by observing their partner. After a few moments, I instructed them to begin mirroring participant A’s movement to the best of their ability. The purpose of one participant closing their eyes is to mimic the fitness trainer-to-client dynamic where trainer (B) has more information about the function of the movement than the client (A). As the participants moved, I prompted participant A to move their body in a way that felt good and natural to them in the moment. I instructed participant B to follow A’s movements noticing the little intricacies like hand motions. The partners then reversed roles which allowed for each of them to experience what it is like to lead the movement and what it is like to have their movement reflected back to them. Participants with their eyes closed were eventually prompted to open their eyes and glance at their partner following them and I asked, what is it like to see your movement reflected on someone else’s body? After moving for about fifteen minutes together, I asked the participants to find a natural ending. From there, I asked for one partnership to volunteer to demonstrate exactly what they just did, and the rest of us turned our videos off and just observed. This allowed for the group members to both participate in the movement and to witness others do the movement. The intention behind doing this, was to mirror the structure of a workout class where the personal trainers are witness to other movers.

As part two of the mirroring exercise, I asked a different set of partners to volunteer to be the movers while the rest of us watched. This time, I asked participant B to describe movement to participant A using only verbal cues to the best of their ability. Participant A was instructed to follow the movement exactly as cued doing their best not to make assumptions about what their
partner is implying. The rest of the group turned their videos off to focus on the partnership working, again to provide the opportunity to witness. The aim of this version of mirroring was to emphasize the difficulty in communicating without using body language. Again, participants were asked to find a natural ending to their movement, and everyone was prompted to turn their videos back on. This portion of the workshop took about 30 minutes.

**Psychoeducation and Discussion**

After the dance/movement therapy technique and adaptations of mirroring, I brought the slide show back up to provide a rationale of using mirroring. I explained that it is a movement therapy intervention to expand emotional understanding, to create a greater capacity for empathy, and to improve body image. Following the short rationale, I instructed the participants to take out their journal and pen to reflect on two prompts; *How might this intervention be relevant or change the way in which you work with your clients?* and *Did you begin this workshop with any assumptions?* Next the participants and I had a thirty minute discussion on the responses to their journal prompts as well as four questions that I posted in the chat box on Zoom; *What emotions did you experience during this intervention?*, *What body image obstacles do you and your client share throughout the training process?*, *What have you found allows you to connect best with your clients?*, and *What was it like to see your movement reflected back to you on someone else’s body?*

**Closure**

Lastly, I concluded with presentation slides to share the research that supports the mirroring intervention, the takeaways and considerations, and an expression of gratitude for the participants taking the time to join the workshop. I offered for the participants to stay on the Zoom if they would like to debrief further.
To gather information and reflect on the workshop, I recorded the Zoom and watched it back. This allowed me to be present during the workshop, physically and mentally, to be an observer of movement and a witness to my own experience during the workshop.

**Results**

The workshop was a culmination of movement, journaling and discussion. The workshop ran an hour and forty-five minutes, which was slightly over the time allotted due to interest in further processing at the end. It followed the plan accordingly with slight technical difficulties of getting the recording started. Throughout the session, there were several noteworthy observations of the participants and of myself as the witness. The following is a discussion of my observations through reflections and the lens of dance/movement therapy terminology defined in the literature review, specifically rhythmic synchrony (RS), kinesthetic awareness (KA), and kinesthetic empathy (KE).

**Experience as the Researcher**

The workshop began with a discussion of what the ‘ripple effect’ is. As a facilitator, I watched as the participants shared about how it is like the domino effect indicating that they understood the premise of the workshop. I provided a short rationale of how the workshop they engaged in might inform their work as trainers, thus the ripple effect. Following this, we began to move into the warmup. Using my own experience of trying new movement or exploring something new, I chose to lead with more functional movement to begin with, knowing this would be more comfortable and in line with movement they were familiar with as trainers. This was my way of gradually transitioning the trainers into improvisational movement that would be explored later on in the workshop. I called on rhythmic synchrony; I noticed how the trainers were responding with their bodies and tuned into their rhythm as close as possible to create
connection and synchrony. To further the development of group cohesion, I proposed that we shift between each other leading part of the warmup without using verbal communication and the participants were receptive. There were moments of pause in transitional period and gestures were used to welcome the next leader. In a sense, we were all using kinesthetic empathy to understand how we were moving and how others were responding.

Without verbal conversation, I shifted into moving and asked the trainers to follow my movement. This where I expanded the functional movement into more improvisational movement (i.e., moving from a functional hamstring stretch to sweeping and fluid arm movements in the vertical plane). I witnessed the movement of the trainers become less resistant and more flowing. By tapping into a deeper and more authentic movement as the leader, I was inviting the trainers to do the same. Essentially, I was asking each of them to find comfort and try on my improvisational movement before giving them the space create their own.

Once the trainers were put into pairs, I asked participant A, the movers, to move in a way that their body wanted, felt called to do, and then asked them to try adapting the movement they were doing in a new way they may have not explored before. Participant B became the deep listener and observer. I witnessed trainers who typically move in regimented and orderly movement, fall into movement that was exploratory and unprescribed. I witnessed deep attunement to the self in each of them. There were moments where the trainers would pause, watch their partner, then begin again as if to want to follow as closely as they could. I saw the person who was following, participant B, utilize kinesthetic empathy to engage with their partner. Participant B was listening to their partners movement and doing their best to attune to them. For the first time in the workshop, I had transferred the leader role into the partnerships. In
a sense, I was seeing the ripple effect; what I had shared with them, they were now sharing with each other.

In the final exploration of mirroring, one participant was verballing cueing the movement for their partner to do. I watched, what appeared to be, the person giving the verbal instruction struggle. It was as though she was learning in that moment how much she normally uses her body to explain movement to her client. There were moments where she would lift her hand as if to emphasize her word, and quickly draw it back when recalling she was only to cue verbally. As a witness, I felt the frustration in her physical body as well. Although my camera was off in order to observe, I felt myself being called to attempt the movement being instructed. I wanted to embody what the participant was. In that moment of body awareness, I was being called to respond with kinesthetic empathy. I wanted to embody the movement to understand their experience on a body level.

In the following section of the workshop, we began verbal processing; the participants shared vulnerably about their experience in the workshop and the relevancy to their work as trainers. Almost immediately a participant shared, “I have no experience with dance and movement. I have always shied away of from this kind of stuff. I was made fun of when I tried to dance when I was a kid, so I still stay away from it as an adult. Although I train people in powerlifting every day, I sometimes I forget what a beginner feels like, which was exactly what I felt like today.” This participant was calling on her own experience to inform how to work with her clients. Following this she expressed, “I am an expert in what I do, but sometimes it feels good to step back and feel what they [the clients] are feeling.” When she was moving with her partner, I had witnessed her use this information from her own experience, embody her partners movement and lean into the non-judgmental space for them to explore together.
Application and Implications

After allowing the participants to journal about their process we shared a conversation where the impact of the experiential of mirroring became apparent. I believe that both the trainers and I gained insight into ourselves through this experience. One participant shared how she has incredibly high stress and anxiety that make it difficult for her move more freely. By watching and mirroring her partner she was able to find softness in herself. She shared about her partners hand movements in particular; “they had such a lightness to them that really resonated with me. I was trying to channel your movement. I felt super connected to you through your movement. It was a sense of ease, relaxation, and nurture.” This was something I witnessed. The longer this participant followed and was attentive to her partner, the more I saw the softness in her grow. This was a common thread in each of the partnerships I watched.

Another participant shared, “I have a hard time letting go, but I knew I wasn’t being judged,” which led to a discussion of the questions ‘How do you know when you aren’t being judged? and What information was your partner giving you that let you know you are supported?’ The participants began sharing that it was through movement that they were establishing trust in one another. This furthered into a discussion of building this trust physically with their clients. A different participant shared that she could see using elements of mirroring to lessen the intimidation and power dynamic between the trainer and client. She shared, “I can use mirroring in moments instead of standing over a client while instructing them through movement. If they are in a stretch and their stomach shows or where they might feel self-conscious, I come down and get on their level and mirror them.” This developed into conversation about how trainers and clients alike have had the experience of movement moving their clothing in ways that might expose more vulnerable parts of the body, like the stomach or
hips. Through this discussion, I began to see the impact mirroring can have on supporting a partner in a way that allows them to feel comfortable and not judged physically.

**Reflecting on Body Image**

As a group, this conversation seamlessly transitioned into reflection about whether it is ever appropriate to make comments or validate a client’s weight loss. In this discussion I shared my belief, supported by evidence of the literature and experience, that validating weight loss makes a statement to the client that the previous version of themselves was not good enough, and it begins a dialogue to the client’s future self that it is not okay to gain the weight back. Participants generally agreed in this discussion, and it appeared to be a newer concept for others. We discussed alternatives to validating weight loss. Some of the proposed ideas were to validate accomplishments that are unrelated to weight (i.e., completing a personal record time, accomplishing a pull up, or meeting a weightlifting goal for the first time). In a similar vein, it was discussed that trainers often arrive to new sessions with the assumption that the client wants to lose weight. On the other hand, the client may come to a new session assuming that they will lose weight as a result of working out and lose it quickly. Each of these discussion points arose as a result of the trainers sharing their experiences moving and processing the workshop.

**Discussion**

The workshop was designed to create a ripple effect. As I led the exploration for the trainers, and the trainers taught each other through mirroring, a discussion came about that may extend into their work with their clients. By providing this psychoeducational and experiential workshop to the trainers, curiosity about how they present themselves with their clients might be induced. This influence could largely impact the culture of fitness spaces by allowing for a more welcoming and inclusive environment that is supportive of the mental health of each person that
comes through the gym doors. By allowing the trainers to engage in an experience where they could explore for themselves, they learned about how they are not dissimilar to their partners (clients) in the human experience of wanting to feel confident, to feel a sense of belonging, and to succeed.

As evidenced by the verbal processing in the workshop, the trainers expanded their understanding of movement beyond the walls of anatomy and strength. It is as if the workshop was the flat stone that was thrown into a body of water, the fitness community, and created a ripple that “extends far beyond the view of the person who casts it” (Weber, 2014). The workshop proved to a beautiful experiential of shared movement, collaboration, witnessing and discussion. As noted in the literature, personal trainers are not educated on the impact their own implicit biases may have on their attitudes and behaviors toward their clients (Jolley, 2019). The need for a workshop to ‘train the trainer’ on understanding the implications that fitness environment has on body image is abundant. The aim of the workshop was to provide a space for trainers to investigate the self and begin conversation about the implications of their work on their clients’ body image. Through the collaborative warm up, partner work using the dance/movement therapy technique of mirroring, the written reflection, and conclusion of with verbal processing of the experience, a few considerations were planted for the trainers and myself. For the trainers, they investigated and learned how much of their communication comes from body language and how that could have an impact on their clients. As the researcher, I learned that the technique of mirroring could be expanded beyond my original intention and potentially used to show trainers how to further support their clients on a body level.
Adaptations and Considerations

In retrospect, there are a few adaptations and considerations for future workshops 1) regarding the overall structure of the workshop and 2) considerations based on what was shared by the participants. In the workshop, I shared a rationale for the DMT technique of mirroring prior to the discussion of what the participants experienced. In the future, I would share the mirroring rationale after discussion in order to remove the predispositions I may have provided.

Secondly, the workshop was initially designed for the trainers to learn about their inner self and how that might impact their work; however, I had not considered the idea of adapting the DMT technique of mirroring to work directly with personal training clients. For example, one participant shared the idea of mirroring simply the spatial level of their client to bring themselves to the client on a body level. This would allow for the physical body of the trainer to match the body of their client to demonstrate support. This is an example of rhythmic synchrony and could be expanded upon in future workshops. To further the idea of using concepts from this workshop that could be developed for work directly with clients, the trainers shared the idea of creating a movement ‘check in’ or ritual before sessions in order to let go of “what we are carrying” and how it is important to do this “not just through conversation but through movement.” Each of the participants shared vulnerably about their own experiences, assumptions, and potential applications to their work as trainers.

Another noteworthy observation was that throughout the workshop, I witnessed attunement despite it being on Zoom. Attunement, as previously defined, is being able to wholly connect emotionally and physically to another person or client (Jerak et al., 2018); however, on Zoom, the full body of the participants was not always in view. This led participants to do their best with a limited view and use kinesthetic empathy to the best of their ability. There was more
effort needed for attunement virtually because one does not have to work as hard to achieve this in person. At times, I witnessed the movers guessing what the hand motion of their partner was doing out of view of the camera. In a sense, this is attunement to the implications of the movements they witnessed. By doing this workshop on Zoom, participants were asked to pay close attention to the intricacies of their partner. The participants of the workshop all shared that they are doing trainings over Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This workshop may have provided them with attunement skills for virtual training as a byproduct. The information and products of witnessing I received as the researcher was highly informative of next steps for this workshop.

Future Directions

The results of this workshop gave rise to several ideas for future research. This served as a pilot inquiry of the influence of personal trainers on client body satisfaction. Future research could further explore this workshop as a prospective study and survey personal trainers about their attitudes towards their clients and their goals. Conducting interviews with the trainers to ask them to identify goals they have for their clients might give rise to implicit biases and whether their work meets the needs and wants of the client or whether it is ego-driven. Additionally, it would be fascinating to combine Susan Kleinman’s Body Image Experiential (BIE) with this workshop for trainers. This would be a worthy collaboration as it could serve as a quantifiable measure for body image in the coaches. If the workshop was repeated several times, this measure could identify pre- and post-outcomes of whether the workshop is effective in uncovering body image perceptions and implications. The BIE aims understand the inner drivers of body image perceptions, challenge body image distortions, and building trust in the self (Ressler & Kleinman, 2018). By adding this to the workshop presented in this thesis, it would allow for
further exploration of body image of the self for the trainers, and in turn, influence how they might attune to their clients.

Another consideration for future studies would be to compare the workshop done in person versus virtually. Although the workshop was initially to be in person and was switched to virtual due to COVID-19 guidelines, doing it through Zoom allowed for outcomes I, as the researcher, did not anticipate. A participant shared “being in person I would have been more anxious but being in my own space helped me feel more comfortable.” This provided me with insight on how further developing the workshop virtually could allow for better participation and comfortability. Furthermore, continuing to do the workshop on Zoom would allow for participants who do not have access to transportation or the ability to travel to attend and experience the workshop. Having participants from various different areas would bring in a variety of perspectives as well. Lastly, a more diverse and larger quantity of participants would be needed before concluding any generalizations to the larger public.

In conclusion, the process of researching, exploring, leading and reflecting on this workshop provided me with great insight into the effects the dance/movement therapy technique of mirroring. It allowed for awareness to not only the body but the surrounding context in and out of the fitness community. I am grateful for the participants who made this graduate capstone possible, and I look forward to future adaptations of this experiential and research.
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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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