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Helpers in Divided Times: The Psychological Experience of Care Providers in the Ongoing Social Movement in Hong Kong, A Community Engagement Project

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Abstract

This community engagement project highlights the psychological experience of care providers from Hong Kong in the ongoing social movement. While the largest-scale Hong Kong social movement since June 2019 has led to an unprecedented mental health crisis, little is known about the psychological narratives of its affected communities, including care providers. The literature review first introduces the historical context of Hong Kong, as well as the relationship between social movements and internal experiences using the Movement Cycle framework. It then discusses the concept of political trauma, challenges for care providers, and the importance of an embodied approach in community-based work. A one-time, virtual, arts-based workshop titled “Moving Through the Movement Cycle: A Peer Support Group” was held with a group of six expressive therapists from Hong Kong. The psychological experience of the group and the researcher is summarized and artistically reflected via movement, visual art, and poetry. This project shows success in validating shared experiences, providing emotional release, and fostering community cohesion within the helping profession. The findings reveal practical insights for being a “wounded healer” and the values of community care. This paper offers a way of facilitating community-based support spaces integrating psycho-political considerations. Lastly, the strengths and limitations of this study are discussed.

*Keywords:* care providers; social movement; civil unrest; Hong Kong; political violence; indirect trauma; community engagement; dance/movement therapy; the Movement Cycle
Helpers in Divided Times: The Psychological Experience of Care Providers in the Ongoing Social Movement in Hong Kong, A Community Engagement Project

Introduction

There is no power of change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

—— Wheatley, 2002, p. 55

Without a sense of caring, there can be no sense of community.

—— Anthony J. D’Angelo

It has been approximately two years since the streets of Hong Kong were first filled with pro-democracy campaign leaflets and protestors peacefully chanting for their freedom. I am referring to the beginning of the largest-scale and longest-running social movement in Hong Kong, namely the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-Exlab) Movement. A year ago, the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by the imposition of the National Security Law (NSL) in June 2020, brought a drastic increase in the health and legal consequences of any forms of civil action. What was left behind in the midst of silence is a complex social problem and a city-wide mental health crisis, with an estimated 12% increase in the demand for the city’s healthcare sector (Ni et al., 2020b). According to the Movement Cycle developed by an activism-based organization — the Movement Netlab — Hong Kong is currently experiencing a period of disillusionment, characterized by a steep contraction in movement efforts and an emotional crash experienced by its citizens (Golan, 2016). While Ni et al.’s (2020b) study was the first to highlight the mental health impact of the Hong Kong civil unrest, not much is generally known about people’s psychological experience in an ongoing social movement like the one in Hong Kong (Hou & Bonanno, 2018).
Care providers, often being the first-hand respondents who do the groundwork, have been negatively affected by the social unrest on a personal and professional level. These challenges include bearing an increased workload, being exposed to direct and indirect trauma, witnessing political polarization in therapeutic settings, and lacking community support (Ho et al., 2014; Knight, 2013). All of these challenges call for community care and healing spaces within the profession. Healing does not and should not occur alone. With the legal consequences and help-seeking barriers imposed by the NSL, the question remains: how do we offer peer support and facilitate an emotionally contained space for collective processing within the profession?

I come from Hong Kong, and it has been heart-wrenching to witness the past two years from afar. Even as I was writing this paper, there had been development including censoring our school textbooks and the unceasing prosecution of pro-democracy figures. As I learn more about American history and social justice in this country, I felt a dire need to connect back to my own national identity and lived experience of what power, privilege, and oppression looked like in my hometown. Therefore, this capstone project is motivated by my deep love and care for the people and city of my roots. As a Hong Konger, I aim to bring awareness to the humanitarian crisis in Hong Kong, as well as highlight the unique lived experience of our care providers. As an artist, I will practice using art as my own form of self-expression and social action. As a therapist-in-training, I hope to gain a deeper understanding into my own psychological experience as a “wounded healer” during times of uncertainty and repair. Professionally, I intend to gather community knowledge, expand scholarship, and initiate allyship within the profession.

Drawing reference from literature on political violence, trauma, and civil unrest, my purpose is to dissect and describe the psychological experience of care providers as we continue to mitigate this unprecedented, ongoing national crisis. Using an arts-based methodology, I aim
to reflect on what it means to be a wounded healer during this time and design a project to offer community support for our profession. Findings from my literature review and conversations with my colleagues, who are expressive therapists or social workers in Hong Kong, are presented in this paper. A one-time virtual workshop titled “Moving Through the Movement Cycle: A Peer Support Group” was held with a group of six expressive therapists from Hong Kong. The workshop aimed to provide a mutually supportive, arts-based processing space for care providers to gather in solidarity, reflect, and re-ground as we explore the meaning of this pervasive period of transition together.

In discussing this politically sensitive topic, I would like to first address my positionality and privileges as the researcher of this project. I am a Hong Kong born, Chinese, Dance/movement Therapy graduate student currently in the United States. Being abroad granted me the freedom of speech and considerable physical safety that was crucial in my exploration as it allowed me to report with transparency and truthfulness. At the beginning of the Anti-Elab movement, I was physically present in Hong Kong and had attended numerous police-approved demonstrations. After moving to Massachusetts, I have since returned to Hong Kong twice: once in December 2019 during the peak of the movement and once in July 2020 after the passage of NSL. The ability to choose my physical and emotional involvement gave me the necessary headspace and strength to conduct this project. Yet, being physically and socially distant has led me to believe that only a community engagement project would do this topic justice.

In this thesis, my literature review first outlined the historical context of Hong Kong and introduced the Movement Cycle framework. I then discussed the concept of political violence and political trauma, as well we the challenges faced by the helping profession. Referencing expressive therapies literature on this population, I presented my methodology for community
engagement. Lastly, my learning and clinical implications were discussed and reflected via artistic means.

**Literature Review**

**Historical Context Prior to The Movement**

To better comprehend the psychological experience and role of care providers in the current Anti-Elab movement, it is necessary to first understand the historical context of Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China (HKSAR). As a former British colony, Hong Kong was handed over to China by the British government in 1997. Under the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984, China agreed to allow the region fifty years of considerable political autonomy under the principle of “One Country, Two Systems”. This agreement was stipulated in The Basic Law, which came into effect on 1 July 1997. This constitutional document enshrines the city’s “capitalist system and way of life” and grants it “a high degree of autonomy,” including executive, legislative, and independent judicial powers until 2047 (Maizland & Albert, 2021). It protects the rights of the Hong Kong people, including the freedom of speech, assembly, demonstration, association, press, and publication.

However, over the past 23 years after the handover, there have been numerous official initiatives aimed at strengthening Beijing’s control in ways that would have subverted the autonomy and rule of law in Hong Kong (Kirby, 2019; Maizland & Albert, 2021). For example, in 2003, the HKSAR government proposed a national security legislation that would have prohibited subversion, sedition, secession, and treason against the Beijing government. In 2012, it tried to amend the learning curricula of Hong Kong schools with an aim to foster students’ Chinese national identity. In 2014, Beijing proposed a universal suffrage framework that allowed Hong Kongers to vote for the city’s chief executive, yet only from a Beijing-approved shortlist of
candidates. In recent years, it appeared that the freedom of Hong Kong had been eroding as Chinese authorities continued to prosecute pro-democracy activists, expel new legislators, and increase media censorship (Maizland & Albert, 2021).

In 2019, the greatest display of defiance was seen in Hong Kong, as over 2 million people demonstrated against a Beijing-endorsed legislative proposal that would have allowed extraditions to mainland China — a socialist country without legislative oversight that “arbitrarily imprisons its citizens if they displease the government” (Kirby, 2019; see also Hong Kong Free Press, 2019). Hui, the Notre Dame professor, described this law as the last stand before “there is no more protection of Hong Kong against mainland China’s criminal system” (Kirby, 2019, para. 32). Mass anti-government protests broke out in June 2019 and have since expanded into a widespread pro-democracy movement (Reuters, 2020). This movement evolved from nonviolent actions, such as peaceful marches, civil disobedience, noncooperation, and business boycotts, into violent confrontation between the police and protestors.

Commonly known for authoritarian regimes (Hlatywayo & Mangongera, 2020), the HKSAR and Beijing government used both coercive (e.g., military and legal arrests) and subtle strategies (e.g., media attacks) to control citizen compliance. In only six months, the police arrested nearly 7,000 people (Reuters, 2020), fired over 10,000 tear gas bombs (Zhou, 2019), 4,800 smoke bombs, 6,200 rubber bullets, and 19 live rounds of ammunition (Cheung, 2019). On the other hand, protestors have used physical means in confrontations with the police, such as roadblocks, bricks, and petrol bombs. Even after Carrie Lam, the chief executive of Hong Kong, announced that the bill was withdrawn, the tension between authorities and protestors continued to escalate into an ongoing “humanitarian crisis” (Hou & Hall, 2019, p. 982).
The National Security Law was directly implemented in Hong Kong by the National People’s Congress without legislative scrutiny and came into effect on the day of its announcement (Wong, 2020). The NSL essentially criminalizes any acts of secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign or external forces. Due to the vague language, any act of defiance can virtually be classified as one of the four criminal acts. This law is applicable not only to permanent citizens of Hong Kong but also to non-permanent residents in and outside of the city. Pro-democracy activists referred to this law as “the end of Hong Kong” (Maizland & Albert, 2021). Indeed, the government has continued to target and arrest journalists, activists, and critics of Beijing (Davidson, 2021; Talusan, 2020). There were stories about citizen disappearances and military abuse. Against the backdrop of the civil unrest, the COVID-19 pandemic unraveled, further deteriorating people’s mental health. A cross-cultural study showed that Hong Kong, compared to the USA, France, and South Korea, suffered the steepest deterioration of mental health during the initial phase of the pandemic (Dean et al., 2021). This suggested that the psychological impact of the social movement was significant and should not be disregarded.

**The Movement Cycle**

People across the globe and throughout history have encountered social unrest and contentious politics (Hlatwayo & Mangongera, 2020; Ni et al., 2020a). Social movements “consist of citizen mobilization clusters that use collective nonviolent action, have change-oriented demands and goals, are sustained over time, and involve some degree of unity building and organizing” (Hlatwayo & Mangongera, 2020, p. 7). These movements may appear to dissipate and reemerge as they go through a cycle of ups and downs of actions around the trigger events (Hlatwayo & Mangongera, 2020). While it is infeasible to illustrate a comprehensive
picture of every social movement, the Movement Cycle is proposed here as a starting point for understanding the Hong Kong movement and how it relates to one’s psychological experience.

The Movement Cycle was introduced by the Movement Netlab, an American-based practice-centered organization comprised of movement organizers, activists, and researchers (Benson, n.d.). This framework views social movements as a cyclical process that repeats itself historically. Figure 1 illustrates how people’s emotional state changes across the different phases of a social movement. While this framework was intended to aid activists in planning and evaluating collective actions, an organization named TRACC4 Movement (Trauma Response and Crisis Care For Movement) adopted this model as a psychoeducational tool to describe trauma specifically in social movements (Mateus, 2020). Mateus (2020) proposed that through understanding the “socio-emotional cycle of movements at an individual and communal level”, healers can begin to identify ways to support activists at different phases of the movement (para. 7). As a researcher and helper myself, this model helped me dissect the contextual implications of the protracted social movement on my own wellbeing.

**Figure 1.** The Movement Cycle. This figure demonstrates the cyclical changes in the emotional states of the public as a social movement evolves from one phase to another in time.
The stage of crisis endurance is characterized by the persistent and declining conditions of injustice, leading to a build-up of public anger (Golan, 2016). In Hong Kong, this stage lasted for years as we continued to see issues of declining democracy, judicial independence, and civil rights. The introduction of the Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill by the Hong Kong government in June 2019 served as the trigger moment for the Anti-Elab movement (Lam, 2019). Following this event was an expansive, heroic phase where massive numbers of people were mobilized and looking for opportunities for social action (Golan, 2016). The Hong Kong protests gained international awareness and evolved into a much wider call for systemic changes. This period of honeymoon often brings temporary relief and euphoria, masking and delaying the impending emotional impact (Mateus, 2020). The heightened sense of solidarity and perceived possibility for positive revolutionary outcomes cushion the effects of the traumatic experience.

With the rise of Covid-19 and the NSL, it was safe to say that the movement entered into the disillusionment phase, where the public’s emotional state crashes into an all-time low. The belief that “we would not stand another chance if we could not win even with all the sacrifice” emerges. While action occurs on a community level, the succeeding contraction phase is usually experienced alone. There is often an emergence of unhealthy coping mechanisms, rumination, experiences of survivor guilt, and feelings of grief and anger over divided relationships (Mateus, 2020), all of which indicate signs of trauma. The last stages of the Movement Cycle are reflection and regrowth, where the community prepares themselves as longer-term projects slowly build back up (Golan, 2016).

The nature of a social movement is complex in that it is both a series of past events as well as continuous internal processes. While the Movement Cycle provides a general framework
to look at the external events at a macro level, this capstone project aims to explore the internal psychological experience of care providers in Hong Kong.

**Social Movement and Population Mental Health**

With an uprising trend of social movements in pursuit of democracy and social justice in recent years, social unrest was regarded as an emerging sociopolitical determinant of population mental health (Lau et al., 2017). The prevalence of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Depression — the two most frequently cited mental health outcomes of collective actions — was often comparable to that following armed conflicts, large-scale disasters, and terrorist attacks (Ni et al., 2020a). This spoke to the gravity of the impact of social movement on population mental health and reflected a dire need for a timely nation-wide response.

The social movement continued to take a substantial toll on the Hong Kong population's mental health despite the current protests being scaled down. A 10-year prospective cohort study surveying over 1200 adults revealed an alarmingly high rate of probable depression (11.2%) and PTSD symptoms (12.8%) among Hong Kong young adults in 2019 (Ni et al., 2020b). In addition, more than half of these symptomatic participants reported an unwillingness to seek professional help for health problems related to the unrest (Ni et al., 2020b). This phenomenon may be explained by the additional legal concerns imposed by the NSL which created a significant barrier to confidential, help-seeking resources. While psychiatric services are scarce in Hong Kong (approximately 11 providers per 100,000 people) (Hou & Hall, 2019), a lot of the service burden landed on non-medical helping professionals including psychotherapists and social workers. This provided rationale for my thesis project with an aim to support care providers who are often left mitigating the service gap blindly and in isolation.
Interestingly, the psychological distress didn’t just apply to active participants of the social movement. In a meta-analysis of 52 studies from over 20 countries, Ni et al. (2020a) found that the depression rate in areas affected by collective actions increased by 7% regardless of people’s personal involvement in the protests, suggesting a community spillover effect. In general, riot-affected citizens tended to perceive positive events as less positive and experience higher negative emotional reactivity, which were linked to an increase in anxiety and depressive symptoms (Hou & Bonanno, 2018). Other researchers have found that the psychological impact of personal responses to the movement (e.g., emotional responses to media reports, interpersonal conflict with peers and family, and worrying about safety) was higher than the impact of personal participation in the movement (Lau et al., 2017). This supports my thesis in that mental health intervention should expand beyond working with only traumatized activists or protest participants into the wider community, including care providers.

**Political Violence and Political Trauma**

Traumatology research mostly focused on the impact of episodic events on PTSD. However, Hong Kong underwent over a decade of prolonged systemic oppression that continually suppresses individual voices and threatens human rights. Such movement-related trauma is complex, accompanied by multiplicative and unpredictable consequences on an individual and communal level (Mateus, 2020). Summerfield (1999, as cited in Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016) argued that post-traumatic stress following political violence is only a pseudo-condition and an incomprehensive reframing of people’s suffering without the underlying political context. This calls for more phenomenological studies to comprehend people's subjective lived experiences beyond what is described in the DSM-5 criteria. Although the psychological experience of social movements remained largely undocumented (Hou &
Bonnano, 2018), relevant studies on marginalized populations such as refugees and torture survivors are cited here to provide insights on the broad experience of political trauma.

Montiel (2000), one of the few researchers discussing trauma from a politico-psychological perspective, stated that psychological well-being and political development are bidirectionally linked. Kalmanowitz and Lloyd (2005, as cited in Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016) spoke of political violence as a challenge to the community and culture at large:

The personal consequences of violence are interwoven with the political and can include human rights violations, repression, abductions, rape, unjustified imprisonment, intimidation, … and these can impact the civilians of a country leading to a sense of vulnerability and helplessness and a feeling of un-safety and insecurity (p. 58).

Nevertheless, in most literature about political trauma, the political context does not appear to be integrated into psychological discourses and therapeutic paradigms (Matthies-Boon, 2017).

Political trauma is the result of collective, highly distressing events perpetuated by politically motivated behaviors (Vertzberger, 1997). It is instigated by people “with a political agenda that rationalizes the righteousness of enacting the traumatic event” (Montiel, 2000, p. 94). State-level authoritarianism deprives most citizens of their collective needs and resources for self-determination and decision-making. A prevalent culture of fear, censorship, and helplessness among citizens is often created by an authoritarian governance, even in the absence of direct, visible violence (Hlatywayo & Mangonger, 2020). This power differential leads to asymmetrical intergroup conflicts, as the group that identifies with the authoritarian position possesses significantly more perceived power than the other (Montiel, 2000). The traumatic effects of political turmoil extend beyond space and time boundaries of the traumatic event, leaving a long-standing impact and collective memories of the victimized group (Montiel, 2000).
In a qualitative study highlighting the post-revolutionary experience of 40 Egyptian activists, Matthies-Boon (2017) theorized trauma as a rupture of individual worldviews as well as wider social relations. In other words, it alters the existential reality and everyday assumptions about how the world works, i.e., one’s relation to self, others, and the objective world. Embedded in the socio-political contexts, political violence often creates a narrative that the world is malicious and unpredictable, relationships are meaningless, and the self is deemed undeserving (Matthies-Boon, 2017). Worldviews affect how one interprets the events, perceives the help received, the type of support one seeks (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2017). The polarization within public spheres further deepens social trauma, posing a challenge for the community to operate as a “cushion of care”. The divided community often struggles to interpret traumatic experiences as worthwhile sacrifices, contributing to a reality of indescribable despair and isolation (Matthies-Boon, 2017). While the consequences of Egyptian activism were grave, including being detained, tortured, and experiencing near-death, they held similarities to that of the Anti-Elab movement in its protracted and conflictual nature. Care providers in Hong Kong may or may not have had direct life-threatening encounters, but the continuity of oppression leaves no space and time for victims to come to terms with the constant shift in existential reality. My community engagement suggested that they also shared a forced shift in worldview, having to redefine the meaning of social justice and freedom in this nation.

Another common theme among survivors of political violence is the internal conflict between forgetting and remembering, which Herman (1992, as cited in Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2017) described as the “central dialectic of psychological trauma” (p. 2). As to how grief researchers would conceptualize loss, the aftermath of political violence is a process of both yearning for the past and coming to terms with reality (White & Fessler, 2013). This experience
of internal conflict is shared by my community of interest. Part of them needed to cope by denying and emotionally distancing themselves from the current socio-political events. Meanwhile, another part of them reflected an underlying will to proclaim aloud their experience, as the consequences of civil unrest were often inevitable in their personal lives. Individuals in social movements have to constantly adapt to a polarizing struggle between dread and hope, engagement and disengagement, as well as fighting and surrendering.

Gray’s (2014) work with refugees and survivor children described political violence as tormenting and uncertain, in which the foundations of trust, safety, and interpersonal relationship are undermined. While research has assumed that healing from political trauma should take place in comfortable and war-free contexts, Montiel (2000) stated that it often realistically occurs in unstable and impoverished environments, as people may not afford to migrate to a politically safer place. Psychotherapeutic interventions must accept these contextual realities. Matthies-Boon (2017) also argued that healing from political trauma requires socially embedded means of coping and cannot take place solely within private spheres. Empathetic community spaces are necessary to help one “reintegrate” and “reinterpret” traumatic experiences as having served a purpose on a personal and structural level (Matthies-Boon, 2017). While we cannot guarantee that these spaces are truly safe, it is only within held, relational contexts that people could receive emotional validation and collectively re-construct their ruptured worldviews. Therefore, my project argues that community-based interventions must begin by first fostering human connection that aims to provide a sense of belonging and an opportunity to reframe or re-tell stories.
Challenges for Care Providers

In addition to what was aforementioned, prolonged social unrest brings unique challenges and personal impact to healthcare providers, who are often the first-hand respondents for traumatized citizens and protestors. It puts care providers outside of their usual therapist role as secondary witnesses, as they are also direct victims of this collective trauma. Firstly, care providers are exposed to and at risk of indirect trauma during these times of collective distress. Indirect trauma is an umbrella construct that encompasses a series of interrelated challenges, including compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious trauma (Knight, 2013). It is used to describe the impact that working with trauma survivors has on practitioners, including the recollection of traumatic events shared by clients, loss of empathetic capacity, or development of the belief that the world is an unsafe place (Knight, 2013). With reference to Middleton et al. (2021), vicarious trauma for therapists exists across three realms — within therapy sessions, within their professional role, and in their personal lives. Within sessions, there may be inevitable triggering moments of transference and countertransference. Within the profession, political depolarization and the productivity culture at large can create significant barriers to help-seeking, which creates systems that are prone to burnout. In their personal lives, professionals may cope by means of dissociation, disengagement, and high-risk behaviors (Middleton et al., 2021).

Secondly, while they are traumatized themselves, care providers often have to take on multiple roles to fill the societal gaps due to the limited helping resources. Ho et al.’s (2014) study addressed the challenges for teachers to mitigate the post-disaster stress of their students while being victims of this traumatizing event. Collective disasters can lead to an immediate and unprecedented shift in one’s professional roles. Likewise, the changing political circumstances in
Hong Kong have caused an ongoing shift in clientele, institutional policies, and care provider roles. Examples of care provider roles include hands-on support on the frontline and spreading crisis management resources. Other examples of more indirect, community-wide support include providing psychoeducation, building healer networks, and coordinating activism efforts (Mateus, 2020). The complexity of this collective crisis further leaves care providers in navigating their changing roles in isolation and with growing danger within the political sphere.

Thirdly, there is a tendency for caregivers to fuse their helper role with other aspects of their entire identity (Powers & Engstrom, 2020). They often have to put down their own grief and loss in order to focus on the helping responsibilities (Ho et al., 2014). Attending to the primary role of a helper poses risks for an internal imbalance that would hinder recuperation and negatively impact one’s wellbeing and long-term client care. These personal needs of care providers are often overlooked (Mateus, 2020). As healing resources go into service recipients, there is often inadequate support for this community during these times of post-traumatic stress.

**Self-Care and Community Care Among Care Providers**

Under the current socio-political climate and capitalist culture, care providers whose work surrounds social justice are particularly vulnerable to activist burnout (Powers & Engstrom, 2020). Existing literature stressed the importance for helpers to employ proactive self-care measures in order to renew, reorganize and develop themselves (Masson, 2019). The American Counseling Association Code of Ethics conveys the importance of self-care by stating that “counselors engage in self-care activities to maintain and promote their own emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual well-being to best meet their professional responsibilities” (2014, Section C). However, self-care is not merely about being more equipped for our professional roles, but also about caring for our own intrinsic values and identities, including why we do what we do.
and who we are fundamentally beyond our professional work (Powers & Engstrom, 2020). Under the continuous systemic oppression, the core values which we uphold as care providers, such as social justice and equality, are often shattered by the authoritarian political agenda.

I also argue that the lack of self-care should not be framed as a personal weakness or responsibility during these times of civil unrest. Rather, the practice of self-care should include recognizing that there are macro-factors that are both contributors to burnout and outside of one’s control. Self-care does not need to be completely self-reliant especially when it is a by-product of the larger political climate. Solidarity is what unites us in struggles. In post-conflict contexts, the most affirming sense of shared meaning among each other often emerges in the content of community conversations (Johnson, 2017; Wengrower, 2015). Although tending to individual grief was important, it is necessary to highlight that there is still a community despite devastation. As opposed to a politically-charged combative space, a respectful peer support space can offer the opportunity for helpers to find healing and allyship through a sense of belonging and solidarity.

Using the Arts as a Therapeutic Modality

Studies have found promising outcomes for using expressive arts interventions with victims of civil unrest and political violence (Aranda, Zárate & Panhofer, 2020; Dieterich-Hartwell, Goodill & Koch, 2020; Kalaf & Plante, 2019). Somatic scholars suggest that the legacy of trauma and oppression are often stored as non-verbal, image-based, and sensorimotor memories (Gray, 2017). Particularly in a Chinese population, where verbal expression of feelings may not be appropriate to the political climate and align with collectivist cultural norms (Ho et al., 2014), non-verbal means are essential in the recognition and appreciation of the somatic,
cognitive, and emotional effects of social movements. Art used within a community also “bolsters the morale of groups to create unity and social solidarity” (Jones, 2018, p. 51).

Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) is a deeply embodied therapeutic modality that engages the mind, body, and heart in a restorative process (Gray, 2014). As the most primitive form of communication, movement helps to foster a body-mind connection and allows one to access traumatic memories (Dieterich-Hartwell et al., 2020). DMT offers opportunities for one to become “more aware of their bodies, increase tolerance for sensation, access greater movement repertoire, and reclaim some bodily authority or agency within their lived experience of oppression” (Cantrick et al., 2018, p.196). The arts also allow for creative self-expression which promotes the development of one’s inner resources and resilience (Aranda et al. 2020). Within an aesthetic container, participants are allowed to explore ambiguity and choose how much they would like to reveal in the process. By speaking and using the arts of writing, movement, and images in a group, individual experiences can be given a voice — “not to be analyzed, studied, or explained, but to be seen, and acknowledged” (Rogers, 2011, p.29).

Development of This Project

This thesis sought to understand the psychological experience of care providers in the ongoing social movement in Hong Kong. This community engagement initiative was intended to meet three general needs of care providers: validating shared experiences, providing emotional release, and fostering community cohesion (Ho et al., 2014). To explore the psychological impact of social movement while addressing political contextual considerations (Montiel, 2000), the Movement Cycle was adopted as a central theoretical framework of my workshop. It served both as a psychoeducational model to help define these macro-determinants and as an artistic prompt for a trauma-informed, embodied exploration for the community. This framework was
also intended to create a therapeutic structure to foster a sense of safety and predictability that is paramount to the work of political violence. Informed by Kalmanowitz & Ho’s (2017) Inhabited Studio, my community engagement workshop centered around the connection between embodied and visual/symbolic representations of participants’ experiences. Through providing an arts-based, communal processing space, I reflected on my own experience as a care provider via witnessing my participants and a series of my own embodied, artistic exploration.

Method

My Community Engagement Efforts

A community consists of people linked by social ties who share common interests and perspectives, and in this case, a geographical location and cultural roots. In this project, my community of interest was expressive therapists and therapists-in-training from Hong Kong. As it was essential for me to apply an arts-based methodology, I invited specifically expressive therapists due to their comfort level and skills in using the arts as the main modality for inquiry, self-reflection, and communication. A virtual, community engagement workshop titled “Moving Through the Movement Cycle: A Peer Support Group” was held in March 2021.

My community engagement process began with five individual, structured conversations with my colleagues from Hong Kong who worked as care providers during the time of this social movement. My goal in these conversations was to gain an understanding of the relevance and significance of my topic to the community. The intention of these meetings is not to “experiment,” provide therapy, or educate, as doing so would be unethical and further exploit the community (Hacker, 2013). Rather, it was a peer-led space to support each other and deepen our understanding of this social phenomenon collectively.
As my main channel of recruitment for my workshop, I sent out an email to all professional and student members of the Hong Kong Dance/Movement Therapy Association. In this email, I provided a pdf document outlining my thesis topic and introducing the Movement Cycle (see Appendix A). A brief outline of the experiential activities was listed to elaborate on what to expect in the workshop. To better shape and design my workshop, I sent out a registration google form so I could preview participants’ basic demographics, their availability for the weekend, and their hopes and expectations for this space. I also invited previous colleagues whom I talked to individually in a similar format. Finally, a flyer with confirmed meeting details was sent to all registered participants (see Appendix B).

**Considerations in Recruitment and Community Engagement**

To protect people from violating the NSL, people’s participation or political stances on the movement were not asked or prompted for discussion. To maintain a small, closed group with a maximum of six people, all group members were required to pre-register via a google form. Within this close-knitted profession, it was probable that interested parties would already have known one another beforehand. This worked in favor of my project as a pre-built group cohesion would enhance a sense of safety on this sensitive, politically-charged subject. A private meeting link was only sent to participants who confirmed their attendance. During recruitment, it was made clear that the session would not be recorded or transcribed. I stated that any identifying information or specific verbal content shared would not be reported. Instead, my writing would focus on how my subjective understanding of the topic has changed following my community engagement. Some colleagues have previously expressed concerns for data privacy on certain China-owned virtual sites. All participants were provided with six options of video conferencing platforms. All expressed a preference and agreement in using Zoom.
Traditional research involving communities is often highly researcher-driven, using the community only as a laboratory (Hacker, 2013). However, knowledge should not emanate only from academia. Community-engaged research exists on a continuum of community involvement, engaging them throughout the research process from question identification and methodology development to analysis and dissemination of results (Hacker, 2013). This was demonstrated in my project in the identification of community-relevant research questions and the invitation for people to take part in creating this peer-led space. However, due to the project’s time constraint, I was not able to fully incorporate the participatory nature of community-based research.

Adopting principles of community-engaged research, I worked to foster a sense of shared leadership, mutuality, and collaboration. Prior to the virtual workshop, I spoke with individuals to inquire about their comfort level and emotional readiness on the topic, their hopes and expectations, as well as the kind of support they needed in this space. During recruitment, I also presented a brief, tentative outline of the workshop, together with my research questions, roles, and intention for facilitating this space. I invited and incorporated feedback into adjusting my research topic and workshop facilitation. All group members were asked beforehand about the values that they wished the group could uphold, such as respecting confidentiality and individual differences. In particular, the importance of maintaining confidentiality was discussed and verbally agreed upon by all participants prior to the workshop. My research findings and artistic reflection were presented to some participants for the purposes of member-checking as well as a continuation in the sense of community.

**Research Methodology**

Understanding a complex social phenomenon requires learning from those who are experiencing them directly. I applied principles of phenomenological research, which seeks to
understand the essence and commonality of lived experiences within a group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In my workshop, participation numbers were not prioritized, and specific outcomes were not prompted. Instead, feelings, thoughts, and memories were emerged and explored through mindful, open-ended, artistic exploration. By paying attention to the aesthetics of the moment, an arts-based researcher can understand multiple perspectives and hold the emotional content without abdicating from finding a “truth” (Kawano, 2018).

To track my progress, I kept a journal where I documented in detail my community outreach and engagement efforts, as well as the personal insights gained from interacting with my community and my thesis consultant. I took detailed notes during and after my workshop. I also created a digital folder where I stored my arts-based exploration using dance, visual art, poetry, and music to help inform my understanding of the topic. My artistic reflection was done before and after each community encounter, i.e., the group workshop and individual conversations. An embodied response can open up alternative ways of understanding the lived experiences of the participants, capturing the intention, justification, and feelings of purpose that would not have been spoken (Kawano, 2018). With reference to Kawano’s (2016) method of Embodied Listening, I created a final dance to integrate the emerged themes I picked up from participants as well as my own reflection. I also used Laban-Bartenieff Movement Analysis (LBMA) as a self-observation tool to derive meaning from my embodied responses.

**Workshop Participants**

Six participants attended the two-hour workshop. Their ages ranged from 25 to 60. Two identified as male and four as female. Half of them were in Hong Kong while the other half were in Massachusetts during the workshop. Hence, there was a time zone difference of 13 hours among group members. Most of them identified as “Hong Kongers” and/or “Chinese” as their
nationality and ethnicity. They were mostly dance/movement therapists or DMTs-in-training while one was an expressive arts therapist. Some participants were also social workers or clinical psychologists, both were recognized helping professionals in Hong Kong. Their helping work ranged from non-profit organizations and private practice to mental health research and tertiary education. A few participants identified to be Christian or Catholic. Participants have all known or met some other members of the group, if not all, prior to this project. Cantonese was everyone’s primary language, but they were all fluent in English. Everyone shared some common knowledge of the movement and its ongoing progression.

**Workshop Outline**

The workshop began with a verbal check-in among group members. A movement warm-up geared towards grounding and fostering a sense of self-containment was led, following which I introduced an opening ritual to embody and reiterate our group agreements including confidentiality. A collage reflecting the group’s vision and hopes for the workshop was also presented (see Appendix C). The main portion of the experiential was an embodied exploration of the Movement Cycle, where participants responded with improvisational movement and other artistic means to a textual description of the cycle that I composed (see Appendix D), integrating information from Golan (2016) and my knowledge of how it applied to Hong Kong. As a form of non-verbal sharing, participants “moved out” their experience and responded to each other in pairs with the intention of peer support and encouragement. Lastly, the group ended with a verbal discussion of the creative process and a closing ritual to symbolize resilience moving forward. In the aftermath of collective trauma, rituals performed in a therapeutic structure can aid in establishing safety, community restoration, and emotional expression as one transitions from one stage of life to another (Dokter, 1998; Kawano, 2018). Table 1 summarizes the brief outline
of the workshop, and a more elaborate description of this workshop is listed in Appendix E. The workshop lasted for about two hours and was facilitated in a mixture of Cantonese and English.

Table 1

*Workshop Outline Using a Dance/Movement Therapy Approach*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Outline</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Verbal Check-in | • Introducing our names, current locations, helping work  
                  • Emotional check-in |
| Body Warm-up & Opening Ritual | • Enhancing self-containment via exploring body boundary  
                                 • Focus on breath, body, and space  
                                 • Opening ritual to embody shared group norms and agreement  
                                 • Presenting my collage reflecting the group’s hopes for the workshop (Appendix B) |
| Theme Development: The Movement Cycle | • Presenting my thesis topic and the Movement Cycle visual framework  
                                          • Movement exploration on the Movement Cycle (Appendix C)  
                                          • Artistic reflection using movement, visual art, or writing |
| Non-verbal Witness & Response | • Taking turns to share a movement phrase to reflect our experience  
                                 • Witnessing and responding in pairs using movement  
                                 • Group mirroring as peer support |
| Verbal Sharing & Closing Ritual | • Verbal processing and sharing  
                                     • Closing ritual to symbolize the connection between the past, present, and future |

**Results**

**Community Conversations and Workshops**

During individual conversations with my colleagues, I learned about the challenges they encountered in relation to the social movement and the resources they felt were missing in the community. All of them shared some kind of chronic physical and mental fatigue due to the constantly evolving socio-political situation, yet felt that there was no time and capacity to rest and effectively perform self-care. As the movement generally required people to be steel-hearted, little room was left for personal reflection and introspection. Hence, they generally expressed difficulty in emotional processing, identifying their psychological needs, and integrating reality. They also started to notice somatic symptoms of distress in themselves and their clients after the
protests had been dismissed, suggesting that the contraction of social movement has begun to reveal the masked psychological impact of the unrest. Due to the increasing legal complications and phenomena of social division, they disclosed a tendency for self-censorship and feeling cautious around other colleagues and clients. It was also professional challenging to manage countertransference and hold space for when politically-charged issues and polarized opinions surfaced in a therapeutic setting. While everyone sought emotional support from trusted colleagues, the impact of the social movement was not an explicit agenda that had been discussed in the profession. There were limited government assistance and affordable community resources to support traumatized or affected citizens in their mental health. As helpers, some felt unqualified to pursue these services without acute PTSD symptoms. However, all seemed to agree that there were unresolved collective trauma and an existing service gap, suggesting that a community processing space may be worth trying for.

This project offered me insight into how I experienced the social movement interoceptively on a bodily, sensory level. To capture my observations as a witness, I improvised in dance to reflect the group’s embodied experiences and art pieces during the Movement Cycle exploratory portion of the workshop (see Appendix F). This dance was guided by integrating four types of movement — gestural, literal-descriptive, interpretive, and expressive — to portray the different layers of what I witnessed (Kawano, 2016). Based on the shared textual information, the gestural movements were used to deduce the feeling of a word, phrase, or sentence, while the literal movements depicted concrete words and/or abstract concepts (e.g., “upward”, “endurance”, or “power”). Using interpretive movements, I embodied my subjective understanding of the shared content. Lastly, based on non-verbal elements of our conversation
(e.g., movement, voice, visual art), I incorporated expressive movements to reflect the non-linguistic, aesthetic information.

In the *uprising* phase, my body began with sustained, bound, direct, and repeated core-distal movements. I then moved with increasing weight, rising and spreading reach in crescendo and explosive phrasing. There was an active use of the vertical and sagittal plane, accompanied by an upward eye gaze. This reflected goal-oriented social actions and a stronger sense of self, action, and community. The images that emerged for me during this uprising phase were a ball of bright light, an expanding troupe of soldiers, crashing waves, and blooming flowers.

In the *disillusionment* phase, my body slowed down and shifted into a sustained, bound, light, and indirect effort state and shape flow with near-reach movements. I observed from the group a quality of stillness, tension, and enclosing. There was a repeated play between falling and rising, representing the balance between giving in and regaining control. Eye gazes gradually shifted downward, reflecting a feeling of disconnection and isolation. I felt a desperate need for deep, audible exhaling during this time. I thought of the images of a dark and silent hole, an empty well, a broken glass, a chaotic tornado, and an aching heart.

Finally, in the *regrowth* phase, effort qualities were generally free flow, indirect, and sustained. There was a very gradual, non-linear rise from the ground to a more upright, seated posture. Near-reach self-touch and swaying rhythms emerged in even and repetitive phrasing. I felt a need to move mindlessly and indirectly across space. Nevertheless, across all three stages, the group’s movement carried the most variety at the regrowth phase, implying the individual differences in this healing process. I thought of the images of a layer of mist, a gentle breeze, a fresh sprout, and a floating boat.
Overall, although this group may not have experienced life-threatening violence from the unrest, they shared several similar narratives with populations who have like traumatized activists, refugees, and torture survivors. These experiences included ruptured beliefs towards others and the world, the cumulative distress from the continuous adaptation to systemic changes, and the anxiety about an increasingly dangerous future (Matthies-Boon, 2017; Montiel, 2000). My participants also described prominent emotional themes of sadness, fear, apprehensiveness, avoidance, helplessness, confusion, and depression. Their body reflected an underlying tension, a sense of weight, and exhaustion throughout the exploration. This suggested that the community may be currently experiencing the downhill, contraction phase of a social movement. After the workshop, many participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to process the forgotten reality and be held by the arts and the group. Some shared a newfound understanding and acceptance of their lived experiences in the past two years, while some described regaining some sense of agency and empowerment.

The peer support focus of the workshop aimed to provide a supportive communal space for providing emotional release and validating challenges within the helping profession. Although the group was not specifically prompted to discuss their professional journey in relation to the movement, my observations reaffirmed to me the value of community care during this time. Drawing from the movement-and-response portion of the workshop, I noticed a positive shift in group affect and expansion in movement repertoire. While I was not able to showcase our collaborative choreography in the group, I recreated a dance afterward to reflect our non-verbal sharing and my experience of being witnessed by others. Derived from the dance, this community engagement process offered four major values — listening, learning, attuning and holding, and expanding (see Appendix G). Interestingly, the quality of these movements was
very similar to my embodiment of the regrowth phase in the Movement Cycle — a period of sustained recuperation while still carrying the weight of the movement aftermath. This suggested the success of this project in validating shared experience and providing community support, which had a positive “cushion of care” and recuperative effect on this group.

**Intersectionality of My Psychological Experience**

The progression along the Movement Cycle is not a linear, straight-forward one. Throughout this project, I gradually transitioned from the phase of disillusionment into reflection and regrowth, as evidenced by comparing my embodied journal from a year until now. I noticed in my body an increasingly expansive use of kinesphere, inner-outer flow, and carving tendencies, reflecting a growing readiness to reconnect with myself, others, and the world. However, my process has taken me a full year. While I had the chance to introspect and reflect, my community may not. This informed my decision during the workshop to meet them where they might be by providing ample time for embodied processing. My own journey suggested that the collective healing process is deeply personal and must take time. This also served as a reminder for me that as a care provider, I cannot create or induce resilience, as it is a process rather than a checklist of personal traits (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2017). It was only through a non-outcome-oriented exploration with a trusted community that I finally found some sense of closure and meaning in my own experience.

The unfortunate aspect of any stage models like the Movement Cycle is that people interpret them as a fixed process that one must pass through accordingly. However, through embodying the Movement Cycle, I discovered that while the external events may follow a cyclical process, my internal experience came in no particular, logical order. They existed on an intersecting continuum and should not be categorized into stages. During my exploration, I
experienced in my body a strong resistance against fitting these narratives within discrete parameters. For example, I found that my body held more anger when I was embodying depression and disappointment, and that the feeling of denial was present throughout the ups and downs. In an art response I created (see Appendix H), I portrayed this intersectionality by emphasizing the dynamic quality of the bodily elements and overlaying them over the politically-charged background images.

Although my topic was specifically about the perspectives of care providers, I realized that it felt both unnatural and challenging to separate my embodied experiences into discrete categories of my identity, as well as into fixed stages. Johnson (2017) described oppression as complex and dynamic, thus compartmentalization risks neglecting intersectionality and oversimplifying one’s experience. Personally, the social movement has the most primary, immediate impact on my identity as a Hong Konger while the impact on my helping roles was only a by-product. For example, the uncertainty and hopelessness I felt in my helping work stemmed greatly from the despair and fear I felt for my city’s future every day. It would have been impractical for me to single out my helping experience without first examining my whole identity and raw personal reactions to the movement. This informed my decision to meet people where they were by inviting my participants to inquire into their experience as a whole instead of specifically their role as care providers. My embodied learning suggested that research on the psychological experience of social movement should take into account one’s complex, intersecting embodied identities. My process also revealed that practitioners should beware of the discrepancy between intellectualizing objective information and inquiring from a subjective, embodied level.
I found a lot of resemblance between my experience in this ongoing unrest and the experience of grief. Loss extends beyond tangible losses and death to also include symbolic losses when something meaningful for a person has been taken away (Aranda et al., 2020). Grief is our internal reaction to loss while mourning is the external manifestation and process of grief (Rogers, 2011). Grief theorists describe grief as a journey consisting of shock, denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and lastly acceptance (Rogers, 2011). Likewise, my participants and I went through a journey of grief, especially as we shared the disillusionment over the movement and what could have been. It had been a struggle to accept this transitional reality and fight against the powerless notion that any civil action for justice was now perceived as a “lost battle”. This “loss” was not only on a national level, but also posed extensive personal impacts on our lives, such as losing our democratic values, freedom of speech, free economy, the legal justice system, and thus our general way of living. In Appendix H, I included an image I created along with a description to illustrate my embodied experience of grief in this social movement.

**Implications for Care Providers**

Conducting such a personal project required my continuous, parallel internal reflection and recuperation. There were unavoidable feelings of resistance throughout exploring a topic that may otherwise be censored in Hong Kong. Because of this, I repeatedly practiced examining my own needs via means of art, dance, and community conversations. In order to maintain the sustainability of my work, I came to learn the distinction between the needs of this thesis and the needs of my own. The process also revealed to me the intricate balance between attuning to another and maintaining my own personal boundaries as a care provider. As I was used to putting down my own feelings in order to focus on my helping responsibilities, the project expanded my understanding of the concept of self-care — there is value in honoring my whole
identity and holistic well-being outside of my helping work. I was made aware that I do not just carry a helper role. More importantly, I was able to draw inspiration and strength from my roles as a colleague in the helping profession, an ally to the greater cause of social justice, a family member, and an affected citizen who cares deeply about my city. While prior research views disengagement as a negative outcome of vicarious trauma (Perron & Hiltz, 2006), my process suggested to me that disengagement can in fact be a positive self-care and coping strategy during protracted times of chaos.

As the facilitator of this project, I gained a deeper, embodied understanding of what it meant to be a “wounded healer”. My somatic countertransference was evident throughout the project. A memorable moment was when I narrated the Movement Cycle in the workshop — while the technicality of my facilitation confined me to a still, sitting posture, my body and voice were both trembling. This moment felt as though my body was being aggressively shaken by a strong external force, leaving me frozen, anxious, and confused. This experience resembled feeling stuck in between the fight and flight responses as a care provider is exposed to indirect trauma in their work. From my observation, I also picked up from the group an impending pressure that demobilized their body, which triggered in me a recollection of vivid memories and suppressed feelings towards the topic.

To reflect this conflicted experience as a “wounded healer”, I created a blackout poetry piece to narrate my internal dialogue (see Appendix I). As the facilitator to such a personal issue, I felt the great power and responsibility that came from being in the position to evoke raw emotions in my participants. Meanwhile, there was also a lot of fear and uncertainty about whether my work would actually facilitate positive therapeutic change. Our group agreements reiterated to me the importance of offering nonjudgmental witnessing to both the self and the
other without an agenda for change (Rogers, 2011). Overall, I noticed that the more I tried to change my countertransference reactions, the stronger they became. Rather, present-moment awareness and transparency were necessary to hold the space. For example, revealing to the group my embodied responses and making immediate adaptations were paramount to acknowledge my suppressed “wounds” and re-ground myself. Being a care provider in Hong Kong entails actively seeking ways to regenerate in the moment and in the long run.

The Movement Cycle embodiment in the workshop was designed with reference to mindfulness research (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2017), where participants began by sensing their body interoceptively. However, while mindfulness helped to establish a sense of safety, physiological and emotional regulation, I gradually experienced in my body the need to move bigger and stronger as I continually delved into such an emotionally difficult, personal topic. For example, I joined the group in their artistic self-processing by parallelly improvising as a participant-observer. My movements then were mostly indirect, far-reaching, and strong, accompanied by deep audible breaths. This suggested the importance of a full-bodied, cathartic release of energy as a way to regain internal agency after exploring embodied trauma and oppression. To modify my workshop for future community-based interventions, researchers may consider allowing opportunities for more expressive, improvisational movements aiming towards emotional release. The practice of authentic movement may be incorporated to invite such release in the presence of a compassionate witness.

My Research Process

My research objectives have changed throughout the process. Society often dictates an outcome-oriented tendency to disengage from the past, “let go”, and move on (Rogers, 2011). As a helper, we may experience a similar desire to “treat” one’s trauma, especially when the issue of
concern is also personal to us. This desire was apparent when I initially designed my study to be a participatory action research, which would require participants to take on the role of involved co-researchers. I had visions of formulating a list of action steps and community resources in response to this city-wide mental health crisis. However, after talking to the community, I sensed an existing strong momentum to “keep going” in their process of adapting. I realized that my colleagues have already been taking whatever action they could have. The form of “activism” for our profession at the moment was not demanding more change or putting more responsibility on our shoulders. Rather, what the community needed was taking time to mourn and acknowledge the work that we have already done. Therefore, to meet my community where they were, I decided to reframe the workshop into a processing and peer support space instead. Drawing from the concept of regenerative activism (Gray, 2020), the appropriate form of “action” is achieved by reconnecting with ourselves and sources of strength. With the knowledge that social movements are cyclic, we must recognize that maintaining a sustainable, impactful fight must include fighting against our tendency to always keep fighting.

This project also made me reflect on what it means to be an “ally” or “supporter” for social justice. At first, being an “ally” gave me immense pressure and the desire to be perfect, to speak up, and to “help” people. Initially, I was predominantly concerned about all the challenges that would come with engaging with this population, such as the possible legal consequences, confidentiality concerns, media censorship, or participation numbers. I wanted to provide some kind of a solution to the community. However, the act of allyship is not achieved by working to liberate people, but rather by creating venues for people to liberate themselves (Patel, 2011). This project served as a reminder that the role of a helper is not to be the “savior” for someone. Instead, the best I could do sometimes is to open up pathways and provide emotional, social, and
community support for people to narrate and re-author their stories. The role of care providers is to accept whatever level of emotional expression one is willing to express (Rogers, 2011). As I spent the past year witnessing stories, I practiced not to overanalyze, but to sit with the discomfort, take risks, and approach one’s experience with curiosity and truthfulness.

**Discussion**

Incorporating arts-based psychotherapeutic techniques with political considerations using the Movement Cycle and a DMT approach had several benefits in my project. Firstly, the framework provided contextual acknowledgement of the significant impact of the ongoing systemic oppression and civil actions on one’s internal experience. Without having to ask the participants to verbalize these historical events, the model offered a way to help conceptualize the disorganized past events into the digestible phases in the cycle, where meaning can begin to be reconstructed. Secondly, by first introducing this framework in the initial stage of my community engagement, it served as a therapeutic structure for participants about what to expect while still offering freedom for creative self-expression. This sense of transparency and agency was an important element in a trauma-informed intervention and was emphasized throughout my recruitment process. Thirdly, expressing oneself through means of movement and art facilitated a distance from the traumatic experience itself. While they may not feel safe to verbally reveal too much, the arts enabled a look from beyond for participants to explore the past social actions, and thus facilitating acceptance and self-expression (Peljhan, 2015). Additionally, facilitating an embodied awareness of oppression-induced trauma is essential in social justice activism (Johnson, 2017). Therefore, adopting a DMT approach offered opportunities for knowing one’s body and cultivating resilience in the long term. Fourthly, the cyclical nature of the model implied an ever-changing shift that would continue internally, externally, and within the
community. This suggested to me that perhaps the closure I was seeking for the Anti-Elab movement lies in the possibility that the fight would somehow continue in the future. Overall, all participants responded with agreement and curiosity when asked whether the Movement Cycle appeared applicable to the context of Hong Kong.

Nevertheless, there were several limitations to this study. First, some participants suggested that translating the Movement Cycle into Cantonese could allow for more culturally and linguistically appropriate use of this framework in a community setting. Second, since conversations were held entirely online, body movement observation and kinesthetic attunement were confined to a Zoom screen, thus limiting the process of fostering cohesion and embodied attunement. Third, even though the meetings were not recorded, there were inevitable concerns about data privacy and confidentiality on a China-owned conferencing platform. Practitioners working with this population should be highly sensitive to the political context and potential legal implications of their interventions. Forth, this project was bound by a limited timeframe. Therefore, only one community workshop was successfully held with trained expressive therapists. While this group of helpers may be trained at recognizing their own emotional boundaries, future exploratory work on victims affected by social movements should extend caring attention to establishing a sense of safety, transparency, and choice (Gray, 2014). Lastly, while my community and I shared a similar cycle of political violence and abuse of power, my conclusions were only indicative of my own learning and should not be used to create a generalization of the whole population. It should also be noted that the described experiences were compounded by the effects of the pandemic (Tso & Park, 2020).
Conclusion

Overall, this thesis highlighted the psychological implications of the Hong Kong social movement beyond the general concept of “trauma” from the perspective of care providers. This community engagement project with a small group of Hong Kong expressive therapists offered an opportunity and artistic means for emotional processing, meaning making, and peer support within the profession. By bringing awareness to one’s somatic, emotional, and cognitive reactions during different phases of the social movement, one may be able to recognize trauma reactions, manage responses, and strengthen resilience in the long term. I gained practical insight into what it meant to be a “wounded healer” and an “ally” during these divided times. I argued with this project that community-based interventions with this population should consider integrating the political context into psychotherapeutic paradigms as both were deeply interrelated. Although the Movement Cycle framework used in this project appeared to be an appropriate therapeutic container, future studies could adapt this model into a more culturally fitting one, such as translating it into Cantonese or redefining social action in the context of Hong Kong. Further research can continue to enrich the understanding of political trauma and what collective healing looks like for this population. It would also be helpful to continue building a psycho-political clinical toolbox and accessible community resources for helpers in ongoing civil unrest. With the understanding that collective transitions as such take time, initiating a series of community support groups efforts instead of a one-time workshop may continue conversations about the implications of social movement on the helping profession.
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Appendix A

Selected Slides for My Project Introduction Used in Recruitment

How I frame our “collective experience”

The Movement Cycle model from the Movement Netlab views social movements around the globe as a cyclical process that repeats itself historically. This diagram postulates how the general emotional experience of the public changes as the movement evolves. But of course, there are other things that we are holding, including the pandemic and other work/life challenges, which are all important and welcomed in this experience.

Outline for our group experience
(subject to change depending on your responses)

Guided Body Check-In
Group Norms/Values Setting

Artistic exploration of the
Movement Cycle via
expressive arts

Group sharing & reflection

Introducing & Discussing
The Movement Cycle

Authentic Movement to
explore your journey as a
care provider

Collaborative art-making
Closing Ritual
These were sent to all professional and student members of the Hong Kong Dance Therapy Association (HKDMTA) prior to the workshop. Although some information on the slides has changed since then, this was a way of informing participants of what to expect before engaging in exploratory work on a sensitive topic.
Appendix B

Workshop Flyer

HK CREATIVE ART THERAPIST COMMUNITY: A PEER SUPPORT GROUP

MOVING THROUGH THE MOVEMENT CYCLE

an art-based processing space
facilitated by: Sofia Lee
Second-year DMT Student at Lesley University

(HKT) March 7th, Sun, 9:00-10:30am
(EST) March 6th, Sat, 8:00-9:30pm
Zoom link will be sent via email

Please come as you are with comfortable clothes for movement and bring some art supplies that you have
See you soon!
Appendix C

An Artistic Representation of Group Norms and Values Agreed by Workshop Participants

This collage reflected the group norms and values that my community shared and agreed to, which included holding uncertainty, support, inspiration, a space to listen and be listened, a safe space for self-processing and self-expression, and being present and here.
Appendix D

Script for the Embodied Exploration of the Movement Cycle

1. Grounding

Close eyes or soft gaze. Put one hand on your heart and one hand on your belly. Do a gentle body scan. Notice the points that feel stuck and the points that feel free. The points that are moving and the points that are still. Check in with your body where you are now. I want to take time to acknowledge the things we are holding, related or unrelated to the movement. They play an important part in our experience, and they’re welcome here.

2. Uprising/Expansion Phase

There is usually a trigger event, a wake-up call. From a place of endurance, people move towards a place of expansion and uprising. Massive numbers of people are beginning to be mobilized. They are looking for opportunities for action, for allies, for support. They begin to build structures for others to participate in. People wish to get all hands on deck. To build as much as they can. To bring new people in. There is often a hyperawareness, hyperfocus, hyperarousal. The movement is becoming more widely recognized, as people continue to own their power. Arguments are spreading and penetrating mainstream media and people’s lives. In this phase, it may feel as if the movement takes over physically, digitally, mentally. At some point, there may be a moment of relief, where people see the hope for change, and celebrate their victories.

Take another minute to notice what is coming up in your body. How is this uprising stage of the movement manifest in your body? Is there a focus or intention in the way that your body wants to move? What emotions are coming up? How does this uprising phase relate to you? Find a pause in this portion of our exploration wherever you are, perhaps a gesture or a
posture. Take a moment to gently notice what has come up. With a few deep breaths, let go of this phase or shake it off.

3. Disillusionment Phase

The movement is usually received with a backlash from authority figures and the people with power. Legal and systemic barriers begin to rise, appearing more prominent than ever, taking over the mainstream media. There is a decline in energy and participation numbers. Efforts for outreach decreases. Key organizers and affected parties are burnt out. This is the emotional crash period, when whatever was bottled up and closeted during the uprising phase comes roaring back. Action may happen in the community, but this contraction phase and isolation happens alone. What is left behind may be a shattered reality, a disillusionment and deep disappointment that comes from discovering this mismatched reality that is out of their control. There may be rumination, anger, grief, mourning of the losses, mistrust in relationships, survivor guilt, pressure of your role, second guessing, confusion, distancing… Here, people try their best to hold on and adapt. And the people need rest and healing.

Take another minute to let your body explore this downhill phase. What is already shifting when you come into this contraction phase? How does your body want to move? How are you reacting to this collective transition? How are you doing? Find a pause in this portion of our exploration wherever you are, perhaps a gesture or a posture. Take a moment to gently notice what has come up. You may choose to stay where you are as we move into the next phase, or option to soften or let go of your experience just now. Wherever you are, connect back to your breath and center.

4. Regrowth Phase
This is a hypothetical phase of regrowth. This is a time when people take space to reflect, learn, strategize and heal. It happens slowly, gradually and subtly. The process is not linear. There are still ups and downs, dips and rises, movement and stillness. Like little waves. Reflection allows for important lessons about ourselves, about what we stand for, why we do what we do, about others and the world, about what’s most important and worth fighting for. Perhaps the movement builds back up in different ways. Perhaps we discover new meaning and purposes. Perhaps we await another unpredictable wave to come. We plant the seeds for things that haven’t had the chance to grow. We adapt and continue to move in the everchanging normal, like we always do, right now and together. With a sense of weight, we find strength.

Take another minute to allow the words to land and reach you. How is your body reacting to them? Is there a shift in your sense of weight, how you’re moving in space, or with time? Connect to what holds your body up, the inner strength in this position, allow your body to move from those places, spread the energy to other parts of your body. Slowly take up more space. Lengthen the spine. Shift attention back to your feet on the ground. When you’re ready, you may come back to the screen.
Appendix E

Full Description of Session Outline

Table 1

*Workshop Outline Using a Dance/Movement Therapy Approach*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Outline</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Check-in</td>
<td>• Introducing our names, current locations, helping work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Emotional check-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Warm-up &amp; Opening Ritual</td>
<td>• Enhancing self-containment via exploring body boundary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Focus on breath, body, and space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Opening ritual to embody shared group norms and agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Presenting my collage reflecting the group’s hopes for the workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Appendix B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme Development: The Movement Cycle</td>
<td>• Presenting my thesis topic and the Movement Cycle visual framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Movement exploration on the Movement Cycle (Appendix C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Artistic reflection using movement, visual art, or writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-verbal Witness &amp; Response</td>
<td>• Taking turns to share a movement phrase to reflect our experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Witnessing and responding in pairs using movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Group mirroring as peer support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Sharing &amp; Closing Ritual</td>
<td>• Verbal processing and sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Closing ritual to symbolize the connection between the past, present,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The group began with a self-introduction and emotional check-in among the group members. Each member introduced their name, helping work, and current location. They each creatively shared a food dish to reflect their current states of mind and intentions stepping into the space. I introduced my role as the group facilitator and researcher. As a warm-up, I led a guided movement experiential geared towards grounding via attending to the breath, body, and space. Participants traced along the outline of their bodies with different imaginary materials to foster a sense of self-containment. I invited them to move this “body container” across space, and to locate a comfortable distance from the screen as their anchor point for when they needed to step back.
With respect to the group norms and values that the participants shared prior to the workshop, I then led an opening ritual to embody and reiterate these agreements — confidentiality, speaking only from ourselves, respect, honesty, flexibility, openness, non-judgmental listening, and holding complexity — using gestures attending to the head, eyes, ears, mouth, and heart. In the aftermath of collective trauma, rituals performed in a therapeutic structure can aid in establishing safety, community restoration, and emotional expression as one transition from one stage of life to another (Dokter, 1998; Kawano, 2018). The group then reviewed the group’s vision for the workshop— to gain or receive support and inspiration; to listen and be listened; to have a safe space for self-processing and self-expression — through a visual collage that I created (see Appendix B). All members took a moment to witness the collage and add in elements they felt was missing in the picture.

As a recollection, I restated my thesis topic and objectives in a PowerPoint — that is to process and support each other in our lived experience in the on-going social movement using a DMT approach. I communicated that in addition to being a care provider, other identities and experiences (e.g., our personal issues or the pandemic) that we held were also important and welcomed in this space. As the main framework for defining our collective experience, the Movement Cycle was visually presented and briefly explained as a model originated from the U.S., viewing social movements as a historically, cyclical process. The group intended to explore our current needs in the context of Hong Kong, rather than to intentionally portray our past experiences. Since the verbal prompts may trigger unpleasant content or traumatic memories, I reminded the group to respond from a place of where their current self was and attend to their boundaries. Participants were given the option to turn off their cameras or step out of the camera frame as needed.
The main theme development of the group focused on three general phases of the Movement Cycle — the uprising, the contraction, and the regrowth. As I read out a description of the cycle (see Appendix C), group members were invited to attend to their bodily sensations and respond to the text with improvisational movement. This piece of text was a synthesis of information Golan (2016) and my own interpretation of how it applied to Hong Kong. With reference to mindfulness work, the group was asked to intentionally and nonjudgmentally focus on the moment-to-moment unfolding of the body-mind experience. During the transition from one phase to the next, I invited brief moments of pause, re-grounding, and re-centering. This present-moment focus promotes cognitive flexibility and helps one re-establish an internal sense of time rather than being stuck in the past (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016). This part of the experiential was mostly facilitated in English, as I chose to preserve the meaning and affective salience within the original language used in this American model. This was also partly due to my own limitation for doing the Chinese-English translation.

After the 20-minute movement exploration, the group further explored the cycle by the means of visual art, journaling or dance/movement. Instrumental music was offered and played in the background. During this time, I parallelly engaged in and filmed my own movement reflection in order to capture my immediate, embodied experience as a group facilitator and witness. After 15 minutes, I offered the opportunity for a collaborative movement-and-response as a form of non-verbal sharing and cohesion building. Participants were grouped in pairs. Each member took turns to represent what stood out in the exploration and their current states of mind using a movement phrase or gesture. Their partner then responded using movement with the intention of witnessing and supporting their peer. After that, everyone mirrored back the response to the mover altogether. The group then engaged in a verbal sharing of how the creative
process felt and their takeaway messages. Lastly, I guided the group through a brief movement closing ritual to embody resilience moving forward (Kawano, 2018). The Warrior pose in yoga was introduced to symbolize the transition between the unpleasant past, where the back hand reached, into the ever-changing future, where the front hand extended towards. Both hands then came to the center of the chest to reflect the self and the community as sources of strength. The whole group lasted for about two hours.
Appendix F

Screenshots of My Movement Reflection of The Movement Cycle

*The uprising phase*

*The disillusionment phase*

*The regrowth phase*

This is a combination of my own perspectives and my observations from the group.
Appendix G

Values of Community Care

**Listening**

**Expanding**

**Learning**

**Attuning & Holding**
Appendix H

Artistic Representation of My Experience of Grief and Loss in Relation to the Hong Kong Social Movement

The creation of this image began with my improvising to a music playlist with songs that reminded me of my own grief experience during the Hong Kong social movement. I recorded and took screenshots of my movements. This image was then edited using Pixlr.

The symbol at the top of the image is the Bauhinia flower on the Hong Kong national flag dripping in blood. The ocean in the background was inspired by a motto from Bruce Lee — “Be Water” — which was a main tactic adopted by Hong Kong protestors in this leaderless movement. The crashing of the waves, as well as the images of teargas, represented the merciless, ever-changing social injustice and political violence perpetrated by authorities in power. I concealed parts of my face to portray the loss of self in the process of shaping and adapting to my identity being erased and my voice being silenced. This image encompassed the
polarity between resistance and submission, denial and acceptance, as well as fighting and mourning.
Appendix I

Blackout Poetry: My Own Resistance in Conducting This Project

rabbit-hole
tunnel
down,
stopping
very slowly,
to wonder
next,
too dark to see

Do you
think you could manage it?
to ask them
perhaps I shall see
began talking

fear of
killing somebody,
past
How brave
I wouldn’t say

I’m afraid,
But
I wonder?

it
matter
hand in

a
good opportunity
to listen
practice
wonder
idea

hand
the truth:
tell me
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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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Expressive Therapies Division
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Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Helpers in Divided Times: The Psychological Experience of Care Providers in the On-going Social Movement in Hong Kong, A Community Engagement Project

Date of Graduation: May 22, 2021

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

Thesis Advisor: Meg Chang, EdD, BC-DMT