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Power of Circle: A Literature Review

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 3, 2024

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Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Dance/Movement Therapy

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Abstract

This literature review includes research on the history of and cultural roots of circles; role of belonging and our social engagement system in circle and group processes; and healing and witnessing in circle. This literature review highlights supportive research exploring reasons we are drawn to the circle formation, how circle spaces are powerful, and why this structure may help to bring ease and safety to our nervous systems. The research reviewed includes an exploration of the history of circles in dance/movement therapy (DMT); how circles facilitate healing of the social engagement system; and how circles can contribute to healing on the individual level through increased sense of belonging, connection, coregulation, and perceived safety. The purpose of this research review is to highlight studies and supportive research into the power and potential for the future of group therapeutic work and the power of circle.

Keywords: Circle, Dance/Movement Therapy, Group DMT Therapeutic factors, Attunement, Social Engagement System, Restorative Justice Circles

Introduction

*“Everything the Power of the World does
Is done in a circle. The sky is round,
And I have heard that the earth is round
Like a ball, and so are all the stars.
The wind, in its greatest power, whirls.
Birds make their nest in circles,
For theirs is the same religion as ours.
The sun comes forth and goes down again
In a circle. The moon does the same
And both are round. Even the seasons
Form a great circle in their changing,
And always come back again to where they were.
The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood,
And so it is in everything where The Power moves.”*

— Black Elk, Medicine Man of the Oglala Sioux Nation

These powerful words from Black Elk beautifully lift up the symbol of circle and the connection to circle within and around us. The power and safety in circling is in our bones and in the natural elements that surround us. Indigenous traditions from around the world have gathered in ceremonial circles for reconciliation, ritual, healing, and community building for millenia. The circle with its inherent non-hierarchical structure is a return to a knowing from our past. The power structure in a circle is shared, evenly distributed, of the community. We all have a felt

sense experience of sitting in circle but how many times have you considered the power of this formation and why we as humans are drawn to circle? To begin, I ask the reader to consider all the ways and examples of gathering and being held in circle they have experienced in their lifetime? **What makes circle process powerful in healing and restoring community?** What does this formation mean to you, how has it supported your healing, your work, your community? How does it feel to gather in circle? Is it safe, confrontational, relational, connected, intense? Is the act or ritual of gathering in circle something that you have considered or explored? What is it that makes a circle such a powerful symbol of unity and connection? As humans, we meet and gather in circle in a variety of ways and, yet, may not question or explore with curiosity the structure of a circle and how it can be a tool for healing, connection, and belonging for ourselves, our families, and our communities. This literature review will take a closer, deeper look into supportive research that explores some of the reasons we are drawn to the circle formation, how circle spaces are powerful, and why this structure may help to bring ease and safety to our nervous systems just by its inherent container.

The research reviewed here looks at the history of circles in dance/movement therapy (DMT); how circles facilitate healing of the social engagement system; and how they can contribute to healing on the individual level through increased sense of belonging, connection, coregulation, and perceived safety.

In thinking of why I am passionate about circles and the inspiration for this subject, I look to the quote above from Black Elk. To me a circle is a symbol of our connection to one another, to the natural world around us, and to the oneness of it all. I have long been inspired by the ways in which our nervous systems attune, connect and the process of coregulation. I have also been curious as to what exactly makes a circle such a powerful form and intervention? A

circle, by its very essence, creates a safe container for both what is within the circle and what is outside of the circle. The circle is the one structure that can hold paradox, transmute tension, and hold a space of inclusivity without hierarchy. (Jocelyn Steury, Personal Communication, March 2024). Paradox and conflict are neutralized with the circle. In looking to nature we can see the power of the circle and many examples of its use to receive energy and evenly distribute it. The circle space is relational, exposed, and holds within its container unconditional belonging and equality. Circle is resonate and recognizes the collective.

There is a simplicity in the structure of circling, but also a beauty and a power. A power of the individual in the collective, where every voice is heard and equal, where we can be held in the circle and also do the holding when we are strong. As dance/movement therapists, we learn group processes and often intuitively begin and end our group work with a circle formation. The circle space shows up in many different areas of our life and we are naturally drawn to the circle.

I have long been interested in the social, cultural, and psychological purposes of circle and the power of gathering in this form. Inherent in the circle setting is the witnessing. My first experience with circles in a therapeutic capacity was for conflict resolution and restorative justice, which was the initial inspiration for this paper. I experienced first hand the power and transformational capacity of circles and combined traditional restorative justice circle framework with dance/movement therapy group techniques. My interest began while working for a yogic nonprofit that was going through a challenging and transformational time in its community after abuse revelations came to light. Myself and others received facilitation training and helped to facilitate online gatherings for the community to come together, share, and process. Additionally, we held a series of in-person healing and reconciliation circles at a summer gathering. I felt much apprehension and fear in the lead up to the in-person circles because of the many different

viewpoints and sides in attendance. We designed the circles using Kay Pranis' circle keeper's structure (Pranis, 2005) and under the guidance and counsel from restorative justice consultants. I also added dance/movement therapy interventions to the traditional circle structure to bring an embodied aspect to the circles I was co-facilitating. In this format, agreements and a clear structure are set to ensure the safety of the space for all in attendance. The circles were well attended and the feedback was positive. The circles held the space for reconciliation and healing and for participants to feel safe to express and process. The experience showed me that there is a true power when we come together heart to heart, face to face circle. Furthermore, this circle experience was a beautiful example of the power of planning and a clearly defined process. If the boundaries and agreements are clear and set and agreed by all beforehand, the circle space is strong and can hold whatever is brought to it for healing. It was this experience that inspired my further research into the topic of circles and the use of circle process in dance/movement therapy, community groups, and conflict resolution spaces.

I believe that the work of remembering and integrating ancestral healing knowledge, of connecting to the collective healing of the earth and of the feminine, and cultivating liberation is all connected to the circle in order to reintroduce circle practices to our therapeutic spaces, our schools, our families, and our communities. It is by shining a light on the connections between modern therapeutic, evidence based practices and the deep cultural and traditional wisdom practices that are the foundations for transformation and change.

Methodology

My methodology primarily focused on researching keywords such as: "circles for connection", "dance/movement therapy circles", "circles for healing", "polyvagal theory and

circles”, “social engagement system and groups” and “circle process for reconciliation” in the Lesley library, google scholar, and academia.edu. I also immersed myself in the subject with podcasts, media, and images. In particular, the interview with Osprey Orielle Lake influenced my overall approach to the research collection and presentation (Brower & Orielle Lake , 2024). While I have included evidence based and peer reviewed sources, I also find inspiration from the collective, art, nature, and this human experience.

In consideration of the historical roots of circle process and the history of appropriation of Indigenous traditions, it was important to me, as an identifying white cisgender female, to include in this research review an acknowledgement and appreciation for the cultural origins of historical Indigenous circle practice as a model for healing and reconciliation. As a part of this honoring, I hold gratitude for the Indigenous Peoples of all the lands that I reside on today and recognize the rich Indigenous history of the place I call home. I am currently gratefully residing on the ancestral and unceded homeland of the Schitsu’umsh (sti/shumsh), Kalispel, and Ktunaxa Nations. In my research, I sought out work created by Indigenous writers, researchers, and artists to anchor this thesis and acknowledge the long historical use of circle practice in Indigenous communities. It is my intention with this literature review to bring awareness to practices such as circling in a way that connects these practices to the source of its Indigenous roots and wisdom.

In my research I discovered an embodied meditative practice that uses the painting or creation of a circle on the outbreath of a breath cycle. It is the Japanese practice of enso and is a symbol in Japanese calligraphy that represents a moment what the “mind is free to let the body create” (Waller, 2023). It is a reminder to stay present. For several days, in my morning practice, I created an enso as a meditative embodiment of my thesis topic and to further embody the concept of circle and the infinite connection to the breath. An example of an enso I painted

previously can be found in the Appendix. My inspiration for writing on this subject of circles was led by the mystical and natural elements of this symbol. By including an artistic and meditative practice, I found I could stay connected to this inspiration in my heart.

Review of Literature

This literature review explores the attunement, attachment, and healing of the social engagement system through group interventions, specifically circles and circle processes. The resources highlighted explore the ways in which dance movement therapy and other therapeutic uses of circles and restorative justice practices align with and support the key tenets of dance/movement therapy: mirroring, witnessing, belonging, attuning, connecting. Additionally, the research presented explores how the therapeutic alliance inherently created in groups facilitates a sense of belonging, connection, coregulation, and safety and how the relational processes of dance/movement therapy interventions and circle framework can enhance this.

There are many areas to focus on in looking at group dynamics and the power of circle process and group therapeutic environments compared to individual or dyad focused therapy. My research here is primarily focused on what is happening under the surface that drives us to intuitively gather in circles; what is happening on a nervous system level in circle spaces; and how this shared horizontal, non hierarchical, inclusive space creates a safe container that can hold whatever needs to emerge within this space. Additionally, how does the group dynamic differ from dyad focused and what do the other group members and shared experiences bring to the healing and connection space. My research looked at supporting research into the motivation to gather in circles, where it is done well and has historically been used both in dance/movement therapy and in healing and community building spaces around the world. This literature review uncovered key assumptions and questions that will be further explored and centered on the use of

circles in dance/movement therapy; a brief history of and cultural roots of circles; the role of belonging and our social engagement system in circle and group processes; and healing and witnessing in circle. The purpose of this research review is to highlight just a few of the studies and supportive research into the power and potential for the future of group therapeutic work and the power of circle.

Mirroring and Attuning: The use of Circles In Dance/Movement Therapy and Historical consideration of the circle in other cultural dance forms

The circle, like a sphere, is a symbol of the self (Jung, 1964a, 1964b; Winnicott, 1986, as cited in Karampoula, 2018). It represents totality, the wholeness of the psyche, and whatever form it takes (in mandalas, worship of Gods, rituals, myths, dreams, etc.) signifies completeness. It represents the perfect and eternal and has no beginning or end. Subject to a perpetual motion it brings to mind the concept of infinity; of what is completed and restarted. It can be seen as a conclusion and a fulfillment and is characterized by harmony. (Karampoula & Panhofer, 2018)

The historical use of circle process for healing and connection and the theories and key tenets supporting dance/movement therapy lend themselves to further investigation and exploration as to the inherent components of the process and wherein lies the power. Circle dances formed part of community life from when people first started to dance, marking special occasions, rituals, encouraging togetherness and providing a sense of belonging especially when coping with difficult personal and collective changes (Jerome, 2002). The symbol of the circle is of special significance in Indigenous cultures and talking circles are “often credited to the

Woodland tribes in the Midwest North America, who used it as a form of parliamentary procedure” (Lewis Mehl-Madrona, 2014).

The village dance circle ritual has survived cultural change, and remains significant on the continent and in diaspora contexts. The circle is embodied in practices such as *sabar* in Senegal, *dounduba* in Guinea and Mali, ring shout and breakdance cyphers in North America, *capoeira* and *samba* in Brazil, and even refugee camps in Sudan (Browning, 1995; Hazzard-Gordon 1996; Keita and Billmeier 1999; James 2000; Kringelbach 2013, as cited in Banks, 2019). The dance circle is also fundamental to other cultures such as the Lakota of North America, the Catalan of Spain, and Paiwan of Taiwan (Kwok 1978; DeMallie 1982; Brandes 1990, as cited in Banks, 2019). “It is a kinaesthetic experience that bridges thus the “symbolic and knowing realms” (Ellis, 200, as cited in Banks, 2019). Furthermore, hip-hop dance educator Tehmekah MacPherson called the circle a pedagogy of love, inclusiveness, and mutual empowerment. (Banks, 2019)

Given this history of circles and their use for ritual and community connection, it is not surprising that the circle formation also emerged within dance/movement therapy. The use of circle is frequently observed in dance movement therapy, often emerging during a dance/movement therapy session. The circle is especially connected to the work of Marian Chace. While the therapeutic factors of circles are known and appreciated, they are rarely documented or researched. “Dance/movement therapy is defined by the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) as the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual, for the purpose of improving health and well-being.” dance/movement therapy is based on the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit.

In a dance/movement therapy session the circle is the basic figure (Steiner, 1992, as cited in Karampoula, 2016), a powerful movement metaphor that has been used by mankind since ancient times in dance (Schott-Billman, 2000, as cited in Karampoula, 2016). Many well-known approaches in dance/movement therapy stem from Marian Chace's interactive approach (Karkou, 2006, as cited in Karampoula, 2016). Although she had no formal model describing her work (Chaiklin & Schmais, 1979, as cited in Karampoula, 2016), it is characterized by emphasis on the communicational aspect of dance (ibid; Karkou & Sanderson, 2006, as cited in Karampoula, 2016). Her approach introduced the Chacian Circle, a very frequent and widespread technique in dance/movement therapy Western practice today. The therapeutic factors of the circle formation in dance/movement therapy are fascinating but are sparsely documented. (Karampoula, 2016)

Much can be found in the dance/movement therapy literature and texts by Schmais and others to support group circle work in dance/movement therapy since its inception. The structure is often applied to set the container at the beginning of group work and to close a group session. "The group ended the session in a circle, coming back to how they started, but with a greater awareness of each other and of the dance of therapy. Exploring individual issues led to a greater sense of individuality and community" (Schmais, 1998).

A thorough literature review by Karampoula and Panhofer's focused on the use of circle in dance movement therapy and looked at the therapeutic aspects of circling, comparing the elements of dance/movement therapy group circle process with group therapeutic factors. It is a comprehensive look at circling as it pertains to dance/movement therapy and includes supportive research for elements such as fostering a sense of belonging and healing within circles

(Karampoula & Panhofer, 2018). Specifically, this literature review compares and connects essential elements of circling in dance/movement therapy and where these overlapped with known group therapeutic factors. The analysis of this is represented in the table below. The study's findings supported that the inclusivity and lack of hierarchy in a circle structure "enhances therapeutic relationships through movement" and "moving together in circle can facilitate a concrete sense of connectedness between group members (Borges da Costa & Cox, 2016; Violets-Gibson, 2004). Additionally, the research found that circle dance, "provides an opportunity to engage in touching, holding, moving together gently, and to be part of a group; this promotes re-attachment and connection by overcoming communication difficulties through the use of non-verbal means and verbalization of those experiences whenever possible and as required (Hamill et al., 2011, p. 712) (Karampoula & Panhofer, 2018). When looking at the essential elements of the circle in DMT literature, we can see from the comparison table that there is overlap with a number of therapeutic factors.

Table 3. Comparison of essential elements found in circle DMT and group therapeutic factors.			
Basic elements of the circle found in DMT literature	Therapeutic factors in group psychotherapy Foulkes (1964) and Bion (1962)	Therapeutic factors in group psychotherapy Yalom and Leszcz (2005)	Healing processes in DMT groups. Schmais (1985)
Mirroring-echoing of emotional states	It creates the "mirror reaction".	Imitative behaviour	
Container-Holding	Bion's (1962) concept of the "container/contained"		
Physical contact-touch-holding hands			
Social relations-connectedness	Fosters social integration and relieves isolation	Development of socialisation techniques	Integration
Solidarity-Global Values	Activates the collective unconscious or condenser phenomena	Universality	
Learning from each other	Promotes exchange	Interpersonal learning	Education
Be part of the group		Group cohesiveness	Cohesion
Vitality effect		Installation of hope	Vitalisation

(Karampoula & Panhofer, 2018).

A number of authors, such as (Karampoula & Panhofer, 2018) have recognized the sacredness and power of the circle and the creation of both a container and a feeling of being contained by the facilitator or therapist. When considering the role of boundaries and potential limitness of body boundaries, the container created by the circle can help to define self by the creation of boundaries. “The circle sets the space inside and defines the space outside.” (Karampoula & Panhofer, 2018). Additionally, as cited by (Beard & Koch, 2016) the circle can act as both a container and a ritual space. The ritual circle space is powerful and creates solidarity, a sense of community, inclusiveness, and equality. In addition to an intervention, the circle can be used as a tool or ritual for opening and closing space. “Circles are not spaces where something has to be done, achieved, or performed but places for connecting and for purely being in the Here and Now” (Longman, 2017). The ritual of circle can be extremely helpful in setting the therapeutic container and the agreements of a shared space. The form of the circle can act as the container for what emerges, and can be a collaborative effort with the therapist and group members in therapeutic applications. In my own experience facilitating a variety of circles, I have found this to be true and in my opinion, one of the most defining powerful aspects of circle process. It is by the inherent safety, belonging, and attunement that occurs in a boundaried circle space, that what needs to emerge to be held, seen, and healed in the circle will come forward.

I had an experience leading a circle with a group of fourth grade students in an elementary school during my internship as a school counselor. I introduced an intervention to a group of 4th grade students called the web of connection. In this activity students sat in circle as a group would each share something about themselves verbally to the group. After sharing, the holder of the string would hold a section and toss it to a student with similar experiences. The prompts for both circles were the same. These two groups were very similar in demographics and

had similar instructions and group agreements beforehand, but two very different things emerged from the experience. The first group's sharing was at a very surface level. The second group started with a student sharing a vulnerable grief experience that was weighing heavy on their heart. This sharing opened the door for others in the circle to share similar vulnerabilities and the circle became a place where many of the students were sharing deeply and openly. What fascinated me was the clear example of how this experience was a confirmation of the concept of *what needs to emerge in the circle will emerge*. Those students were able to help one another process and also to connect on a deeper, more vulnerable level.

CIRCLE AS CONNECTION and the ROLE OF ATTUNEMENT and THE SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT SYSTEM

“There is something that happens in a group that can never be matched by individual work alone. My mission is to help unlock this potential.” Gibran River

Returning to this question of how therapeutic groups help to foster nervous system repair, particularly related to polyvagal theory and the social engagement system and how can the key components of a therapeutic group setting and group circle process collectively support nervous system regulation and healing? In a circle process, we are communicating with one another on both a verbal and nonverbal way. Our nervous systems can attune to one another in the space and on the informational processing level, we can meet one another in the circle space and hold the paradoxes to equalize.

When considering the power of circles and looking at group dance/movement therapy work in general, it is important to consider research related to polyvagal theory, attunement and

healing of the social engagement system through group interventions. Polyvagal Theory focuses on the autonomic nervous system, especially the vagus nerve, and the role it plays in regulation. Created and developed by Stephen Porges, PhD, the theory describes the physiological/psychological states and how safety, co-regulation, and connection are critical to our overall mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing (Porges, 2011). This theory emerged from an understanding of the interconnectedness and the relationship between the body and the mind. At the core of polyvagal theory is an understanding of how our relationships and our social behaviors impact our mental and physical health. Additionally, how individuals co-regulate their behavioral states. In other words, how we attune and connect to others is directly related to our overall well-being. “From a polyvagal perspective, group therapy is especially suited to provide the neural exercises required for promotion of the neural circuits involved in co-regulation and emotional regulation” (Porges, 2017).

In recent years interest in the mind/body connection and the role of the nervous system has increased. As dance/movement therapists, the research supporting the connections between the body, mind, and nervous system and how they communicate, naturally aligns with many of the key tenets of dance/movement therapy. Dr. Porges’, polyvagal theory,

provided us with a more sophisticated understanding of the biology of safety and danger, one based on the subtle interplay between the visceral experiences of our own bodies and the voices and faces of the people around us. It explains why a kind face or a soothing tone of voice can dramatically alter the way we feel. It clarifies why knowing that we are seen and heard by the important people in our lives can make us feel calm and safe, and why being ignored or dismissed can precipitate rage reactions or mental collapse. It helped us understand why attuning with another person can shift us out of disorganized

and fearful states. In short, Porges's theory makes us look beyond the effects of fight or flight and put social relationships front and centre in our understanding of trauma. It also suggested new approaches to healing that focus on strengthening the body's system for regulating arousal. (Van Der Kolk., 2015, p.80)

There exists a considerable, and growing, body of literature on attunement in the group setting and how therapeutic groups help to foster nervous system repair, particularly related to polyvagal theory and the social engagement system. Research by Burlingame & Strauss supported the assumption that group psychotherapy has been shown to be equivalent to individual therapy for many disorders (Burlingame & Strauss, 2021). In addition to effectiveness in reducing symptoms, groups offer members a sense of belonging, purpose, hope, altruism, and meaning throughout treatment (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020).

Studies of polyvagal theory and the implications for its application in clinical mental health settings are well documented. Additionally, studies that connect group processes and interventions to nervous system regulation, a sense of belonging, and healing of the social engagement system are available. Dance/movement therapy provides a nourishing, open space for nonverbal expression, and therapeutic processing that fosters the sense of being seen, understood, and socially connected, all of which fosters emotional, psychological and social well-being leading to experiences of improved mental health and quality of life (Barton, 2001; Brauninger, 2012; Geller and Porges, 2014; Homan, 2010, Weare, 2020).

Therapeutic change comes from relationship, which relates to the work of Dan Siegal and his concept that “relational trauma is healed by relationships”(Siegal, 2017). This concept is the essence of therapeutic work and connected to the role of the witness in healing. Emotion transformation and emotional regulation “are particularly salient within group approaches, given

the relational resources of the group” (Marmarosh et al., 2022). In Amber Gray’s work with polyvagal theory and dance/movement therapy, she discusses how isolation is one of the most “debilitating and tragic consequences of being traumatized” but this is not explicitly stated in the DSM-5 diagnosis of PTSD (Gray, 2017). “And yet, feeling alone may be the most definitive hallmark of being traumatized. Fear increases isolation” (Mezey, 2024). Findings from a study of group therapy interventions with couples who had survived torture discovered that the treatment of relational symptoms is fundamental and that the most successful treatment was in a relationship context (Morgan, 2018). Additionally, Bratsberg’s research on social connectedness and group process with older adults found that “Social engagement has implications for health and psychosocial well-being; therefore, its absence could contribute to loneliness and isolation (Park, 2009 as cited in Bratsberg, 2013). “Psychotherapy groups have often been recommended as important components of treatment for reducing survivors' feelings of isolation and shame” (Saunders, 1999). This approach to treating the feelings of isolation through group therapeutic interventions such as dance/movement therapies makes sense in this context and yet Johnson & Makinen findings suggest that trauma treatment worldwide often focuses on addressing individual mental health symptoms more thoroughly than relational symptoms (Johnson & Makinen, 2003).

“Because the relational models of group therapy inherently provide a social environment that requires its members to emotionally engage each other interpersonally in recurring face-to-face social interactions, it naturally promotes many of the most crucial elements necessary for the promotion of the neural substrates required for attachment and affect regulation” (Porges 2017). This witnessing, feeling seen and heard supports individuals to

navigate and co-create their healing journey by helping them attune, connect and evolve in healing communities that nurture resilience.

It is essential that an individual feels a sense of relative safety in order to engage in the therapeutic process, to take in information, and connect. “Group therapy can be an ideal environment for people to develop vagal tone because their nervous systems can experience a neuroception of safety, which then allows the body to enter into the parasympathetic nervous system. The parasympathetic state is one of connection, openness, and curiosity” (Collen, 2023). Our social engagement system not only signals but also searches for safety by sending out cues of safety for connection and we do that through our vocal tone, our movement, facial and eye movements. “We communicate one nervous system to another, that it is safe to approach and to come into relationship” (Dana, 2018). “Polyvagal theory further postulates that neuroception not only monitors safety cues from the environment but is also a “bidirectional communication between the nervous systems” (Geller et. al, 2014, p.182) of people around us influencing our ability to socialize and create healthy bonds with other individuals. Neuroception influences our ability to interact with others via the social engagement system through “potent cues of safety or danger that are detected by cortical areas and...are communicated interpersonally from movements of the upper part of the face, eye contact, prosody of voice, and body posture” (Geller et. al, 2014; p.184, Weare, 2020).

A noteworthy article on group psychotherapy that bridges polyvagal theory and attachment theory by Porges and Flores provided further support into how the interactions and emotional state regulation of group therapy dynamics can have a reciprocal positive impact on group members. In this article the authors also touch on the connection with emotional regulation and co-regulatory relationships as indicators of our physical and psychological health.

Furthermore, Porges goes on to specifically highlight that the simple act of putting chairs in a circle promotes proximity and face-to-face emotional engagement in a safe environment and that this enhances the neural mechanisms responsible for the emotional regulation of the group members' nervous systems (Porges, 2017). The authors discuss how when an individual's social engagement system is online that it is less likely to have unnecessary activation of the fight/flight or freeze defensive responses and that from a polyvagal perspective

The active engagement of one person's social engagement system with another person's social engagement system lies at the heart of all psychotherapy, interpersonal learning, exploration, discovery, change, emotional regulation, and the maintenance of mutually gratifying relationships. Our social engagement system works in tandem with neuroception to promote the development of “self at best” which means a person is better able to read social cues, manage recurring co-regulatory relationships, detect friend from foe, and develop a rich capacity for emotional literacy with self and others. (Porges, 2017)

This article goes on to link the engagement of the social engagement system with group therapy and the increase in self-awareness that comes from having healthy relationships in a safe environment. Additionally the article discusses how a group can help to strengthen the social engagement system by enabling an individual to more accurately be able to read social cues and respond to the different nervous system states, further supporting the connection between healing the social engagement system through group and circle spaces.

CIRCLE AS BELONGING, CIRCLE AS HEALING

As humans we long to belong and seek this belonging in our relationships and communities. Group therapeutic spaces and circle work provides an opportunity for healing in

relationships, contributing to a sense of belonging. The human need for belonging and how that is impacted by an individual's perceived view of the meaningfulness of their life or sense of purpose, was researched in a series of four studies by Lambert and others. “Humans seem to have a biological need for social relationships (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Baumeister (2005) contends that the human thirst for belonging and the capacity to understand large systems of meaning are inextricably linked in the human psyche. Therefore, one would expect the sense of having a meaningful life to depend, at least in part, on a sense of belonging” (Lambert, 2013). “Viktor Frankl (1946/1963, 1969) proposed that humans are driven to find meaning in life, and he termed this motivation *will to meaning* (Lambert, et. al, 2013). Group therapy and being witnessed in circle, is shown to facilitate this sense of belonging and meaning or purpose. “Group process can promote meaning and connectedness by enabling group members to share experiences, receive feedback, and develop connections” (Yalom, 1998). In a diverse study with correlational, longitudinal, and experimental methodologies examining the link between belonging and meaning, Lambert, Stillman, Hicks, Kamble., Baumeister, & Fincham found that “initial levels of sense of belonging predicted perceived meaningfulness of life” (Lambert, et. al, 2013). Lambert’s research looked into how a sense of belonging impacts overall wellness and went beyond looking only at a person’s positive relationships but also considered their *sense of belonging* and security in fitting in. Lambert’s research connected a sense of meaning and purpose to overall wellbeing and how this is all impacted by our innate human desire for connection and belonging. The participants of this study showed higher levels of perceived meaning when they were primed with belongingness. The result of this study supports the concept of a connection between our perceived sense of belonging and the importance it plays in our overall happiness and contentment with life.

Several recent studies on group work and attunement were included in this review including a study focused on the effectiveness of group dance/movement therapy with children and their mothers. It includes research into the level of connection and attunement between the child and mother as a result of the dance/movement therapy group experience, thus, providing background support to the questions of how we attune to one another in a group therapeutic setting that includes dance/movement therapy interventions.

A salient research study by Marmarosh and others specifically looked at group psychotherapy and the connection of positive psychology concepts. Rather than only looking at the alleviation of overall symptoms, positive psychotherapy looks at overall wellbeing indicators for growth and change. The focus of Marmarosh's research was to look at the effectiveness of group therapy on things such as a sense of belonging; purpose; hope; connection; attachment; empathy and how the facilitation of group work and group development can be used to assess the treatment outcome of these. Marmarosh considers how group therapy is unique from other interventions in that it includes aspects such as empathizing across differences, "taking accountability for personal actions, developing gratitude, and learning to forgive. Through the integration of positive psychological factors and an emphasis on both social and emotional well-being, we can deepen and enrich clinical practice and build the evidence base" (Marmarosh et al., 2022). While the research wasn't solely focused on groups, it looked at the comparison of the traditional didactic model and group therapy and how group therapy has been shown to be just as effective with specific presenting problems and disorders but it has also been found to be, in some cases, more beneficial. The study broke out the areas of belonging and of secure attachment, and also looked at the area of perspective taking and building of trust on emotional regulation. Additionally, the transformation and fostering of well-being for marginalized groups

supporting hope and the section on the use of groups for conflict resolution to facilitate forgiveness, were important to supporting the thesis statement of the power of the circle space and group work.

The role of the witness and healing through relationship is a core component of group work. “Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of emotion co-regulation and the ‘felt security’ (Sroufe & Waters, 1977) “Across the lifespan, attachment figures (e.g., parents, romantic partners, close others) can serve important functions in providing security and comfort amidst distress (Bowlby, 1988; Sroufe et al.). McWilliams (2022) argued that facilitating safety and helping clients develop more secure attachments can significantly improve their relationships and well-being. Group theorists and researchers have explored how attachment, used as a predictor variable, influences group members and leaders’ behaviors, as well as exploring how groups can foster more secure attachment among members (Marmarosh et al., 2013). Maxwell et al. (2014) found that after 16 sessions of Group Psychodynamic Interpersonal Psychotherapy, members reported a reduction in attachment anxiety and avoidance, both of which were significantly related to decreased interpersonal problems at one year post-treatment, while reduced attachment anxiety was significantly related to decreased depression at one-year follow up. “Interestingly, the significant relationship between reduced attachment avoidance and decreased interpersonal problems strengthened across time” (Marmarosh et al., 2022). Additionally, a study by Keating et al. (2014), found that group members' secure attachment within the group was connected to a more secure attachment in dyadic relationships one year after group therapy ended (Marmarosh et al., 2022).

One fundamental part of group therapy is the change and growth in the therapeutic sense that happens when there is a sense of belonging and universality that occurs. Belonging is

understood as feeling we are a part of something large or small, part of a community, and that we are welcomed and accepted. Universality, while connected, speaks more to a feeling that others can relate or share an experience. Examples of this were supported in findings from a study of trauma clients' experiences with group approaches underlined "the importance of meeting other trauma survivors in a group setting that facilitates a sharing of trauma-related experiences and results in being more prepared to encounter difficult feelings and daily life situations" (Stige, 2013). Universality helps to bring not only a sense of belonging but also a sense of alleviating shame and also validates an individual's experience (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). Research of group therapy has found that universality is consistently identified as one of the most effective components of the treatment. This sense of greater universality and belonging, was connected and related to greater symptom improvement (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020).

CIRCLE AS WITNESS: Circles for Conflict Resolution, Community Connection, and Healing

Peacemaking circles are emerging as a process and structure to encourage local community participation in resolving conflict and in matters of justice. Such circles have become recognized as a fitting approach under the rubric of restorative justice which seeks a balanced focus on victim and offender needs while enlarging the role of community volunteers in the justice process from prevention, to sentencing, to aftercare. (Pranis, 2001)

The use of circles for structuring communication and decision-making is probably as ancient as humankind (Baldwin, 1994). The current interest in peacemaking circles stems largely from the influence of native groups in Canada and the US Native American cultures, where the use of talking circles is often part of an oral tradition handed down through the generations. "In

many native traditions, circles were and are used in resolving disputes and conflicts” (Coates et al., 2003).

Restorative justice circles are strengths based and inclusive of all individuals present in the process rather than an adversarial system that focuses on criminalizing and punishment. Healthy connection, community, and attuning to others' safe nervous systems is the path to healing. The study of South Saint Paul Restorative justice circles included numerous points which supported my own experience with circles and the power of a prepared circle process. The study was a qualitative look at the “nature of circle work” and captured how participants felt the circle work impacted them and their community (Coates et al., 2003). Data from the study show that “over 40% of the circle participants indicated that having offenders take responsibility and being held accountable for their actions was one of the most important results of the circle process. As a sister of one of the offenders said, "In a circle you can't turn and run". The next most frequently identified outcome was the work and focus on future relationships between victims and offenders (Coates et al., 2003). Further support for the use of circle process in restorative practices was expanded in Bradley’s research study of building the relational capacity of students in a public high school setting by introducing the use of community circles into the classrooms (Bradley, 2022). Data from this study showed an increase in students’ sense of belonging after the six weeks study. This research stood out to me because it also discussed the benefits of a restorative practice mindset on our global community and how restorative practices focus on building and strengthening relationships and communities rather than on an individualist approach. It is interesting to consider how just this shift in thinking can impact many areas of relating and how the circle process can support this shift towards collaboration and connection in our schools, workplaces, and communities.

In addition to the use of circle for restorative justice and in therapeutic spaces, circles have also been used historically for community connection and ritual. Included in this research review is an article on women's circles and the rise of the new feminine or a reclaiming of feminine mystic of wisdom (Longman, 2018). Longman's article focused on how these women circles and the rise of women's circles globally are helping to reclaim Sisterhood spirituality and well-being. I included this in the review of the literature because it specifically speaks to women's circles. I think when looking at the idea of circle and the uses of circle in our modern world it's good to critically analyze and assess the overlap with the traditional practices of circling and this reemergence of this feminine wisdom and how that plays a part. A section of this article specifically analyzes the phenomenon of a circles and the circle movement. It interviews women who take part in these more formal circles or the informal sort of wellness and spiritual circles. The study interviewed 38 women who hosted or participated in these circles over a three year period between 2014 and 2017. Noteworthy because of its precovid context and how this world of gathering in community has shifted since 2020. Another aspect of this study that was of interest were the distinctive features seen in all of the circle spaces over the course of the three years of the participants in the study. These overlapping key features were the use of a talking stick or some sort of item to designate the individual who is responsible for speaking in that moment without interruption; the confidentiality of the circle and agreement that what is shared in the circle stays in the circle; the concept that everyone has a place and a turn and that no one talked over; that there is not a need to fix or find solutions but instead to hold space for each individual's sharing; and that there is not a back and forth dialogue. Finally, there was commonality in the space with a horizontal leadership structure, as was mentioned earlier, where everyone regardless of their cultural background, their age, their socioeconomic status, their

education is an equal in the circle space. These overlapping circle agreements and structures seen in the study of women's circles are also seen in circle process for conflict resolution, in particular the conflict resolution processes that use historical Indigenous circle practice as a model.

It is my personal opinion, and one that is supported by several sources in this review, that when looking at the power of the circle within group process, a key component is the pre-work to set the agreements, expectations, and container for the circle process. It is critical that all participants uphold and understand completely and fully that this is a safe container for holding space for what needs to emerge in the circle. Another element that came forward in this research was the concept of grounding. Specifically, healing the relational wounds through group attunement, yielding through grounding, and how the circle process can be a grounding element. This concept of healing the relational wound through grounding, comes from the beautiful, magical work of Amber Gray (Gray, 2017). In addition, this concept of that connection was also noted in the Longman article and that the participants in the study saw the circle as sacred and as a place to reconnect to their body and to the Earth and to potentially empowering force within (Longman 2017).

In considering how to lift up traditional wisdom and practices and to incorporate culturally relevant interventions, Renee Linklater's book, *Decolonizing Trauma Work*, is a wonderful exploration of healing and wellness in Indigenous communities. Her book has practical methods and resources for communities who have experienced trauma. In considering the use of Indigenous circle processes in therapeutic settings, Linklater's research and methods outlined in her book bring a lot to the conversation of how to include practices such as circling in a way that connects these practices to the source of its Indigenous roots and wisdom. Restorative justice initiatives are also referred to as "community justice initiatives" because they are

developed and implemented by communities. These programs are focused on repairing harm and attempt to “facilitate the healing process of the offenders, victims, and the community as a whole” (Linklater, 2014). “....proponents of circles as a means for "doing justice" contend that this approach does more because it draws on inherent values of traditional native ways. It does so by explicitly empowering each individual in a circle as an equal and by explicitly lifting up the relationship between justice and the physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions of participants in the context of their community and culture” (Lajeunesse & Associates Ltd, 1996; Stuart 1996, 1997, as cited in Coates et al., 2003). “Some participants reported benefiting greatly from the circle process by having a voice and stake in justice outcomes, being understood, experiencing strengthened commitment to change and healing, and mutual respect. and renewed community/cultural pride” (Coates et al., 2003).

Studies on the impact of attunement and the healing that can be found in a group setting are well documented. A 2018 study of the impact of group work with trafficking survivors found that the group attunement and empathy can be further facilitated by the incorporation of expressive therapies. The study focused on group somatic focused interventions for complex trauma treatment. “Therapeutic group experiences that engage the body in movement, laughter, and connection can be a critical element in the healing process for many trafficking survivors. By creating a safe space where a community of trafficking survivors can come together to move, play, practice curiosity, develop self-compassion, and have new shared experiences, we are offering opportunities for "body-up" re-learning and growth” (Hopper, 2018). Yet another examples is a study of group couples therapy with trauma and torture survivors found that attachment can help calm and heal the pain of trauma. Additionally, “...the best predictor of

trauma recovery is not trauma history per se but whether it is possible to seek comfort in others who offer solace and a safe haven” (Morgan, 2018).

Discussion

There is something about the circle that draws us together, both on a physical plane, but also on a frequency and attunement level. Sitting or standing side by side, hand to hand, heart to heart; no hierarchy; no need for a partner; fully experiencing being a part of the collective. This sense of belonging and community is a feeling that is missing for many in our modern, digitally focused world today that instead can foster feelings of disconnection, isolation, and disembodiment. Circle is evocative of the broader community, of that witnessing, it is non-individualistic, an evolution of community, a lifting up of a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging and witness consciousness. Modern psychology often focuses on individual pathology and the dyad focused model, while when we look to Indigenous and ancestral traditions and wisdoms, we can feel the connection to healing of and through the power of the collective. Our bodies respond to the social, facial, movement, vocal cues of those around us. Polyvagal research supports that safe, kind, welcoming, faces and voices all can bring an elevated calm state to the nervous system and body. Seeing the divisiveness in our communities and knowing first hand the healing power of circle has led to my desire to bring focus to and center the power that can be found and experienced by simply gathering together intentionally in circle. Additionally, there is a mystical element of the power and the symbolism with circles. There is a holding of the space, an opening, a witnessing that happens. It is my vision that my future therapeutic practice will focus on and be centered around healthy relating, attachment, and connection. The power of circling touches on all of these aspects. “The moving, living, breathing circle, with the according

archetypal symbolism that it carries, seems to resonate with our human need for wholeness and completion.....the circle influences the individual in various modes and levels at the same time, and designates the spheres of the self, the body and world” (Karampoula & Panhofer, 2018).

One discovery of note that came forward in my research was the connection of feminist theory, dance/movement therapy, and the role of the circle. In the thesis research of Kliewer-McClellan, the concept of the “decentering” in connection to dance/movement therapy and feminist theory is discussed. I believe that circle process is in many ways a return to this matriarchal reciprocal process for healing and that the form and structure of the circle is in its very essence “decentering”.

By intentionally incorporating feminist theory into dance/movement therapy practice, with a commitment towards equity and inclusion, we can move away from the traditional psychotherapeutic focus on pathology, and focus instead on the humanity which is shared within the lived experience of each individual identity. Using the power of decentering and dismantling found within feminist theory, dance/movement therapists can examine ways in which the practice still resides within a power-over hierarchy, and shift into a power-with model of working, with clients as the authorities on their own embodied knowledge and narrative (Kirk, 2009). In this way, dance/movement therapy can expand to its full potential as a therapeutic practice accessible to, and empowering of, all bodily selves. (Kliewer-McClellan, 2022)

In looking for ways in which dance/movement therapy can shift to this “power-with model”, circle process and structure can support and contribute in a multitude of ways. I set out

to find supportive research on the power of circles; the history of circles in dance/movement therapy; how circles facilitate healing of the social engagement system; and how they can contribute to healing on the individual level through increased sense of belonging. In addition, the research shined a light on the origins of circle process and the Indigenous roots of this tradition. It is in remembering and reconnecting to the healing rituals, wisdom, and practices of Indigenous cultures and by gathering in community spaces for healing, reconciliation, and connection that we can begin to heal in circle.

Conclusions

“When we deepen our capacity to connect, we evolve consciousness and culture—lighting the fire that sparks change.” Gibran Rivera

With this summary of supportive research on the topic of circles it is my hope that there will be a move to an emphasis in the collective towards a sense of belonging, cultivation of identity and an overall orientation towards how we survive, thrive, live, flourish and support one another in community oriented healing practices.

In looking to the future of our communities and the collective, group processes that build community and allow us to heal our relational wounds through group attunement processes, feels to me to be an inspiring way to look at the potential for the future of therapeutic work and to a collective holding of the healing at a community level. Group therapy can offer a place of collective healing that is accessible, collaborative, and community focused. There is an acute need for connection, belonging, and healing in community in our current world. “In addition to effectiveness in reducing symptoms, group offers members a sense of belonging, purpose, hope, altruism, and meaning throughout treatment (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020 as cited in Marmarosh et al.,

2022). These additional outcomes are especially important considering the COVID-19 pandemic and national/international conflicts, given the trauma, disruptions, and losses people have experienced” (Marmarosh et al., 2022).

As mental health professionals and community members, we are seeing the loss of this face to face regulation and connection in our modern world with screens, isolation, depression, and loss of community. In her book on Polyvagal Theory in Therapy Deb Dana speaks about the social engagement system and the impact of online interactions and communication on our social engagement circuits. When we engage online, the cues for safety and connection that our social engagement system uses in real life such as our eyes, our voice, and the movement of our face to receive and send signals are often lost. We need more than ever to come together in supportive community to coregulate and witness each other.

It is my intention that creating a literature review around the history, cultural roots, neuroscience, applications, and framework for circle processes will be of benefit for others in the field and seen as a resource for including circle work in their own therapeutic and community work. It is my hope that this can be a resource to inspire community leaders to bring the power of the circle forward in the world. Those who experience the power of circle will be inspired to open to the healing that can be found within community. It is a beautiful, powerful experience to witness the container that can be created in circle. It is my wish that this summary of research supports the how, the why, and the emotion behind why circles are vital to our world and this work. To close, I invite all to join me in circle....

Fireside

*Drawn by the warmth.....the light
of the safe hearts and hands*

I see.....am seen

safe as I circle

as I am embraced and held

as I am circled

as it begins and

ends ~

connects ~

holds.....flows

known in the depths of my being

to the depths of my heart and spirit

I belong

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Appendix



THESIS APPROVAL FORM

**Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy, MA**

Student's Name: Mindy Thacker

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: The Power of Circle

Date of Graduation: 5.18.24

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

Thesis Advisor: Professor Meg Chang (Signed)