

My Embodied Bicultural Experience and Dance/Movement Therapy

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May 2021

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Dance/Movement Therapy
Sarah Lawrence College

Abstract

Culture is in the everyday. It is embodied in the way people walk, sit, stand, eat, wash, breathe, and otherwise comport their bodies as they go through daily life (Cohen & Leung, 2009). Culture is multifaceted and embedded and embodied within identity. Ignoring emotions and body signals is detrimental to mental and physical health. It is possible for an individual to have a sense of belonging in two cultures without compromising their sense of cultural identity (Kim, 2002). Biculturalism allows culture to be a choice rather than something that requires purging old practices and beliefs from the self for individuals to survive (Kim, 2002).

Verheggen and Voestermans (2013) offered that integration of another's culture is achieved by embodied engagement rather than by mere instruction. However, there are limitations that need to be addressed such as inherent biases. Not attending to subconscious and inherent biases, endangers the ability to have empathy, and to be in authentic relationship with others, and has implications for the dance/movement therapist's multicultural competency in dance/movement therapy as well.

This thesis explores the embodied experience of being bi-cultural and how that experience could inform the practice of DMT to better meet the possible needs of bi-cultural clients.

Keywords: Bi-cultural, dance/movement therapy, empathy, emotions, Nicaragua, Anisabel

Culture and Identity

Culture is in the everyday. It is embodied in the way people walk, sit, stand, eat, wash, breathe, and otherwise comport their bodies as they go through daily life (Cohen & Leung, 2009). Root and Kelly (2003) add that culture is the embraced knowledge, practice of traditions, (rituals, celebrations, etc.) and values of a group of people spanning over generations, and is influenced and impacted by historical events. Verheggen and Voestermans (2013) add that identity is the continuous process of affirming who one is and who one wants to become. It is made up of the way one wishes to live according to what one thinks is best. Identity is not a fixed characteristic but instead something that continues to develop throughout time. Identity involves presenting oneself according to crucial and authentic feelings and ideas about oneself. Identity is a multifaceted phenomenon; therefore, a single label does not cover it nor does a binary category. Montero (2004) adds that the individual identities we have developed over a lifetime do not dissipate when we become part of a community but are instead shaped and influenced by how we take in our different environments. Montero (2004) emphasizes how our individuality is not lost within a community but instead can form a constructive part within that community.

Embodiment and the Body

The body is where we reside. It's where we fear, hope, and react. It is also where we constrict and relax (Menakem, 2017). Verheggen and Voestermans (2013) add that since the body is expressive it conveys meanings about the identity that we create for ourselves or that has been created for us, influenced by our environment. Menakem (2017) endorses that our bodies have a form of knowledge that is different from our

cognitive brains and that it is usually experienced as a felt sense of constriction or expansion, pain or ease, energy or numbness. Our bodies have stored knowledge about what is safe and what is dangerous. Advances in psychobiology inform us that our deepest emotions such as love, fear, anger, dread, grief, sorrow, disgust, and hope involve the activation of our bodily structures. Sekimoto (2012) shares that science treats the body as an object or a representation of physical anatomy. However, the body is not simply an object of ideological labeling; it is simultaneously a subject of an ideological act that does things according to, or in resistance to, those ideologies. Sekimoto adds that our body is the origin of expressive movement itself and it is the means through which we create a physical world, it is also the site where various social constructs (race, gender, class, ect.) intersect (Sekimoto, 2012). Mignolo (2018) offers that it is through our bodies that we reconnect to the land and earth, and that we have been trained to block the sensations from our bodies in order to give precedence to our minds.

Berrol and Cruz (2012) add that feminist theorists have noted how embodiment has been characterized by binary norms such as well/ill, black/white, and these norms are both threatened and confirmed by the existence of bodies that fall outside of them. Society places bodies into binary categories, and then labels one as better than the other (Berrol & Cruz, 2012).

Empathy

Jordan (2018) found that for empathy to facilitate change, each person must see, know, and feel the responsiveness of the other person. However, in order to feel the responsiveness of the other person, one must embody their culture, not just during a weekend workshop on cultural awareness, but live within that particular culture and build

understanding through relationship. Verheggen and Voestermans (2013) agreed that integration of another's culture is achieved by embodied engagement rather than by mere instruction. Stuurman (cited in Scull, 2018) asked how and in what historical circumstances did cross-cultural humanity become thinkable? His answer relied heavily on the examination of how, why, and to what extent some thinkers found it possible to put themselves in other people's shoes, to begin to comprehend and grant validity to foreign cultures, and develop some degree of critical distance from the culture into which they had been born. Empathy with the stranger is central to Stuurman, and the idea that we share a common humanity. (Scull, 2018).

Secondly, Scull (2018) added that a different author, Bloom, was inclined to focus on the limits of our ability to overcome bias. He suggested it is easier to feel sympathy for those most like us and because of that, empathy only distorts our moral judgments the same way prejudice does (Scull, 2018). Bloom is saying that expecting to feel empathy for everyone under every circumstance clouds our judgment and negatively affects our moral compass because human beings possess inherent biases. We do not know when our unconscious biases will arise within each of us and so we cannot expect to consistently have empathy for everyone. The nature of being flawed human beings limits our capacity to experience empathy therefore, it is not something we can rely upon consistently. In addition, Bloom thought that only a small number of people could experience empathy and that we cannot feel everyone's pain. Bloom is not saying that empathy is not productive but instead encourages us to temper our emotional responses with a strong dash of reason (Scull, 2018).

Thirdly, Scull (2018) found that author, Bazalgette, suggest that empathy comes from our genes and is a quality we inherit. However, Verheggen and Voestermans (2013) shared that the fact that all behavior can be described in terms of body chemistry does not imply that what goes on inside each separate brain or organism explains it all.

Additionally, Bloom would also disagree based on our inherit limits to overcome bias.

Personally, empathy is shaped by my culture, environment, relationships, past trauma, my inherit biases, boundaries, my current mental health, and self-acceptance. If all these components are balanced then I am more likely to experience empathy for another.

Therefore, while I understand that our biochemistry plays a role in our brain's ability to produce empathy, ultimately, I prioritize the components mentioned above because I experience them in my body and this facilitates empathy.

Emotions

Emotions are complex reaction patterns, which involve experiential, behavioral and physiological elements (University of West Alabama online, 2020). Emotions are how individuals deal with situations they find personally meaningful.

Verheggen, T & Voestermans, P (2013) offer that emotions and feelings have long been seen as the main source of disturbance of the rational process. This is partly true of course. Someone who is angry or feels humiliated may react unreasonably because he is blinded by emotion. However, Maté (2003), would argue that as we lose our emotional competence, the ability to tune into our feelings and follow their guidance, we gain verbal intelligence while repressing our emotional intelligence, in order to avoid confrontations and disagreements. As we grow up, we lose access to the internal reactions and gut feelings in order to accommodate the rational process (Maté, 2003).

Our emotional awareness is debilitated and in this process we miss learning the signs of stress in our own bodies. Maté (2013) adds that, in humans, it has been observed that the physiological stress response is a more accurate gauge of the organism's real experience than conscious awareness. Maté (2013) adds another layer, that the pituitary is a much better judge of stress than the intellect. Regan et al. (2011) explain that the pituitary gland is attached to the hypothalamus and that together they form the major sites of nervous and endocrine system interaction. The hypothalamus is influenced by sensory information entering the central nervous system, and emotions. One of the functions of the hypothalamus is emotional influence over body functions; directly involved in stress-related and psychosomatic illnesses and, in feelings of fear and anger (Regan et al., 2011).

Maté (2003) shares that "Cool"- the absence of emotion-is the prevailing ethic, where "don't be so emotional" and "don't be so sensitive" are what children often hear, and where rationality is the preferred antithesis of emotionality. Personally, I had always wondered if the suppression of my own emotions could cause harm to my health. Maté (2003) found that the suppression of emotions is linked to autoimmune conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis. Rheumatoid arthritis has "in all probability, a nervous origin." in present day language, psychological-emotional stress.

Withholding our Emotions

There are several forms of therapy that have contributed to the practice of withholding our emotions, some more than others. Antony and Roemer (2011) share that the goals of behavior therapy is to help clients develop flexible behavioral repertoires that are sensitive to environmental contingencies and are effective for the client. Antony and

Roemer (2011) add that from a behavioral perspective, a wide range of clinical problems are a result of habitual patterns of responding that have developed because of associations in the environment, which also include the internal environment such as physical sensations, thoughts and imagery. However, our ethnic culture plays a role in how we associate and react to the environment around us and, our internal environment is made up of our inner experience and our emotions. Karen (1994) shares that one of the leading figures in developmental psychology, Sroufe, found that some behaviorists were not concerned with what the infant felt. If we are discouraged, from an early age, to distrust our felt experience, one could infer that we are trained not to trust our own senses or body because they are not valuable. Maté (2003) argued that our inner experience and our emotions do give us reliable information about our health and wellbeing, and that our emotional or inner experiences are translated into potentially damaging biological events when human beings are prevented from learning how to express their feelings effectively. Personally, I think helping clients develop flexible behavioral repertoires is analogous to helping them become resilient in difficult environmental situations or interactions; however, not all clients have the capacity to reach such a goal, because of a mismatch between their ethnic culture and the new culture they are aiming to integrate into, and expecting them to meet such a goal could make bi-cultural clients feel like they do not belong.

Capitalism has played a role in the suppression of our inner experiences too. Selassie (2020) finds that in order to keep the line of workers in the factories productive, they are trained not to express any emotions because they are only there to produce. There is a link between capitalism and the suppression of our inner experiences and/or

emotions. Personally, the culture of suppressing my emotions has affected my bi-cultural sense of belonging and health. There is a direct relationship between the suppression of emotions to stress. Maté (2003) offered that physiological events in our body are affected by stress and stress is informed through our felt experiences and emotions. Stress involves the brain, the hormonal apparatus, the immune system and many other organs. Maté (2003) shared that when emotions are repressed, inhibition disarms the body's defenses against illness. Maté (2003) offered that repression is the dissociation of emotions from awareness and sending those emotions to the unconscious realm, and every time we do this, it disorganizes and confuses our physiological defenses so that in some people these defenses go awry, becoming the destroyers of health rather than its protectors (Maté, 2003).

Normative and Ideal

Mason (2015) found that ideals in one culture may be vastly different to the ideals of another and that these same ideals may change over a lifetime. What is ideal is as much based on cultural values, beliefs, and standards as the notion of what is natural, and neither term should be allied with what is normative (Mason, 2015).

If you ask yourself why it is a problem, it is because lumping the ideal with what is expected leaves out a large portion of the population. Another reason it is problematic is because, according to Mason (2015), the ideal is statistically infrequent or not found in a population. According to him the real reason is because the ideal is a fabricated notion based on social values and personal attitudes (Mason, 2015). For example, accumulating wealth and keeping slim are regarded as attractive in the USA; however, these practices

have antisocial connotations in rural Jamaica where plumpness is the ideal (Mason, 2015).

Almeida (2012) shared that living amongst people that are different than what is deemed normative or ideal brings upon an initial dissonance. Some people may reject the norm, some may flee or self-isolate. However, a partial solution could be sharing, respecting, building trust and forgiving the other. Almeida (2012) offers that some strategies to live amongst cultures that are different from our own include making an effort to gain mutual trust, developing common knowledge, opinions, and beliefs in community and sharing power.

Cultural Misinterpretations

Verheggen and Voestermans (2013) found that people who have absorbed different everyday practices in a foreign group experience misunderstandings or awkward social interactions. This is not simply a clash of ideas or cognitions; it is above all a mismatch in experience-near practices and in the feelings of cognition that go with them. I find the authors are speaking to the social and behavioral details of the misunderstanding that go along with navigating and living in a different country as an immigrant. And while these details may come up when interacting with unfamiliar cultures in a new country, I believe that the majority of it has more to do with cultural customs and beliefs than simple cognitive dissonances. In addition, naming it 'simple cognitive dissonances' excludes the bodily felt experience as being part of the narrative, potentially dismissing a whole people's culture. Perhaps there is greater weight in a people's culture and, failing to consider culture by instead intellectualizing people's behavior could do more harm than good in the long run.

Van Broekhoven (2014) shares that, when conquistadores were attempting to enter the indigenous towns in Nicaragua, they misinterpreted indigenous practices and deemed them to be demonic. The conquistadores reported that there was a secret cave where ceremonies took place that involved human sacrifices. However, Van Broekhoven (2014) points out that the manner in which the conquistadores described the indigenous peoples' practices strongly resembled European stereotypes of witchcraft and, that perhaps indigenous practices could be interpreted as rituals and ceremonies of the pre-Hispanic era; for example, such as transforming oneself into different animals such as the tiger, monkey and deer (Van Broekhoven, 2014). The conquistadores approached their cognitive dissonance by establishing a 'spiritual conquest' where, according to Van Broekhoven (2014), several Catholic missionaries established themselves within Nicaraguan indigenous land with the goal of reducing the indigenous towns by converting them to the Catholic way of life. Selassie (2020) shares that epistemicide is at the heart of colonization; it is defined as the killing of knowledge and refers to the wiping out of ancient ways of knowing (Selassie, 2020).

Biculturalism

Kim (2002) initially shares that assimilation is the process where a member of one culture loses their original cultural identity as the person acquires a new identity in a second culture. Under the assimilation model, Kim (2002) offered Israel Zangwill's influential statement about the melting pot of America where he installs into society that America is the great melting pot where all races of Europe are melting and re-forming. He lists Germans, and Frenchmen, Irishmen, and Englishmen, Jews and Russians. However, Kim (2002) points out that conspicuously absent from this melting pot image

are Americans of color, such as African, Asian, Latino, and Native Americans. When subordinate groups do not adhere to the dominant groups they are blamed and are classified as marginal groups (Kim, 2002). A marginal person is an individual living in two different cultures that are not simply different but antagonistic (Kim, 2002). This theory views identity in a binary sense; either individuals are part of the group or they are not. Kim (2003) mentions the social psychological problems that accompany this binary approach, including anger by the marginalized individual at their original identity that they no longer identify with while hating the dominant group because they were not accepted (Kim, 2003).

However, Kim (2002) also offers a more sophisticated approach, the Alternation model, which defines biculturalism as an integration of the competencies and sensitivities associated with two cultures within a single person where blending of lifestyles, values and skills occur. Here, identity is viewed as a multifunctional choice (Kim, 2002). Within the Alternation model, there is an assumption that it is possible for an individual to have a sense of belonging in two cultures without compromising her sense of cultural identity (Kim, 2002). Biculturalism allows culture to be a choice rather than something that requires purging old practices and beliefs from the self for individuals to survive (Kim, 2002).

Kim (2002) shares that, while previous models, such as assimilation and marginality, based their perspectives on a Western dualistic view, a bicultural model allows for a shift away from the traditional model of identity acquisition. As Nanibush (2018) shares, rather than being aimed from universality of tactics and pathways, she is

aimed at the edges, the extremes, the precarious and the most vulnerable as central and, is working from that perspective (Nanibush, 2018).

Creating a Sense of Belonging

Selassie (2020) offers that we cannot decolonize our minds by unlearning the modern way of life because having a sense of belonging is reliant upon reclaiming the dismissed ancient way of knowing and reconciliation with the dominant modern way of life (Selassie, 2020). However, I personally struggle with the reconciliation with the dominant modern way of life. I have found there is no fixed way to approach it. It feels like a dynamic experience and what may work for some may not work others. Currently, I am dipping my toes into the dominant modern way of life by not forgetting to bring my indigenous customs along with me. In the past, I use to experience shame when wearing my indigenous clothing and braids. I never considered bringing my indigenous clothing into privileged circles where I am the only person of color in the room, there still exist an element of fear when I wear my indigenous clothing in those spaces. However, I am committed to embracing it by wearing it out to various social gathering and professional settings. I wear my indigenous clothing to my internship at an Inpatient Hospital. Initially, I felt uneasy about it because I wondered if it was ‘unprofessional’ to proudly wear my indigenous clothes in a clinical setting. However, wearing it made me feel grounded and connected to my body and mind in way that I had not experienced before. There was no more hiding and it was healing. This is how I approach accepting the dominant modern way of life, by bringing and wearing my culture into spaces that were historically unwelcomed.

How do two cultures co-exist within one person? In my experience, my bi-cultural identity is layered throughout my body and sense of self. It is not through code switching. Thompson (2013) found that very often, people code-switch- both consciously and unconsciously- to act or talk more like those around them in order to fit in. I am contending with the idea of code switching because I do not think that one has to leave their original culture behind in order to fit into the new one. In America, I have experienced the integration of both cultures within my body and while it is not often mentioned, according to Verheggen and Voestermans (2013) Integration is not an “all” or “nothing” process. The integration of both my Nicaraguan and American culture has demonstrated to me that my sense of belonging can co-exist without losing my connection to my original culture. Personally, it has required awareness, and elements of empathy.

Confronting Limitations and Constructing Possibilities

Scull (2018) encourages us to temper our emotional responses with a strong dash of reason. I agree with this utilitarian approach because I have a threshold for empathy. It is not a simple emotion but instead is something multifaceted, informed by my bi-cultural identity and, does not move me to action for all human beings. While we may desire to feel empathy for others, at all times, Bloom (Scull, 2018) does not think it is a reliable state because of the nature of our humanity. I agree that our inherent biases can spontaneously come up and, denying such ingrained biases would be wishful thinking and even irresponsible (Scull, 2018). Jordan (2018) shares that, early relational cultural therapy was skewed by the reality that the original writers were all white, middle class, and well educated. Although these writers as women protested the distortions imposed

mainly by men on a psychology women, they unfortunately duplicated this distortion by talking about woman's voice rather than women's voices, revealing how the assumption of universality by the privileged dominant group found its way into even the most conscious attempts to incorporate diversity and appreciate power inequities (Jordan, 2018). Jordan (2018) adds that women of color, lesbians and women from different economic backgrounds personally pointed out that "the theory group" was doing the very same forms of exclusion they were protesting.

Ciofalo et al. (2018), express that as educators there exists a need to co-construct spaces and places with students and colleagues together and shift toward the needed potentials of decolonization. This could look several different ways, from shifting the reading in the classroom from historically white U.S males, to writers of color. Confronting the limitations can also look like courses that recognize students' need to process racialized, traumatic, or potentially rupturing content emotionally, rather than only intellectually. Personally, I think this is where dance/movement therapy can play a role in shifting the limitations. Dance/movement therapy offers the space to process trauma in a non-intellectual way. The processing includes somatic experiences and may also include verbal processing, but is it not required. Dance/movement therapy offers an opportunity to explore the structures of colonialism and discover the incorporation of colonialism into one's own thoughts, actions, and relationships through movement experiences. Ciofalo et al. (2018), add that applying an Indigenous Community Psychology approach facilitates possibilities for moving forward. This could be accomplished by creating non-hierarchical reciprocal relationships between the dominant center and the peripheries (Ciofalo et al, 2018). This could mean between teacher and

student or, in dance/movement therapy, it could be between therapist and client.

However, the emphasis is on openness, humility, and trust as the key ingredients to democratize community psychology.

Dance movement therapy is a psychotherapeutic approach where movement and embodiment can illuminate our thoughts or bring meaning behind them.

Dance/movement therapy's goal is to make the internal external through experiencing movement in community while simultaneously integrating different ethnic cultures. In dance/movement therapy, democratizing therapy could look like accepting what one sees as a therapist. It could also look like letting go of a planned session in order to meet the needs of the clients and build horizontal relationships where a client will feel seen.

Personally, could look like not coming into the session with a legal pad and checking off names. In essence it is bringing the humanity back into the movement experience by allowing the clients to teach the therapist what is needed.

The Role of Dance/Movement Therapy

Human beings seek to participate in relationships in which people both give and receive (Jordan, 2018). Jordan (2018) , argues that we are neurologically hardwired to connect with others. Dance/movement therapy can play a significant role because of its inherent relational approach. Greenspan and Weider (2000) found that emotionally meaningful negotiations, not memorized scripts, are the building blocks of higher-level social and cognitive abilities. Dance and movement is communication, and thus fulfills a basic human need (Chaiklin & Schmais, 1986). Some goals of dance/movement therapy are recreating social awareness, participating in shared experiences, being aware of and responsive to others, becoming aware of inner sensations, mobilizing energy, expanding

the expressive range, externalizing inner thoughts and promoting interaction, and bonding people with disparate feelings and life styles (Chaiklin & Schmais, 1986). Montero (2004) shares that community is an experience where interactions take place, where members share knowledge and deeds. She warns that communities are not defined by a fixed territory or location but, instead, a felt sense between members. Montero (2004) clarifies that in the 20th century there were more than 94 different definitions of community. Montero (2004) finally offers that a community is a group that constantly evolves and transforms and, within that group, individuals gain a sense of belonging and social identity. Its members are cognizant of their unity and social potential.

A sense of unity and community can have authority and serve as a protective mechanism for those that are part of the community. According to Van Broekhoven (2014), in the eyes of the conquistadores, the indigenous communities in Nicaragua exhibited a sense of unity and this made the conquistadores task much more challenging. The conquistadores immediately picked up that although indigenous communities in Nicaragua were physically far apart from each other, there was a felt sense of unity amongst the Chorotega, Nicaraao, and Maribio tribes.

Berrol and Cruz (2012) offer that dance/movement therapy sessions include a process of putting words to somatic experiences and, while placing labels on experiences can be enormously helpful in making those experiences easier to recollect and communicate, it is the most helpful when dance/movement therapists do not offer labels for somatic experiences that put them into neatly binary social and/or cultural categories (Berrol & Cruz, 2012). Instead, critical social theorists suggest that supporting clients to

find words that transcend binary categories is one way to honor the uniqueness of each individual's experience (Berrol & Cruz, 2012).

Embodied Experience of Differences

The elements of empathy -- emotional boundaries, witnessing, separateness and connection, regulations of emotions, and differentiation of emotions --revealed themselves to me through an embodied experience of differences with a peer. Jordan (2018) argues that good conflict is necessary for change and growth, and suggested we undergo our most profound change and grow most deeply when we encounter difference and work on conflict or differences in connection. While I recognize that conflict resolution through relationship is not possible for everyone, it was possible in my particular case because I was able to embody my peer's pain. My own experience with suffering through family trauma as a child allowed me to embody empathy for a peer that I did not expect to have empathy for, had it not been for my bi-cultural experience in the United States.

In other words, living within two cultures has offered me the capacity to embody how other cultures express frustration and sadness. In America, I have mostly witnessed people withholding their emotions because it is not polite to express frustration or anger; however, in Nicaragua expressing frustration or distress is part of our culture. In Nicaragüan culture, frustration is an emotion that is layered with many others such as sadness, anger, and the desire to belong. When I embody someone in America expressing frustration, without inhibitions, my body remembers what my original culture ingrained in me and I allow it to guide my relationships, and this grants me visceral empathy. It does not always guarantee empathy but it allows me to pause and explore the different

elements of empathy. Personally, this contentious experience with my peer allowed me to explore conflict resolution through relationship, and through my own personal exploration of domination.

Selassie (2020) found that we think someone with a completely different set of life circumstances, references, and realities, should think, act and be different than they are, they should be how we want them to be, and we assume we would be different if we were them (Selassie, 2020). This is an attitude of domination- a belief in superiority (Selassie, 2020). Personally, I explored this by looking at the role my ego played in a turbulent relationship with a peer, and within that I found domination. Through this experience I realized I was succumbing to the narrative of domination. I was seeking domination and forgetting about my indigenous community approach. I was able to release my need for domination once I became aware of it through my embodied bi-cultural identity.

Contending with “Normative”

The word ‘normal’ is a term I contend with often because I often wonder who is deciding what is or is not ‘normal’. Falling in the middle of the statistical curve is not possible for many. Personally, based on my background as a member of an indigenous culture, Nicarao, blended with dominant cultural norms in the U.S, there is not much opportunity for me to fit into the ‘normal’ category from a Eurocentric perspective. Instead, I navigate my socialization in America by re-centering Nicarao ways of being, rather than from within a critique of Euro centrism. In my Nicaragüan culture we value honesty and being transparent with others even if it is considered excessive. I come from a culture that values community but within that we each have our own identity and are

remembered for it. In Nicarao tribe we do not look all the same, our hair, clothes, tattoos and sticks can be different but each characteristic has a function and/or spiritual belief that we find valuable. In Nicarao we do not think of people as ‘normal’ or ‘not-normal’ because each person has a role to play within the community. Our definition of community is fluid and does not allow for fixed definitions of normality.

Personally, I associate the word ‘normal’ with a repressive quality because I see it as putting our inner selves away in order to be accepted. It feels unnatural to act or aim to look like another. When I do this, my body feels restrictive, my breath is short, and the center of my body does not feel connected to the rest of my limbs. I feel as if I am not honoring myself and I wonder if others experience the same when trying to ‘fit in’.

I am naturally drawn to non-homogenous groups because it is the foundation of my Nicarao identity. We are taught to support each other and we are encouraged to do this by being our own persona; this is directly linked to how our Nicarao community became the country that was known for outsmarting conquistadores for the longest period of time. Nicaragüans believe in the sense of community so strongly that when the conquistadores were trying to take over our land, we outsmarted them by asking our whole community to spread the word about a soup we named “Indio Viejo” which translates into “Old Indian”. Nicaragüans told the Spaniards that within this national dish were bits of “Nicaragüan Indians” because we cook people. This made the Spanish flee and the natives were able to gain some time to plan their next move.

Nicaragüan Sense of Community and Phenomenological Research

Indigenous Nicaragüans prioritize being in community over proving theories to fit in. We engage with others by being physically and emotionally present. The Nicarao

community listens to their bodies and value visceral experiences when interacting with others. Therefore, I was drawn to Phenomenological research because it integrates our felt senses in our bodies and utilizes it as data. I found it to be the closest thing to how Nicaraguans are in community, through instinctual drives instead of intellectual ones.

Phenomenological research is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of lived experience (Creswell, 2013). Personally, I am drawn to it because I value using my own body to inquire and describe, and ultimately using my own personal experience as data. I cherish phenomenological research because it encourages me to step into the felt sense. It pulls my culture in by centering the visceral drives and letting go of the intellectual.

My methodology in this process was to first describe the movement experience, secondly to offer a reflective comment and lastly to ask myself, why was this experience valuable. I was rooted by exploring one of the elements that make up my emotional well-being: taking up space. I was interested in finding out if taking up space through movement would contribute to my emotional well-being.

Phenomenological Research

I began moving my body by standing and reaching outside of my own personal kinesphere with the intention of researching how many ways I could take up space. I began by reaching my arms out in the sagittal plane. I noticed that I first began with bent arms as if I was reaching with my elbows and only after did I extend my whole arms. I noticed that my hands and fingers were soft but engaged, evidenced by feeling the air in between my fingers as I swung my arms in the space. As I got warmed up my abdominals engaged and I began to feel safer, and playful. The connection between my abdominals

and my lower body allowed me to make turns with my body and I began to smile. I had the urge to undue my hair because I did not want the feeling of restriction anywhere in my body. As I became more playful I began to change levels and went onto the floor with ease. I spend time on my back and allowed my arms to sweep the floor until I came back to standing by connecting to my abdominals.

However, once I got up, I noticed a change, my eyes were softer and my shoulders were not almost touching my ears anymore. I realized that my eye gaze was at eye level instead of dropping to the floor and realizing this made me smile and I experienced joy. Lastly, I had a felt sense that my chest area was lifted, and my shoulders were not folded over anymore. I felt less guarded and more available to look out at the world. This realization allowed me to feel grateful within. Upon reflecting about my experience of taking up space, I noticed my comfort areas as a New Yorker. I walk the city with a quick pace and closed down chest with slumped over shoulders and, my eye gaze is downward because making eye contact in the New York City Subway system does not feel safe. I understand that my body lives in those geometrical positions quite often and this phenomenological research allowed me to experience a stark contrast.

The two different bodily experiences left me wondering if others too experience the same thing. I found it curious and asked myself if others too could experience softening their gaze while researching within their body how to occupy greater space. Could this experience carry over to other bodies and give others information about how they navigate the world. In my perspective, I found the experiential information valuable because it allowed me to realize how guarded I walk through the world and I asked myself why. I noticed that my guarded body language is my default and while it is useful

at times, perhaps it is not always necessary to move my body this way. I wondered if practicing this more often would allow me to carry my body with more ease. This information allowed me to integrate the information from my body into my head, and my nervous system felt calmer. From my perspective, the reason I found this qualitative research valuable was because the integration of my bodily experience with my mental realizations allowed me to carry my body in a novel way, one where I was taking up greater space than before. Taking up more space with greater awareness was organizing and grounding, therefore calming to my nervous system. I wondered if others could have a similar experience too.

Navigating America in my Body

“Don’t be so sensitive” is what children often hear, where rationality is the preferred antithesis of emotionality. This idea was something I came across when I first came to America. The culture in America felt foreign in my body. It felt restricted, and disconnected. When I first arrived, I noticed how people did not express themselves with their whole body, as in Nicaragua, but instead only through succinct sentences. It felt sudden in my body, I found myself aiming to express myself less through my body and more through my words however, and I repeatedly failed at this task. This made me feel confused and out of place and left me wondering why my emotions were so much bigger than my peers. In school, I balanced it out by participating in all kinds of sports. I was a long-distance runner, played tennis and was on the dance team. It was the only way I could channel what I considered back then my ‘excessive energy’ but in reality, it was just my expressive nature. I learned how to be ‘rational’ instead of ‘emotional’ in order to fit into the circle. However, I was always gaining information through my body while I

was being 'rational'; I was applying my emotions simultaneously. Initially, needing to navigate my expressiveness was anxiety provoking but I dug deep into schoolwork instead.

On the way to becoming bi-cultural I befriended empathy because it directly contributed to navigating both cultures within my body. The outcome was a relational change. I was malleable when the cultural situation called for it. I learned to choose when to share my culture and I also got a sense of when it was not safe to do so. I identify with Stuurman's thoughts on empathy with the stranger, as an initial approach; that we all share a common humanity because it was by looking for people's humanity that I was able to integrate into a new country where the customs were foreign to me. However, I soon discovered that my levels of empathy had a threshold.

Implications

Empathy in my body feels like an integration of my mind, body and my bi-cultural identity. I feel a deep sense of connection between my inner and outer experience. When I am moving from a place of empathy, my inner core is connected to my limbs and all my parts move in relationship to each other. I feel a calm confidence; my eyes are looking out and not downward, and there is a balance between everything that I take in and what I give out. My whole body is connected and, change in one part changes the whole. I started this experience of embodied empathy by lying on the floor in an X position. I only initiated movement from my core. First I activated my core then I extended by left leg and lastly my right arm. I did this on the other side as well. I explored coming to my side into fetal position and then extending out. My center felt warmer and my legs and arms felt more connected to each other, and my neck was alert

but not stiff. I explored this on the other side as well and I became so much warmer that my lower back started to sweat. I felt alert and awake. Once I got up to standing I realized that I was warm and my whole body was connected from my core to my distal.

This experience allowed me to feel safe and connected to my inner self. I felt connected from within and had a sense of grounded empathy when I interacted with others. This experience left me wondering if others too could experience empathy as an integration of their inner and outer and if it could help them better navigate their relationships in their personal lives. Personally, experiencing empathy in my body is an embodied experience of my bi-cultural identity. It is a felt experience where the whole body is connected and nothing is left behind, just like my bi-cultural existence. I aim to integrate my bi-cultural identities wherever I am and if for some reason I forget a certain part or limb I feel disconnected and my body and spirit does not feel complete.

Verheggen and Voestermans (2013) found that integration of culture is achieved by embodied engagement rather than by mere instruction. In a dance/movement therapy session this looks like sitting in a circle and passing a ball where I ask everyone to first share their name and preferred pronoun. The second time around I ask them how they are feeling, it could be one word or a couple sentences. I the leader, start first. Then I lead them into movement warm up that consist of rolling our shoulders and head, reaching out with our arms in the sagittal plane then horizontal plane while I ask them to take an inhale as we lift our arms up and an exhale when we bring our arms down, music is playing in the background. Then I ask them to find another chair and to simply notice how the negotiation of that feels. I ask them if frustration comes up and to simply notice it. This time I bring the ball back into the circle and I ask them to toss it to someone and

as they catch it to state if they are “feeling”, “thinking” or “both” after some time I ask them to take the ball for a ride around their body. This could look like bringing it around their head, or tucking it under their legs, anything goes as long as they take the ball for a ride. I let them know there is no wrong or right way to do it. As this comes to a close, I take the ball back and ask them to go for a walk around the room.

I encourage them to feel the air between their fingers as they go on this walk. I ask them to think about their culture of origin. I encourage them to think of an ancestor that makes them feel proud, good or supported, an ancestor that embodies strength. I ask them to embody how this ancestor would walk. I invite them to notice if their body feels different as they are embodying their strong ancestor’s walk. I ask them to let that go and shake it off. Next, I ask them to think of an ancestor whom they know struggled in their life. I ask them to embody their ancestors that struggled. I encourage them to notice how their body changes while doing this and if their breathing shifts as well. After some time, I invite them to let that go. Lastly, I encourage them to move their bodies or take a walk where they integrate both, their ancestors that were going through moments of struggle and the ones that were experiencing strength. I ask them to research and explore in their bodies how to hold and integrate both. I give them about 4-5 minutes to find this for themselves. Soon after, I ask them to let that idea go, to shake it off. I encourage them to come back to their seats and I ask them how that experience felt. I let them know there is no wrong or right answer. After the group is done sharing, I ask them to take three breaths together with one hand on our side ribs and the other on our hearts. I let them know that our session is over but if they need to check in, to simply reach out.

This is what I intend to bring to a dance/movement therapy space: an integration of cultures and of body and mind; so that others can recover their sense of belonging and can co-exist across differences without losing their sense of self.

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