

## **COUPLE THERAPY THROUGH DANCE & MOVEMENT: DISCLOSING MULTIPLE TRUTHS IN THE RELATIONSHIP**

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### **Abstract**

Body and Movement-integrated couple therapy aims to embody seminal issues in the couple relationship through joint dance, and to offer a somatic translation of issues like power relations, leadership and dependency. These issues, expressed in and through movement, are processed symbolically and verbally in the course of the analytic session. This study aimed at understanding the couples' perception of the significant moments within therapy. Nine couples participated in 12 couple therapy sessions. They were interviewed and responded to questionnaires both before and after the sessions. The findings show that diverse experiences in movement introduced the couple to misconceptions about their relationship and elicited individual subjective truths of each partner alongside significant shared truths, which were all somatically embodied and expressed. The "here and now" encounter with emotional contents through the body created a safe space for acceptance and internalization of unconscious roles and needs, which only came to the fore through the couple's movement. Based on the results of the study, I will present how the combination of verbal discourse and movement allows the partners to get acquainted with latent knowledge that resides in the body and cannot be consciously reached through language alone.

**Keywords:** *Couple therapy, dance movement therapy, embodied relationship.*

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### **1. Introduction**

In Dance movement therapy for couples, we use dance and movement for getting acquainted with contents that are inaccessible through verbal language, primary issues which were experienced in the body, but have not yet been verbally processed or expressed. The importance of integrating body and movement in couple therapy has gained recognition in recent years, as evidenced in case studies involving a combination of movement experiences during the couple therapy session (Wagner & Hurst, 2018). Thus, for example, sex therapy sometimes uses mindfulness techniques to increase the couple's awareness of their bodily experiences and of the somatic origins of emotional processes (Kimmese et al., 2015), and the Imago approach integrates deep breathing exercises and techniques as well as eye contact experiences for assisting couples in attaining greater relaxation and a better regulation in situations of conflict (Hendrix, 1988).

Research shows that the integration of ballroom dancing into therapy can facilitate numerous therapeutic issues of relating such as elements of leadership, trust, boundaries and dependency (Hawkes, 2003). Moreover, experiences of expressive movement, synchronization, and mutual attunement through movement produce a positive impact on the perceived couple relationship, increase kinesthetic empathy and improve individuals' ability to emotionally attune in relation to their partners (Kim et al., 2013). Recent qualitative research with couples diagnosed with borderline personality disorders has indicated that the imitation of a personal choreography, movement synchronization and collaboration in resolving incidents of non-synchronization of movement have resulted in greater marital satisfaction, more secure attachment and increased empathy in the relationship (Pietrzak et al., 2017).

These developments notwithstanding, research literature on couple therapy has mostly examined measurable outcomes of the process, and most studies involve only small samples and cover singular or few sessions, whereas this type of therapeutic process involves a significant time period in order to evolve. Moreover, only few studies have so far focused on the developments and changes that occur within the therapeutic process itself as a result of clinical interventions. With this in mind, the study presented in this

chapter aims to address the way in which movement can highlight the significance of explicit behaviours, whose origins and meaning are not fully understood by the partners themselves.

## **2. Dance movement therapy for couples – a comprehensive qualitative research**

In order to examine the meaning of nonverbal expressions and movement within the couple relationship, I conducted a large-scale qualitative study (Shuper Engelhard, 2018; 2019a-c). The participants in the research were nine heterosexual couples, who have been living together and sharing the same household for at least three years, and who come from a variety of backgrounds in terms of religious affiliation and country of origin. They all took part in twelve sessions of couple therapy, combining body-movement work.

The sessions were all similarly structured (Shuper Engelhard, 2019): Each session begins with an invitation to attend to the somatic, physical experience with which each of the partners arrived at the meeting. The objective of this part is relaxation and release from daily experience, attaining availability for the therapeutic process, practicing the somatic listening technique, and deepening the awareness of feelings associated with the sensory experience. Following this, the therapy session continues by working through dynamic contents of the relationship through movement and dance. The couple is invited to attend to their individual and interpersonal experiences that arise from different qualities of movement. They are asked to take note of the sensations, emotions, images, memories and associations that come up during movement.

## **3. Dance movement therapy for couples: objectives, uniqueness and innovation**

In the course of the project, I have found that diverse experiences in movement introduced the couples to misconceptions about their relationships and elicited individual subjective truths of each partner alongside significant shared truths, which were all somatically embodied and expressed

The experience of moving together and the knowledge that resides in the body influences and facilitates the relationship. Movement experience in couple therapy serves as a tool for increased creativity, playfulness and intimacy in the relationship. It seems that the benefit of working through bodily movement enables an encounter not only with issues of exhaustion and detachment, but also with the strengths of the relationship.

The participants felt that movement was a means by which emotional experience can be expressed in a deeper and clearer way, as if the language of movement enables emotional “suspension” better than verbal language. This study indicates that when verbal communication between the partners is already charged with negative feelings, the communication through movement allowed them to feel closer to each other even in conflictual situations. Couple therapy through movement offers additional ways of coping with “forbidden” aspects or difficult areas in the relationship, and legitimizing them without hurting or damaging the relationship.

The verbalization of “embodied stories” was key in the therapeutic process. It became apparent that without the verbal/symbolic processing of the body-movement experience, the bodily materials could easily dissolve and disappear, or remain incomprehensible, unknown, and meaningless for the participants. The emotional contents that emerged through movement required both verbal processing and meaning-making in order to be understood and internalized. In this sense, the concrete experience of in-session movement serves as a bridge to an emotional experience as it illustrates different aspects in the relationship, and reveals issues that were only accessible through the body.

To conclude, Movement-integrated couple therapy enables an encounter with the strengths and joys of the relationship, as well as an understanding of conflicts and discrepancies which emerge from the experience of movement. It offers a framework for exploring and attaining insights into intimacy and communication, allowing these aspects to become accessible to the partners following verbal processing.

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