



## CULTURE, SELF AND BODY-SELF: DANCE/MOVEMENT THERAPY WITH ASIAN AMERICANS

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### Culture as Significant Variable

The implications of a culturally oriented approach within dance/movement therapy are manifold (Hanna, 1990; Pallaro, 1993; Schott-Billmann, 1992). This paper focuses on theoretical issues drawn from the available literature on Asian Americans and this author's experience in working with such a clientele, mainly Americans of Japanese and Korean ancestry. Physical, cultural and even linguistic homogeneity is commonly presumed among Asian groups, although due to geographic and climatic variations in that vast continent, inhabitants of South, Central and East Asia each feature mutually exclusive physical, linguistic, cultural, historical, social and economic traits. These characteristics also apply to the large group configured as Asian Americans.

It has been pointed out that culture is a persistent and inevitable yet sometimes overlooked variable in the enterprise of psychotherapy (Draguns, 1975; Price-Williams, 1979; White & Kirkpatrick, 1985; Yi, 1995). Substantial evidence supports a consistent relationship between achieved levels of psychological development, forms of pathology and cultural context (Phillips, 1968).

There are some basic qualities needed to establish a therapeutic alliance that transcend culture (i.e., warmth and the ability to instill hope), although therapists must be aware of crucial factors related to the practice of psychotherapy with cultural minorities when dealing with themes such as stereotyping, resis-

ance, transference, countertransference and clients' expectations (Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1983; Shechter, 1992; Tseng & Hsu, 1979). Basically, the culturally sensitive adaptation of psychotherapy integrates the therapists' knowledge of their own and their patients' cultures, their clients' culturally-based expectations as well as their flexibility in utilizing different techniques.

Nonverbal behavior, which transcends written and spoken words (Harrison, 1974), plays an important role in intercultural counseling and psychotherapy because it operates mostly at the unconscious level (Argyle, 1988; Samuda & Wolfgang, 1985), thus replacing, modifying, clarifying or underscoring speech. It allows communication of emotions, attitudes, intensity of anxiety and degrees of warmth or coldness in relation to others. It reveals or masks communication expressed through the medium of words. Being by definition ambiguous and culturally determined (Montagu, 1971; Samuda & Wolfgang, 1985), nonverbal expressive modes of the culture to which the client belongs must be familiar to the therapist dealing with cultural minorities. Awareness of nonverbal cues is stressed in order to avoid culturally-biased stereotyping and ethnocentrism, as well as to fully understand the client's dynamics.

Dance/movement therapy is uniquely equipped to treat patients from diverse cultural backgrounds precisely because its premise (e.g., that body movement is the basic mode of communication) is valid across

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cultures (Pallaro, 1993). Furthermore, it utilizes behavior as the product of the relationship, at times conflictual and always subject to change, between experiences of the self and social role expectations, between inner life and outer reality, as well as between the constructs of one's own mind and the processes centered around human interactions (Pallaro, 1996).

Because behavior changes considerably within cultures, it has been postulated that cultural traditions shape one's sense of self and that the self will have particular ways, inherent to that culture, of engaging with external experiences (Lock, 1981; Roland, 1984a, 1984b; Weidman, 1969). It becomes obvious that one's modes of coping, rooted in a particular culture, may not be effective if transplanted to a different cultural environment; the concept of adaptation, in terms of psychological adjustment or maladjustment, then becomes crucial. Dance/movement therapy offers a laboratory in which adaptive or maladaptive behaviors are brought to awareness, in which the demands of the self and those of the dominant culture are embodied, amplified, nurtured or challenged.

#### Asian Perspectives

Individualistic characteristics of the self in the Western perspective are in significant opposition to the more socialized aspects of the self as conceived in the Eastern world (Pallaro, 1987). The family, as the primary social structure with all its rules and obligations, is the first source enhancing one's own individualistic self (DeVos, 1985). Children are raised to be obedient to parental rules, to socialize and interact with respect for others' needs, and at the same time to grow independent and self-reliant. Conversely, in Asian cultures, although in varying degrees, interdependency between individuals is highly regarded as the most appropriate mode of existence (Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1983; Cross, 1995; DeVos, 1985; Doi, 1973; Ewing, 1990; Huang & Charter, 1996; Kakar, 1985; Kitano & Kikumura, 1976; Lebra, 1976; Pedersen, 1979; Roland, 1984a, 1984b, 1996).

Pedersen (1979) described the self rooted in Asian cultures as "participating in a unity with all things" and as "not limited by the changing manifestations of an illusory and temporary phenomenal world" (p. 84). This conception is deeply rooted in four strong philosophical and religious traditions: Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism and Buddhism, each of which emphasizes a broad sense of being, one that tran-

scends and subsumes the individual self (Chang, 1982; DeVos & Sofue, 1984; Dien, 1983; Epstein, 1990; Huang & Charter, 1996; Pedersen, 1979; Roland, 1984a, 1984b, 1996; Wu, 1984).

Chang (1982), Marsella (1985) and Pedersen (1979) emphasize the "self-transcendent" quality inherent in Asian culture-bound relationships: the self is not an independent observer or potential master of the external environment but a mediator between individualistic tendencies and the socially required effort toward harmony and integration.

#### *Family Ties*

The traditional Asian family is hierarchically structured, with the elements of age, gender and generational status as primary determinants of role behavior. Family organization is based upon political and religious foundations (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism) that are thousands of years old and still deeply ingrained in the culture (Shon & Ja, 1982; Wilkeson, Poussaint, Small & Shapiro, 1983). The father is the head of the household and is its unquestionable authority figure. The eldest son, even if married, is supposed to be subservient to his father and likely to take care of his family of origin's needs before his own. A daughter is expected to marry and leave her family to join her husband's, bear male children and become her mother-in-law's devoted helper. Ancestors and elders are greatly revered and respected.

The American family stresses independence and self-sufficiency, rearing its children to leave home and to eventually start a new nuclear family (DeVos, 1985). In sharp contrast, within the traditional Asian framework the concept of family is extended over centuries, including ancestry as well as future kinship. Shon and Ja (1982, p. 211) noted that "The individual is seen as the product of all the generations of his or her family from the beginning of time" and, therefore, "Personal actions reflect not only on the individual and the nuclear and extended families, but also on all of the preceding generations of the family since the beginning of time. And individual actions will impact upon all future generations as well."

Problems within the family are subtly and indirectly approached, and conflicts are minimized, in order to avoid interference with this role structure as well as to refrain from offensive behavior. Asian philosophies stress the relationships of the individual to nature and other people, valuing their intrinsic har-

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