



## DIVERGENT CULTURAL SELF CONSTRUALS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF DANCE/MOVEMENT THERAPY

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### Introduction

Throughout the 1990s, I had the opportunity to lead Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) group workshops in Europe and in Asia. In this paper I will report on two adult DMT group workshops I conducted with Western European and Taiwanese dance and mental health professionals in Zurich and Taipei, respectively. The organizations that sponsored these workshops requested that I introduce workshop participants to “American Dance/Movement Therapy.”

Since these workshops were attended by diverse cultural groups, when I returned to Los Angeles, I became interested in reading the notes I had written at the conclusion of each workshop about the participants’ expressive behavior and their verbalized comments about it. Since participants from both workshops were asked to respond to the same initial movement task, I thought it might be possible for me to compare the expressive behavior of these two groups during the introductory phase of the groups’ process.

In attempting to make sense of my observations, I reviewed the research conducted by cross-cultural psychologists and anthropologists on the kinds of self constructions culturally divergent groups possessing differing worldviews create. I found the construct of “self” to be a particularly useful one to account for the expressive behavioral differences observed between participants holding divergent cultural world-

views, since it is an *experiential concept* that refers to the subjective view a person holds about who she or he is, and once formed and incorporated by the person, it acts as an experiential anchor and an emotional filter for all perceptions, values and attitudes held by the person about the nature of the world and the nature of human relationships (Hallowell, 1955; Kohut, 1971; Rogers, 1961).

### *Descriptions of DMT Workshop Groups*

The two DMT workshop groups consisted of 20–25 self-selected dance or mental health professionals. With the exception of two Americans who had lived in Zurich for many years, all of the participants in the Zurich workshop were Western European, while all of the participants in the Taipei workshop were Taiwanese. In both workshops the majority of the participants were females in their mid-20s to early 30s.

I had to limit my comparisons of the groups’ expressive behavior to the initial introductory phase of the workshops’ process because it was only during this particular phase that both groups were asked to respond to the same movement task. In two other respects, the two group workshops were structured differently: (a) the Zurich workshop lasted 5 days and was advertised as “an intensive” DMT workshop, while the Taipei workshop lasted 1 day and was publicized as “an introductory” DMT workshop; and (b)

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the movement structures or movement tasks provided to the participants in each group varied over time due to the fact I attempted to make the forms offered relevant to the evolving interpersonal and individual psychodynamics manifested by the participants in each group.

The introductory or beginning phase of both workshops began with participants standing in a circle facing each other. As a way of introducing participants to one another through the medium of movement, I suggested that one at a time, participants state their names, tune in to how they experienced themselves and then through some gesture or movement express how they felt in the moment. (This opening movement task is similar to one I might use with beginning DMT groups composed of functional adults in the U.S.) Because the instructions and movement task were the same for both groups, I would be able to observe similarities and differences in the expressive responses of the participants in these groups.

At the conclusion of the Zurich workshop, I made the following notes about the expressive behavior demonstrated by the participants during the introductory phase of the workshop (to protect the identity of individual participants, their names have been eliminated):

Participants showed little hesitation in displaying their emotions in front of a group of relative strangers. They exhibited a wide range of emotional expressiveness (from extremely positive to extremely negative). One participant took up much of the group's time, unexpectedly challenging me through a display of some rather aggressive movement gestures (approaching me, she came very close to me, growled at me while displaying her canine teeth; much in the manner of an aggressive cougar seeking to dominate and intimidate a potential prey). The aggressive behavior she directed towards me sent an air of fear through the group. I sensed that she enjoyed asserting her power through her aggressive behavior and that she was testing me to see how I would respond to her challenge. I growled back at her, both to show my acceptance of her aggressive display and also to demonstrate that I was not intimidated by it. Group participants carefully watched the way that I responded to the challenge posed by her. My response seemed to free others to respond in

more playfully assertive ways. It seemed to me that generally participants in this workshop were far more comfortable with the display of negative emotions than their American counterparts, who do not typically express anger so early in the process of a group. Participants also exhibited a great deal of individual expressive variability from one another. They readily shared their movement experience verbally with the group, though they did not all agree with the interpretations offered by some individual participants about their movement.

The following are notes I made at the conclusion of the Taipei workshop about participants' behavior during the initial phase of the Taipei workshop:

Participants showed great hesitation in expressing their emotions publicly (even though many were acquainted socially with one another prior to the workshop). They watched each other carefully and frequently imitated each others' movement patterns while adding something of their own or doing the pattern slightly different from the way it had been performed by the original mover. The person whose movement was being imitated seemed to enjoy the fact that another person would select their movement pattern for imitation. Participants showed great restraint in the emotions they exhibited outwardly and the emotions they did display were all very positive and pleasant in nature. The display of humor was something everyone seemed to enjoy (I appreciated this, since it permitted some of the tension which was present in the group regarding what might happen next, to be dissipated). When I asked if anyone would care to share verbally with the group what their experience had been for them, there was an awkward moment when no one spoke. So I simply stated that "there is no right or wrong in what we do here, so no one has to speak who does not want to." Participants treated me as a "teacher" and extended to me the kind of respect accorded one (as soon as there was a break in the group's activity, several participants came up to me to inquire whether I would like a cup of tea; this solicitous behavior continued throughout the entire workshop).

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