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Movement metaphor as mediator: a model for the dance/movement therapy process

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Introduction

The English language is rich with somatic and movement metaphors that describe emotional states. 'He looks as though he's carrying the world on his shoulders' describes emotional burden. 'She's cracking up, falling apart, breaking down' describes the emotional turmoil often associated with mental illness. Having a 'gut feeling' implies having a hunch or an intuitive idea.

I have found myself particularly attracted to the symbolic nature of movement in my practice using dance/movement therapy with groups of people who suffer from schizophrenia and other psychotic conditions, in rehabilitation settings. In this paper, I will describe a schema for understanding how the movement metaphor can act as a mediator in the therapeutic process.

Dance/movement therapy and symbolism

Certain principles underlie my use of movement in therapeutic work. Like other dance/movement therapy practitioners, I hold the belief that we experience ourselves, others, and the world through our bodies. I believe there is an inter-relationship between mind and body, and that there is a recursive relationship between movement and emotion. Not only is movement a medium for experiencing, expressing, and communicating, but action itself can create meaning through physical expressive and sym-

bolic realms (Best, 2000; Chodorow, 1991; Meekums, 2000; Schmais, 1985; Stanton-Jones, 1992).

Various theoretical approaches consider symbolic material differently. For those allied with psychoanalytical approaches, symbolic movement is seen as representing unconscious experience, conflicts, and defenses (Siegel, 1995; Stanton-Jones, 1992; Dosamantes-Beaudry, 2000). From a Jungian approach, individuation is achieved through a process of 'active imagination,' where archetypal themes from the 'collective unconscious' present themselves in symbolic form. In the case of Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT), memories from the unconscious are stored kinesthetically and emerge in 'authentic movement' (Chodorow, 1991; Hyde & McGuinness, 1992; Kovel, 1991). Social constructionists see language (verbal and nonverbal forms) as symbolic. According to Erfan and Clarfield (1992) "words and symbols are ways of experiencing ourselves in the context of a community" (p. 212). Meanings are co-created, shaped and reshaped through interactions with others (Best, 2000).

Symbolism and metaphor have been recognized as a vehicle for understanding and change in psychotherapy (Hobson, 1985). Gorelick (1996) argues that metaphor itself is the specific change agent that distinguishes the Creative Arts Therapies from other models of psychotherapy. Central to DMT lies the movement metaphor, a form of nonverbal communication, which, if examined, can provide useful insights into a person's patterns of behavior, beliefs, relationships, and emotional state (Meekums, in press).

Metaphors serve many purposes. They convey and link the basic elements of our nature. They present one thing in the semblance of another. Metaphors can carry us across transitions through ritual.

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They allow us to entertain new possibilities, can change our perception of events and the interpretation we give our experience. They enable the exploration of our unconscious. When thoughts are jumbled or confused, metaphor can give them form and direction. They can create a mask for feelings that are too frightening or painful to acknowledge. Metaphor can be a form of intimate communication (Gorelick, 1996).

Schmais (1985) argues that

Symbolism is probably the least understood and most valuable process in dance therapy. the therapeutic implications of the dance symbol are threefold: in its creation, in the illumination it affords, and in the actual participation (p. 33).

She sees the symbolic expressions in dance therapy as forming a bridge between the internal and external worlds of the client. The symbolic nature of movement can create “psychic distance from private preoccupations” (Schmais, 1985, p. 34). Symbols can extend to the past and the future. She believes that, for people living in a world of terror and personal chaos, order and meaning can be found in shared symbolic expression. With the support of a group, such clients can endure emotions, master skills, and move through transitional stages (Schmais, 1985). Under the camouflage of the movement symbol, people suffering from schizophrenia are better able to express their needs, feelings, and wishes (Chaiklin & Schmais, 1979).

Metaphor as mediator in dance/movement therapy

As a therapist I am strongly influenced by systemic ideas. Central to a systemic approach are a number of principles. Firstly, that as an observer one is part of, and influences the behavior of, the observed system. Secondly, humans are meaning generating beings. We construct narratives about experience that fit with our belief systems. As such there is no such thing as absolute reality. Thirdly, everything we do, or do not do, is a communication. We cannot not communicate. Fourthly, that there is a recursive (or circular) relationship between meaning and action. As such, the meaning we attribute to a particular situation determines our actions, and, in turn, the actions we choose create meaning for ourselves and for others. Finally, meaning attributed to a situation is influenced by immediate and multiple levels of context which include our own personal histories, our immediate system of relationships (e.g., families, kinship system, work colleagues), and our cultural context (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992;

Cronen & Pearce, 1985; Efran & Carfield, 1992; Jones, 1993).

In examining the place of the movement metaphor in DMT, I will focus on the final two systemic principles—those of the recursive relationship between meaning and action, and the influence of context. The movement metaphor lies in the space between client and therapist. It is a kinesthetic experience that bridges, what I call, the *symbolic* and the *knowing realms*. The *knowing realm* is where one is conscious of knowing. Once known, material can be intentionally utilized by the therapist and client to inform actions or understanding. The *symbolic realm* is a place of play and creativity, where material is generally not known at a conscious level. Material may be known in the *symbolic realm* but the meaning is not attended to in a conscious way. The movement metaphor affords symbolic meaning that is not necessarily overtly known.

The dance/movement therapist may extrapolate meaning or hypotheses (what I call *therapist meaning*) from the movement metaphor to bring themes not actively known to the client to their attention (what I call *client meaning*). The therapist may create a movement or a verbal intervention (what I call *therapist action*) that may arise *de novo*, or may be in response to a meaning of their own or that of the client, or in response to an action (verbal or nonverbal) initiated by a client. Clients themselves can act (what I call *client action*) *de novo*, or in response to a meaning of their own or the therapist, or in response to an action (verbal or nonverbal) initiated by the therapist. As *meaning* and *action* lie at the interface of the *knowing* and *symbolic realms*, the dance movement therapist may work solely within the movement metaphor. She may have an intuitive response to metaphorical material, which informs an intervention without it reaching a place of conscious attention. In the therapeutic process therefore, therapist and client constantly shift between the *symbolic* and the *knowing realms*, and between positions of *action* and *meaning*.

The therapeutic relationship is located within various contexts that may also influence the therapeutic process. These contextual levels may vary depending upon where the therapeutic relationship is located. Of particular importance in any therapy are the contexts of supervision, the institution, and culture (see Fig. 1).

Case study

The setting

The setting was a secure, in-patient rehabilitation unit intended to meet the needs of people suffering

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