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Pioneering Dance Movement Therapy in Britain: Results of narrative research[☆]

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Abstract

This article reports research concerning life narratives of Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) pioneers in Britain. Nine pioneers were identified using a snowballing sampling technique. Participants were asked about the training and experiential influences on their career trajectory, first via a questionnaire. Each individual was then encouraged to narrate their story in their own way. Some did so in writing and others were interviewed by telephone. Validity of the narratives was enhanced by circulating the written account for comments, and by cross-checking references with each other within individual accounts.

Narratives were analysed thematically, giving rise to the following categories: isolation; dance, affect and symbolisation; serendipity and choice; beginner's mind (a childlike attitude) and the search for theory.

The following conclusions are made: the phenomenon of pioneering DMT in Britain was historically and culturally situated; career trajectories can be conceptualised as “falling forwards”; an attitude of exploration with tacit, embodied knowledge must be balanced alongside the thrust towards expertise and external evidence.

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Introduction

The creative arts therapies all have histories reaching back into the middle of the last century and beyond, yet little research has been carried out to systematically trace their development. Questions need to be asked about what historical and cultural phenomena supported these developments, and how they have varied within the international arena.

I first conceived of documenting the history of British Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) in 1990, when I was teaching DMT in Britain and wanted a context for my work. The research and reporting has been delayed several times for structural reasons. Fran Levy, in her book *Dance Movement Therapy, A Healing Art* (2005), provides a useful history of American DMT, chronicling the work of key American pioneers. I wanted to discover what made our approach uniquely *British*. I was curious to discover what, in our personal and collective history, had generated the phenomenon of British DMT. There has never before been any attempt to document the contribution of British pioneers of DMT via systematic research, although one useful anecdotal account exists, published since I began this research (Meier, 1996).

I decided to ask pioneers about their life stories in relation to the development of their identity as a Dance Movement Therapist and to analyse the narratives thematically. It is this analysis I offer here, together with some questions for further research. I will begin with a short early history of British DMT, to set into context the phenomenon of pioneering

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DMT as psychotherapy.¹ I will then describe the methodology used for this research before offering a thematic analysis of the individual life narratives on which this research is based. I will reflect on these themes and on the historical context in which British DMT was able to flourish, before drawing conclusions concerning the historical situatedness of the development of DMT in Britain, the notion that career trajectories can be conceptualised as a kind of “falling forwards,” and the importance of balancing an attitude of naiveté together with tacit, embodied knowledge against contemporary imperatives to evidence the profession.

The early history of Dance Movement Therapy in Britain

Dance Movement Therapy has a long history in Britain, yet no formal training courses were developed until the 1980s, and registration of practitioners began as recently as 1996. The delayed development compared to the USA might be accounted for by the later development of dance as an academic subject in higher education (Meier, personal communication, 1999). However, in the UK Laban’s Art of Movement was absorbed into the education system. This enabled several of the pioneers of British DMT to emerge from the area of education concerned with children who have emotional and behavioural difficulties (“special education”). When Dianne Dulicai needed placements for her first trainees from the Laban Centre DMT training programme in London, she was struck by the immediate understanding of the value of dance in some school settings (Dulicai, personal communication, 1999).

British DMT is historically a complicated phenomenon, consisting of two “waves” of development. It is the second “wave” that led directly to the development of the profession as it is today, with its emphasis on dance movement *psychotherapy*. For my own research I was therefore more interested in this second wave. However, we all stand on the shoulders of giants, as Isaac Newton famously said.² This article does not profess to offer a full history of British DMT. Space does not allow for a full account of the first wave, which includes such important figures as Chloe Gardner, Audrey Wethered, the late Betty Meredith Jones, Denise Puttock, the late Veronica Sherborne and Walli Meier. Other inspiring figures in the development of British DMT include Marion North, Patricia Sanderson and Wolfgang Stange. Similarly, this article does not address the important contribution made later by visiting Americans, including Joanna Harris, Marcia Leventhal and Dianne Dulicai, all inspirational and tireless teachers. Neither is there space to give due credit to the many people who have contributed to the development of the profession but who began their practice slightly later than those with whom this research is concerned. Among them are the late Gabrielle Parker, Penelope Best, Laurence Higgins and Monika Steiner-Celebi.

References to the first wave of British DMT are to be found in some unusual places, including the 1960 British comedy film, *The Pure Hell of St Trinian’s*.³ Earlier still Browne (1837), medical superintendent of the Montrose Asylum in Scotland, records positive effects of dance on the mental state of in-patients, in particular for those suffering from “melancholia.”

Research methodology

Levy (2005) account of the American pioneers of DMT, whilst thorough, relied on a survey method. Her identified pioneers were generally well known figures both in the USA and abroad. The British picture is less developed, and I wanted a richer, more narrative first person account. I used a “snowballing” sampling strategy, first placing a call in 1995 via the Association for Dance Movement Therapy (ADMT) Newsletter for participants. I also approached key people and asked all respondents to recommend others.

I decided to focus on the period during which those pioneers currently practising in Britain developed their thinking in a particularly “British” way. By British, I mean multiculturally British; I have not excluded those born or raised abroad. Criteria for inclusion in the sample were: they began practising prior to 1978, when learning from colleagues normally resident in the USA became available in the UK; and their work fitted the ADMT UK definition of DMT as

¹ At the 2007 AGM it was decided to rename the Association for Dance Movement Therapy (ADMT) as ‘The Association for Dance Movement Psychotherapy’, though at the time of writing this has not yet been formally adopted.

² The saying is also attributed to an earlier twelfth century source, Bernard of Chartres (Wikipedia, c. 2007).

³ Produced in Shepperton Studios by Sidney Gilliat and Frank Launder, directed by Frank Launder with choreography by Philip and Betty Buchel and screenplay by Frank Launder, Val Valentine and Sydney Gilliat. I am grateful to Philip Spence for bringing this reference to my attention.

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