

Decolonizing Dance Movement Therapy Through Pleasure-Based, Sensual Movement

Abstract

This paper and presentation investigate the role of sensual, pleasure-based movement in decolonizing Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) and its potential to challenge entrenched societal norms and systemic oppression. Traditional DMT has often overlooked the integration of sexuality and sensuality, which are critical for addressing the full spectrum of human experience and mental health. This presentation reviews historical biases within DMT and the broader societal frameworks that have perpetuated a disconnection from erotic and sensual elements and expands definitions of these concepts. It discusses how integrating these elements can empower individuals by reclaiming bodily autonomy and enhancing self-compassion in the context of DMT. Furthermore, it explores the implications of sensual movement for individual healing and its broader societal impact, suggesting that such practices can challenge and potentially transform colonized therapeutic systems by fostering a more inclusive, empathetic, and holistic approach to mental health care. Through a comprehensive literature review and analysis of recent empirical studies, this paper underscores the necessity of expanding DMT practices to include pleasure-based approaches to promote deeper psychological resilience and social change.

Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) has proven effective in addressing various mental health issues; however, its conventional approach to sexuality remains notably restricted, potentially limiting its effectiveness. Despite the importance for DMT professionals to be competent in handling issues of sexuality, there is a significant lack of research and practical application for managing sexual, sensual, and erotic experiences within therapy. This deficiency not only presents challenges for integrated mental health care but also reflects wider societal biases entrenched in patriarchal, white supremacist, and capitalist values (Hannah, 2010; Walker et al., 2023). Walker (2020) stresses that the integration of the erotic into therapeutic processes is vital for catalyzing necessary social change, pinpointing the cultural avoidance of sexuality as a fundamental cause of persistent oppression and misinformation that severely impacts mental, emotional, and physical well-being (Walker, 2020). This presentation advocates for exploring pleasure-based, sensual movement in DMT as a transformative approach to decolonizing the field. By drawing on feminist theory and expanded perspectives of sexuality and emphasizing the importance of addressing the impact of oppression on marginalized populations, it presents a compelling case for integrating sensual pleasure-based movement to challenge and reshape the foundational norms of DMT, promoting a more inclusive, empathetic and holistic practice (hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1984).

Clarifying Terms: The Erotic as a Transformative Element in Dance Movement Therapy

The Western perception of the erotic has traditionally been confined to its sexually explicit implications. However, feminist perspectives, particularly those articulated by Audre Lorde (1978), Esther Perel (2017), and Melissa Walker (2020), present a more nuanced interpretation that is highly pertinent to therapeutic contexts. Lorde views the embodiment of the erotic as a source of power and a gateway to discovering one's bodily autonomy, suggesting a profound connection between personal empowerment and erotic awareness (Lorde, 1978). Perel extends this notion by describing the erotic as a vital life force that transcends mere sexuality to encompass broader aspects of human fulfillment and relational dynamics (Perel, 2017). Walker further expands this concept by illustrating how the erotic emerges at the intersection of pleasure and personal growth, particularly through the engagement with cultural taboos. She argues that integrating the erotic into therapy is crucial for addressing the cultural avoidance of sexuality, which she identifies as a root cause of continued oppression and misinformation adversely affecting mental, emotional, and physical health (Walker, 2020).

This broader interpretation of the erotic encompasses not only sexual expression but also the holistic experience of sensuality and sexuality as they are felt and expressed through movement. The distinction between sensuality and sexuality is crucial, with sensuality involving a more expansive interaction with the senses and not necessarily leading to sexual arousal. This differentiation is highlighted by both Kierr (2011) and Fasullo (2016), with Fasullo emphasizing the conscious connection to the senses and proposing that any bodily experience of pleasure or sensation can be sensual, irrespective of its sexual overtones (Fasullo, 2016).

Integrating these concepts into DMT practice and theory offers a perspective that embraces the full spectrum of human experience, challenging the conventional boundaries imposed by societal norms. This approach also addresses the broader societal issues related to power dynamics and gender roles, as noted by Fahs and Plante (2016). Their work examines the interconnectedness of women's sexuality with patriarchal structures, highlighting the ongoing need to explore the interplay between power and sex (Fahs & Plante, 2016). This expanded conceptualization underscores the potential for therapeutic practices to transcend traditional limitations and foster a more inclusive, empowering, and holistic approach to healing. By integrating the sensual, sexual, and erotic (SSE) into the therapeutic container, DMT practitioners can offer a form of care that is attuned to the complexities of the human experience, providing a space where individuals can explore and embrace their fullest potential.

Literature Review

Despite its advancements, DMT's approach to integrating sexuality remains notably underdeveloped. Historical analyses show that the erotic elements within dance have often been marginalized due to prevailing middle-class gender ideologies, which sought to purify the image of female dancers and align therapeutic practices with broader societal norms that uphold patriarchal, capitalist values (Hannah, 2010). Further scrutiny by researchers like Lykou (2018) reveals continued neglect in addressing sexuality within DMT, attributed to a lack of theoretical development and integration of feminist and queer theories. Recent dialogues at professional conferences, such as those led by Walker (2023), echo these sentiments, advocating for the inclusion of sexuality in DMT training to challenge systemic biases rooted in white supremacy and patriarchal structures.

Additionally, Irvine (2012) highlights that Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) often impede research on sexuality, reinforcing sexual stigma and limiting the exploration of these critical topics within therapeutic fields. This systemic reluctance to address sexuality openly contributes to an education gap that hinders the development of DMT practitioners capable of integrating a more comprehensive understanding of sexual health and empowerment into their practices. The avoidance of addressing sexuality in therapeutic fields may also stem from the fear of sexual misconduct, a concern that has led to significant institutional hesitancy to publish related research (Dahlberg, 2014). Both Gabbard and Plakun (1999) argue that improved education on these topics could help reduce incidents of misconduct by enhancing understanding and preparedness among therapists. Favero et al. (2022) further support the notion that thorough training can mitigate the underreporting and avoidance of discussing sexuality in therapeutic settings, thereby preventing misconduct and fostering a healthier dialogue around sexuality within the field. The exploration of sexuality in DMT not only confronts these systemic deficiencies but also aligns with broader feminist movements that advocate for systemic changes that address the patriarchal oppression of marginalized people (Fahs & Plante, 2016).

Adrienne Maree Brown (2019) highlights the transformative power of pleasure as a mechanism to challenge systemic oppression and promote social change. Emphasizing that engagement in pleasurable activities can enhance overall well-being, Brown's perspective supports using pleasure as a therapeutic intervention. Supporting this, Bernardi et al. (2017) and Moccia et al. (2018) have found that pleasurable, sensory experiences in dance can significantly foster emotional regulation and enhance psychological health by promoting intrinsic motivation and self-agency.

Building on these findings, Steele (2024) piloted a pleasure-based Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) approach that specifically addresses the limitations in current DMT practices regarding SSE expression. This approach aimed to utilize sensual, pleasure-based movements as tools to counteract the negative impacts of systemic oppression, particularly those rooted in patriarchal and capitalist structures. Steele's method focuses on expanding the therapeutic benefits of DMT by encouraging sensual and erotic expression, providing a pathway to reclaim body narratives, confidence, and self-agency in a supportive, pleasure-focused therapeutic environment.

The Role of Sensual Movement in Therapy

Steele's (2024) research focused on the experiences of people assigned female at birth (AFAB) and those who were raised female in the Western contemporary cultural context. The study aimed to recruit participants of various backgrounds, specifically targeting active dancers to mitigate risks associated with inexperienced individuals exploring self-expression through dance. The selection criteria excluded individuals who had recently experienced trauma or had significant cognitive, emotional, or psychological impairments. Candidates underwent a thorough screening process using three assessment questionnaires to evaluate their emotional intelligence and PTSD symptoms, ensuring they possessed the ability to self-regulate and engage in nuanced self-reflection. Informed consent was meticulously obtained, detailing the study's procedures, goals, and potential risks. Extensive risk mitigation measures were implemented, including requiring participants to have an external therapist and establishing safety agreements to ensure a protective environment. These agreements were reinforced throughout the study, encouraging participants to remain within their windows of tolerance and actively engage in self-monitoring.

Data collection and analysis were multifaceted. It was initially planned to include movement observations through Laban Movement Analysis, but this approach was abandoned due to practical challenges and concerns over participant comfort. Instead, data was primarily gathered through initial intakes, participant journaling, and a post-class survey. Detailed reflections were analyzed using a grounded theory approach, leading to the identification of several key themes related to sensual, sexual, and erotic (SSE) experiences, internal conflicts, and the therapeutic benefits of movement and group therapy.

Design

The four-week pilot series began with introductions, a review of informed consent, and a setting of personal intentions, followed by movement explorations that included guided warm-ups, exploration of embodied consent, and establishment of somatic anchors. Each class concluded with a discussion and reflection circle. In subsequent weeks, participants revisited and built upon prior sessions' experiences through structured activities and open-ended movement explorations, such as moving from impulse versus choice and connecting with others through paired activities and mirroring. Each session emphasized ongoing verbal and written reflections to deepen understanding and integration of the

experiences. The series culminated in the fourth week with extended movement explorations and a final reflective circle to consolidate the therapeutic journey.

Results and Conclusions: Implications for Decolonizing DMT

The positive results of this exploration were plentiful. Participants reported themes of empowerment, expanded self-concept, increased access to pleasure, increased sense of agency, reclamation of body narratives, and increased self-compassion. Through somatic engagement with the SSE, participants brought into question what an erotic body is and what it truly means to be sensing, feeling, and expressing in an erotic body in this cultural context. The structures and interventions of the class series provided a safe enough container for the vulnerable exploration of this charged material.

While many factors helped to provide the appropriate context, two aspects stood out as significantly compelling: the relational dynamic of group work and the phenomenon of slowness. Connection and slowing down prevailed as cornerstones of the work. Participants were passively forced to face internalized judgments, fears, and shame in their roles of both “performers” and witnesses. Each participant negotiated the level of inhibition in their expression and experience of embodying the SSE. Ultimately, their intrapersonal processes of incrementally releasing their inhibitions permitted the group as a whole. As such, the group dynamic evolved into something increasingly powerful and radically accepting.

The outcomes of this study not only illuminate the potential for personal transformation but also highlight a critical pathway for the decolonization of DMT itself. The findings suggest that engagement in pleasure-based sensual movement confronts internalized feelings of inadequacy, which are fueled by societal norms that prize productivity and perfection, often marginalizing those who don't conform. This approach empowers individuals to reclaim their bodies and celebrate inherent worth beyond productivity, fostering self-acceptance (Lorde, 1984; Hooks, 1994). By encouraging a slower, more intentional pace, the approach counters demands of capitalist productivity, enhancing mindfulness and self-awareness and serving as resistance to the relentless push for efficiency that characterizes modern society (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Gilligan & Richards, 2009). The group setting promotes a sense of community and interconnectedness, reflecting values from indigenous and communal cultures prioritizing collective success and challenging cultural values of individualism (Triandis, 1995; Kimmerer, 2013). Encouraging

indulgence in pleasurable movement allows individuals to regain control over their bodies, countering colonial control mechanisms, affirming personal freedom, and emphasizing the right to bodily autonomy and self-governance (Foucault, 1978). Pleasure-based practices challenge colonial ideologies that often dismiss pleasure as frivolous or suspect, especially outside heteronormative and capitalist frameworks. By celebrating joy and satisfaction, these practices advocate for a cultural shift that values well-being and happiness (hooks, 2000). Lastly, pleasure-based movement provides relief and restoration through mindfulness, connection, and physical engagement. It enhances well-being and builds internal resource and resilience (van der Kolk, 2014). Each of these points highlights how integrating sensual, pleasure-based movement within DMT advances personal and community healing and supports broader efforts toward social and cultural transformation, challenging deep-seated colonial legacies within therapeutic practices.

Theoretical and Practical Integration

Incorporating the study's insights into DMT practice necessitates critically reassessing therapist training and the conceptualization, delivery, and engagement with themes of sensuality, sexuality and the erotic in therapy. This presentation introduces a comprehensive framework and template for exploring sensual, sexual, and erotic content alongside pleasure-based movements, aiming to enrich therapeutic practices and actively contribute to the decolonization of DMT and the therapeutic field at large. Utilizing a combination of lectures, experiential activities, and group discussions, the presentation offers participants a holistic and embodied understanding of the transformative potential of this approach.

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