

Article for e-motion

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Developing Transcultural Competence

Cultural awareness in DMT

The purpose of this piece is to share some practical ideas for how we may bring greater cultural awareness and skill to our work as dance movement therapists. These suggestions are based on some twenty years of inquiry into what enables effective and ethical professional practice across cultural boundaries. For a discussion of this research and the ensuing theoretical model of Transcultural Competence as it applies to DMT, please see my chapter 'The Body of Culture' in the forthcoming book 'Dance Movement Therapy: Theory, Research and Practice'¹. I continue to apply and refine the Transcultural Competence model in my clinical work and more explicitly in professional development workshops and courses; the activities below are drawn from this experience.

What is culture?

Culture is not a subset of life, so much as one possible lens through which we can view all of life; a way of understanding all our actions, ideas and experiences. We can imagine a culture as an iceberg. Hidden under the water is a shared sense of identity, core beliefs and values which give rise to a set of 'unwritten rules' about how to act, think and feel, the webs of meaning and collective memory which form the basis of everyday sense-making and other phenomena which we can imagine as a collective unconscious. Above the waterline are patterns of observable behaviour, explicit codes of conduct, the built environment and the material artefacts we produce. The iceberg metaphor has its strengths, evoking hidden (and maybe dangerous) depths; an inner core which can last for centuries or millennia and a surface that forms and melts away; diversity emerging from a shared ocean. But like all metaphors, it has its limits. The iceberg has sharp edges that culture does not share...

Why focus on culture?

Many dance movement therapists work with client groups whose culture is different from the therapist's own. For example, DMT may be offered to groups who risk marginalisation in the wider socio-economic context, such as recent refugees, people living in institutions such as hospitals and prisons, or those whose activities are shaped by physical or mental disability or distress. In any of these cases, it may be useful to bring a cultural perspective; not only where there is an obvious difference in language and nationality. Acknowledging and appreciating our differences can help us to attune more deeply to the lifeworlds of our clients. This, in turn, can refine our practice and help us to accompany and support our clients' journey, rather than inadvertently obliging them to follow our own maps.

¹ Helen Payne (ed.), published by Brunner Routledge 2004.

Suggestions for nurturing Transcultural Competence in DMT:

What follows here is a set of practical suggestions for developing your own skill in working with clients whose cultural heritage differs from your own. All of these have been tried and tested by many hundreds of therapists, educators, artists and managers, in the context of my professional development workshops. Readers who are familiar with the Transcultural Competence model will recognise that these suggestions work up through the five levels of transcultural knowledge, skills and attitude. These ideas are intended to stimulate playful exploration and discovery. Have fun!

Know your place: Being aware of our own cultural position is the foundation for working with difference. If nothing else, take time to creatively explore the places and people that have formed you as a cultural being. Imagining your own culture as the confluence of many rivers, or the petals of a flower of which you are the centre, draw a map of your cultural heritage (whether by ancestry or life experience) and then move to explore how these cultures live in you and through you².

Soak it up: Immersing yourself in the music and rhythms of a culture you will work with, watching the films (even if you don't understand the dialogue), reading the poetry, experiencing the taste and smell of the food... all draw on the wisdom of the body and lead to an embodied knowing of another lifeworld that you may never fully grasp from a more analytical perspective.

Read all about it: Reading about the history of a place or people can help us notice and make sense of subtle patterns in thought, feeling and behaviour. Find at least one good history book and take the time to learn about the events, struggles and characters which have shaped this culture's collective consciousness over the centuries.

Just ask: Informally interview someone from the culture you will be working with. However, it is surprisingly hard to articulate one's own culture, so asking someone about their own cultural beliefs and unwritten rules may be frustrating! Questions about violations of values may help to reveal the unwritten rules. For example, try asking what leads to shame, embarrassment, approbation or punishment in this cultural context.

Spot the difference: Culture isn't just about nationality. Many kinds of difference can be seen as cultural. How about language, religion, gender, sexuality... and also (dis)abilities, addictions, or other contexts which give rise to a common identity and shared unwritten rules among large numbers of people who may never meet face to face.

Check your props: If you work with cloth, hoops, balls or other props, do you know what impact they may have on your clients? For instance, depending on the culture, the colour red may represent danger, luck, anger, prosperity, love, action or stop! Items which are

² In our Cultural Embodiment workshops, Sandra Reeve and I facilitate in-depth exploration of the participants' own multiple cultural heritage and how it affects movement and perception of movement. See our conference report in e-motion Vol XIV no. 4, Spring 2003, pp20-21.

familiar for you could be strangely disconcerting to your clients. When you are choosing props for your session, practise seeing 'neutral' objects with culturally informed eyes.

Do as you would be done by... NOT!: Many of us unwittingly impose our own cultural codes with the intention of being sensitive to our clients' needs. Expectations about issues such as of personal space vary greatly from one culture to another. Your respectful 'giving space' (both literal and metaphorical) may be cold aloofness to your client. Try suspending your ideas about space, touch and appropriate distance and relying on subtle signals that your body picks up from the client's micro-movements.

Learn body language: If there is cultural diversity within the group and you are using turn-taking in movement leadership for the group to warm up and connect, you or a group member may inadvertently introduce offensive gestures. Crossing your arms, showing the soles of your feet, touching your chin, sustained eye contact... all are offensive gestures in one culture or another. Keep in mind that the body talks in every culture – and that the meaning of your message may not be the one you intended!

Grasp the concepts: The disciplines of anthropology and organisational behaviour have generated a massive literature on how cultures differ. Learn about dimensions of culture, such as collectivism / individualism (identity based on 'we' or 'I'), power distance (our expectations of hierarchical relationships) and uncertainty avoidance (the extent to which we try to fix the future). Conceptual tools such as these can greatly enhance our cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Keep moving!: Throughout the session, keep shifting your perspective. From time to time, become a witness to the whole interaction, able to see clearly the connections and contradictions between your own and your clients' cultures. Taking distance from your own cultural perspective can support the emergence of true empathy (feeling the client's experience, seeing through the lens of their beliefs and values) rather than mere sympathy (how *you* would feel in the client's place, through the lens of *your* beliefs and values).

Re-think your thinking: A skilful therapist may support the emergence of themes by witnessing, naming, reflecting or reinforcing an unfolding meaning in the movement. When working with themes, stay alert to your own cultural assumptions. Notice when you attribute meaning; check and check again the basis for your interpretations. What are you taking for granted? What is obvious? Especially when meaning appears evident or natural, ask yourself what radically different interpretation is also possible.

Seek specialised supervision: Find a supervisor who has knowledge of the cultural context of your work, or lots of experience working across cultures. Culturally-sensitive supervision may help you to become more aware of your own cultural assumptions, identify and challenge inadvertent 'us-and-them' thinking, or creatively explore clinical material from different cultural viewpoints. In professional development workshops I sometimes ask participants to tell the story of a critical incident from several different cultural points of view: that of the practitioner, the client and the 'anthropologist from Mars'.

Provide signposts: You know the difference between walking around your own neighbourhood and being lost in a foreign city? The DMT context – including your own

behaviour as the therapist – may be profoundly 'foreign' to your client. Beware of leaving people floundering and bewildered in uncharted territory because of your well-meant commitment to emergence, creativity and freedom of choice.

Tell your story: To paraphrase George Orwell, "All cultures are different, but some cultures are more 'different' than others". 'Exotic', 'foreign', 'different'... most of us attribute these qualities to others, not to ourselves. Encourage dialogue about cultural heritage and be explicit about your own. Tell the story of your difference. This includes describing the various cultural contexts which make up your heritage and articulating how they may shape your perceptions and practice.

Peep through the cracks: For years I cherished a notion of wisdom as a more-and-more inclusive perspective; as we learn and grow, we develop new points of view without forgetting our previous experience and outlook. This allows us to see a situation from many angles and to integrate complex systems in our awareness. But working with cultural difference can feel more like peering through a narrow opening, getting ourselves into awkward and unfamiliar positions in order to catch a glimpse of a radically different lifeworld. This recognition of our own partiality – and our recognition that it may be the best we can ever do – may be even more important than systemic awareness.

Own your power: We are born of and into culture(s), yet we are also the co-creators of culture. From moment to moment, our every act, thought or word generates the conditions for the next moment. Recognise that you are a powerful agent of culture, all the more so in your privileged role as therapist. You can shape, kill or nurture the possibilities that arise in your interactions with your clients. The smallest things you do or say, the feelings on which you focus, the meanings you attribute to your experience, all are opportunities to own your power and co-create the culture of the group with awareness.

Embrace the world: Human beings are cultural by nature. This leads us to identify with some cultural groups and not others. Without intending to, we create social systems of us-and-them. However, we can transcend this and develop transcultural consciousness, based on a fluid, inclusive sense of identity. Us-and-them is replaced by a sense of 'we'. This can include the whole human family, all of life, the cosmos. Be vigilant with yourself. Who is excluded from *your* cultural identity? What would it take to include the outsider? How do you reach, relax and expand to embrace the whole world in your sense of who you are?

Forget culture!: There is a Buddhist saying... 'Before Zen, chopping wood and drawing water. After Zen, chopping wood and drawing water.' If we ignore culture, we risk naïve denial of the extent and depth of our differences. However, there comes a time when we can know the difference, bridge the difference... and transcend the difference. After a deep engagement with human diversity, let it go, forget culture and enjoy the oneness of all things.

I would be delighted to hear from other dance movement therapists who are exploring the role and importance of culture in DMT. Please be in touch via email to sara.boas@lifedance.info.