

Looking into Changing Cultures

Dance Movement Therapy in Pakistan

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The following article draws on my experience as a Dance Movement Therapist in Pakistan during my stay there in 1999 and 2000.

Finding a Niche: Non-Governmental Organisations and Cultural Identity

In a country where the public display of dance is frequently associated with prostitution and where psychotherapy is still a more or less alien concept, the scope for Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) is not immediately obvious. Being, in addition, a foreigner with little knowledge of the local language, possibilities for regular clinical work were extremely limited. Still, I unexpectedly came across much interest within the sector of Pakistani non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the field of social development.

Within a framework of economic and social decline under restrictive political regimes, NGOs in Pakistan have increasingly taken on the task of public service delivery. In addition, they represent one of the strongest pressure groups in Pakistan promoting social change. The NGO sector went through a major boom in the 1990s with much funding flowing in from the West. Along with this came the development of new ideas and approaches to social development work. Nowadays – despite problems of infighting, corruption and dependency on external funding – probably represent one of the most progressive, open-minded, and innovative sectors of Pakistani society. Within this context I was able to establish myself as a trainer for different groups of NGO staff, introducing DMT approaches and tools and adapting them to particular organisational needs. Having previously worked with local NGOs in other countries, I was aware that such organisations have their own internal culture, which is distinct from, and frequently in opposition to the general culture of the country they are operating in. This is a direct result of the NGOs' involvement in activities aimed at social change. I was thus particularly interested in the manifestations of cultural identity in NGOs and the possible conflicts inherent for the members of staff working between those two cultures. Against this background, the aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, to illustrate the potential of applying DMT to group work within the NGO (and generally social services) sector. Secondly, to look at and discuss different aspects of cultural identity which were brought up during the group work. Both will be done using the example of a teambuilding

workshop run for an Islamabad based Pakistani NGO. The names of the organisation and the participants in the following account are all changed.

DMT and Teambuilding: Group-work with the Staff of SAL

The workshop was set up for the core staff of SAL (name changed) – an NGO working nationally against child sexual abuse through awareness raising, training of care professionals, and research. I had initially been approached by the director of SAL who was looking for a training course that would encourage teambuilding among staff. The final workshop was aimed at strengthening group ties and understanding, through the means of creative movement and non-verbal interaction. The program covered Individual Body and Movement Awareness, Personal Space and Boundaries, Trust, Group Dynamics and Non-Verbal Communication. In order to allow enough time for reflection and integration between sessions, a program of six two-hour sessions was spaced out over 4 weeks. This was followed by a supplementary review session together with the director of SAL. Each session started with a physical warm-up for the three female and three male participants, all Pakistani, who spoke English in addition to their mother tongues. The warm-up was followed by a variety of guided movement experiences in order to explore the different themes mentioned above. At different stages, drawing and writing was also used to support the movement process and the subsequent reflection and exchange between group members. The sessions always ended with at least a half-hour discussion about the experiences gained. The introduction of such a DMT framework was facilitated by the fact that all group members were familiar with interactive group work, meditation and relaxation exercises.

Touchy Encounters: Gender Roles and Stereotypes

One issue frequently brought up throughout the workshop was gender roles and stereotypes. This was not surprising in a group with members of both sexes physically interacting with each other – an extremely unusual situation in Pakistan. During a body awareness and trust exercise, Salem (male) expressed his experience of physical contact with other group members as an initial feeling of “repelling heat”. It was the first interactive exercise of the workshop. Participants were sitting with changing partners back to back, with eyes closed, and engaging in a movement conversation with their backs. Interestingly, another group member Fatima (female) also used the term “heat” to describe her discomfort at one moment. When her initial female partner, Noor, returned to Fatima after having had back conversations with two other group members, Noor’s back suddenly felt much warmer than during the initial contact. Disliking this change of temperature, Fatima’s immediate reaction was: “She got that heat from the men!” Being confronted with Fatima’s implicit image of men, two male members repeatedly mentioned throughout the workshop how hurt they had felt by this comment.

Whether it was because the men were more vocal in this respect, or whether it really did depict the current dynamic of this group, the restraining effect of male roles and stereotypes

was more frequently discussed than that of female ones. Still within the context of the back-to-back conversation, Abdul described his confrontation with such a stereotype when he was moving with Fatima. Fearing that Fatima could read the situation as him taking advantage of that moment of physical contact, he did not dare take initiative. As a consequence, he initially waited with much tension until she would start to move first. Later, during discussion, Fatima confirmed that she probably would have had such thoughts if he had initiated the movement. Both acknowledged that such preconceived ideas were hindering the establishment of a trustful relationship between them.

Clearly, this is a dynamic not easily resolved since the daily experience of many Pakistani women is indeed marked by men frequently physically and emotionally imposing themselves onto women. However, especially with regard to the group's shared work environment, it was important for such discussions to arise. Working in an organisation which is trying to bring about social and attitudinal change will, in most cases, change an individual's perception of the society and of her/his own self. In return, such a changed self-image will inevitably come in conflict with society's prevalent norms, roles and stereotypes.

Thus, going back to the question why it was the restraints of male stereotypes in particular which were discussed in this group, it seems plausible that this is linked to the shared NGO environment. SAL is very much engaged in campaigning against emotional and sexual abuse where the abuser is usually depicted as male. In order to counteract the power imbalances in Pakistan's society, the value of being a woman is particularly emphasised, and the wrong done through male-dominated power relationships is exposed. This might provide the female members of staff with a unique environment for self-expression and confirmation. The men, however, are left with a host of hostile images and a significant lack of positive role models.

The Forbidden Glance: Witnessing and Cultural Norms of Behaviour

The influence of gender roles and corresponding behavioural norms was also reflected in Noor's feelings while witnessing a male partner's free movement improvisation. This was at the end of one session in which the group had explored their personal movement preferences, and discussed their impact on interaction with other group members at the workplace. The purpose of witnessing in couples was twofold: firstly, to develop the ability to observe and recognise movement qualities such as Laban 'Efforts' and, secondly, to explore issues of trust, seeing and being seen, and giving and receiving feedback.

Interestingly, Noor did not find it difficult to be seen/looked at while she was moving with her eyes closed, but rather struggled with being in the witness role and to look at someone else. Helped by the fact that the observers were asked to make a drawing while witnessing, Noor found herself spending more time bent over the drawing rather than looking at her partner. She later said that she felt uncomfortable looking at her male partner for any length of time. During the group discussions, Noor and other members linked this feeling to a prevalent code of conduct for women. This not only assigns women a less visible role (e.g.

dress covering the entire body including head and frequently face) but also, for reasons of chastity, discourages them to directly look at men. On the other hand, particularly middle-class women in the cities are frequently exposed to the intense staring by men in public. Being looked at is thus a more common (although not necessarily pleasant) experience.

Certainly, such norms of conduct are not explicitly observed in the group's working environment where men and women work closely together on an equal footing. In fact, SAL's organisational culture promotes not only gender equality among staff, but also open, personal and close working relationships. However, as the director of SAL, a woman, pointed out in the review session, this has led to a "we are very comfortable with each other and get along so well" attitude which exists only on the surface. Underneath remains an array of mixed feelings, unconsciously or consciously influenced by the culture outside SAL. In this situation, the immediacy of non-verbal interaction through movement proved to be an ideal tool to bring to light such deeply rooted patterns of identification. Once the initial awkwardness of physical contact was overcome, the creative and playful nature of the movement experiences made it possible to address what was otherwise being covered up by a façade of intellectual and NGO-political correctness.

The Erotic Dance: Trust and Judgement

Mixed feelings and conflicting patterns of cultural identity emerged also during a guided journey through the workshop room. In couples, the participants took turns leading the partner on a physical exploration of the room. The guided person could only walk backwards and had to keep eye contact with the partner. The leading person was communicating movement, directions, speed, touch etc. in an exclusively non-verbal manner. While two couples were moving, one couple in turn would sit back to observe the interaction between the moving partners. The resulting written notes were kept for the following group discussion.

During this discussion, the only male-female couple (Munir and Fatima) received harsh feedback from its observers Saima (female) and Salem (male). Their interaction was reproachfully described in terms of "not taking the exercise serious", "playing games and enjoying laughing", "Munir wanting to be in control" and "Fatima failing to control". In contrast to the feedback received by the other (single sex) couples, Fatima and Munir did not feel that theirs was reflective of their own experience. Although they acknowledged that they had been testing each other's trust and sometimes trying to assert themselves vis-à-vis their partner, they essentially viewed their interaction as "playful, while taking the exercise serious."

Yet, it was not primarily the content of the feedback, but particularly the reproachful and aggressive tone of its delivery, which set it in such a stark contrast to the feedback received by the others. In the ensuing conversation it slowly emerged that watching a man and woman "having fun" together had stirred up feelings of disapproval and also jealousy in Saima and

Salem. In their minds they had been bystanders of an erotic, if not a sexual event. The group agreed that such an interpretation coupled with their emotional reaction was not just personally motivated, but also rooted in cultural prohibitions regarding contact between unrelated men and women. This time not only had the two looked *at* each other, but also they had looked *into* each other's eyes while playfully communicating and physically interacting. Within conservative circles in Pakistan, this would certainly have been condemned as extremely offensive and frivolous behaviour, especially on the woman's part.

Moving into Private Territory: Personal Space and Boundaries

“Looking at” versus “looking into” and to really see: this became the crux around which most of the workshop evolved. With a multitude of clearly defined and constantly monitored roles to play in professional and personal lives, the difficulty to go beyond looking *at* other people and oneself was a painful reality shared by the whole group. The question of “how can I really see/know who I am and who the other is?” was initially triggered by a movement experience addressing issues of personal space and boundaries.

In order to physically represent and explore their own personal space, participants were given a piece of string to outline a comfortable space for themselves anywhere in the room. After having moved within their particular space, each group member devised a non-verbal ritual, which they would ask any visitor to perform in order to be invited into her/his space. Split into two groups, everybody then had the chance to visit someone else and to receive one visitor. While being together in the particular space, the only rule was for the host and visitor to interact exclusively non-verbally.

Saima built her space on the floor in the form of a fairly small triangle, which was closed by a knot at one corner. After having visited Saima in this space, Fatima said that she had felt uncomfortable sitting with Saima in the small place, the two of them crammed in between the three corners. Fatima had also consciously been very careful not to touch the border line (string), out of fear that this might upset Saima, who confirmed this assumption, admitting that she wouldn't have liked her touching the line. In fact, Fatima's feedback shed some light on Saima's previous question to the group as to why they frequently seemed afraid of her. Saima linked the triangle shape to her experience of private life, which she has spent for many years living in a triangle situation with another couple at home (no further details given). She felt she had never been given enough space and was now also unable to give much space to others. As a result, her colleagues felt that they rarely were able to really get through to Saima – to see the “real” Saima behind the strong and untouchable boundaries.

Fighting the Enemy from Within: Internalised Judgement and Reality-Testing

This dynamic was further complicated by Saima's own constant fear that others might think badly about her. At the same time Saima very much doubted her own sense of judgement, always asking herself whether her suspicions were really triggered by the respective person's

behaviour or rather something inside her which she then projected onto someone else. This was painfully reflected in another movement experience related to personal space and boundaries. While moving with closed eyes in a standing position, each person initially traced and shaped with their hands an imaginary safe and comfortable space around them. After having established a clear internal picture of this space, the participants were then asked to imagine that some negative energy (event, words, people, colours etc.) was trying to invade their space. The task was to explore with what kinds of movements and postures the person was able to defend their space and keep the negative energy out. This experience was finally depicted in individual drawings and then verbally shared among the group members.

Saima's movements during this exercise were very close to her body with her hands leading downwards and away from her, as if she wanted to wipe something off. With a seemingly tired and desperate expression she then covered and rubbed her eyes. The rest of her body was aimlessly hovering around, limp and without much strength. These movement qualities were also reflected in her drawing, which depicted a faintly human shape composed of an array of loosely scribbled black and red lines. The prominent part was the head in the form of a triangle with a strong black border and a red core. During the group exchange, Saima revealed that she found the whole experience very disturbing, since she felt that the imaginary negative energy was not coming from outside but from inside her. This feeling of being "attacked" from the inside rather than from outside paralleled her idea that the suspected negative thoughts (about her) by other people might in fact be born out of her own head. Not being able to trust her own judgement, she was constantly plagued by the question: "But how can I know? How can I really see what's going on?" Without an answer at hand, her interaction with her colleagues was frequently marked by sudden changes of mood, offensive or defensive reactions and generally unpredictable boundaries. It was this inconsistency of behaviour that made her colleagues fear and avoid her at times.

Looking At and Looking Into: Social Status and Self-discovery

Although more expressed by Saima, the preoccupation with other people's thoughts, opinions and judgement was shared by all group members. Abdul, for example, deplored the fact that he had to spend much of his life performing socially required roles in order to maintain a good reputation. This is intimately linked to the central importance of status and honour in Pakistani society. Yet both can only be awarded by society, but others who look *at* one's performance, but very rarely *into* one's individual personality. Or, as the group termed it: people were seen and judged according to social roles, not in terms of their individual being. According to Abdul, much time was thus spent "pretending for the façade" which not only quells authentic self-expressions, but also hinders "real" contact between people. In this context, looking *into* oneself and others in order to discover and reveal "who I really am or who the other person really is" can become an extremely difficult and threatening task.

The group directly experienced the above issue when Saima asked them for more detailed verbal feedback about whether they were afraid of her and why. Part of the answer was immediately visible: nobody was able to look into her eyes or even address her directly. This continued even after I had intervened and addressed this behaviour several times. At this point, the group also revealed to me that Saima was the superior to some of them at work. Although they have been asked for honest feedback in order to finally be able to see each other without façade, the rest of the group was not able to detach themselves from perceiving Saima in the light of status and hierarchy at their work place. The particular façade was thus not only something inherent to its carrier, but also represented an internal(ised) obstacle for surrounding people, preventing them to even raise their eyes. Hence, “looking at” and “looking into” had developed into a very complicated web of interaction that was not easy for Saima to disentangle on her path of self-discovery.

Although trust in and understanding of each other had grown considerably over the sessions, many tensions and mixed feelings caused by the different pulls of wider Pakistani culture, NGO culture, and persona needs remained. Considering the deep-rooted nature of such patterns of identification and behaviour, it was not in the scope, nor the intention of this workshop to come to quick solutions. However, the surface of “we are all very comfortable with each other and get along so well” had received some healthy cracks through which the group was able to start seeing beyond roles, facades and stereotypes and to look deeper *into* their being as a group.

Getting Married: United Power and Role Reversal

The whole groups process culminated in a free movement improvisation that powerfully summed up the different issues touched upon. While in a previous improvisation groups of three had engaged in mainly competitive games with directional, strong and quick movements, these qualities immediately changed when the whole group came together. As if under obligation, the group members started to interact in a harmonious and much more co-operative way. Initiated by Saima, the group started holding hands in a moving circle, while an attempt by Munir to re-introduce kicking and ball games was clearly rejected. It was as if the group was re-enacting their NGO cultural motto of problem-free team spirit. Yet, as if the closed circle – possibly a symbol of harmony and union – was increasingly experienced as inappropriate and uncomfortable, the group soon dispersed and spontaneously started enacting a wedding scene.

This second scene of union was marked by a much lesser degree of harmony and, instead, gave form to the tensions previously explored during the workshop. Firstly, the groom and bride were both women, Fatima the groom and Saima the bride. On one hand, this might reflect the group’s unease when it comes to interaction between the different sexes, in particular when sexual connotations are present as it is the case in a marriage. On the other hand, it might also reflect the power balance in SAL, where the director is female and

women's empowerment is given much attention. Thus, the union between two women seems to fulfil two functions: firstly, to protect men and women from "the heat of sexuality" through segregation; secondly, to subvert male dominance and to "breed" female power. In this context, it is also interesting that Fatima had been the most vocal about her struggle with male stereotypes in relation to sexuality, Saima as the most senior female member of the group was representing power.

Of all possible scenes within a wedding, the group chose to perform the wedding night with its direct association of sexuality and intimacy. By holding up big orange cloth as screen, the married couple was given the private space to consume their union. At this moment, Fatima declared that she wasn't satisfied with Saima, pushed her out of their space, and invited Noor to be her bride instead. Again, there seemed to be two aspects to this scene. On the one hand, Fatima explained later that she had slipped into one of her male stereotypes in which as man has got the power to repudiate his wife at whim. On the other hand, Fatima's interaction with Saima could also be seen in the context of their hierarchical work relationship, and of Fatima's interaction with Saima during the personal space exercise. Similar to the private space behind the screen, Fatima had previously shared Saima's private space created by a piece of string. At that time, Fatima had felt constricted and insecure about Saima's reactions. Being her direct subordinate through, she felt she had to "play the game" within the frame set by Saima. In the wedding scene, however, freed from her "real role" and empowered by the male role, Fatima was able to voice and show her frustration and anger towards Saima. She thus took her chance to retaliate. The fact that this happened in the form of an extreme stereotypical male behaviour shows again how deeply rooted the identification is with the general Pakistani culture and its power and gender relationships.

The Wedding Night: Intimacy and Voyeurism

Continuing the wedding scene, the group accepted the change of bride but increasingly grew intolerant of the potential intimacies taking place behind the screen. Munir started to repeatedly "peep" (his own words) behind the cloth and finally pulled it down with an aggressive movement. Again, the mixed feelings of attraction to and repulsion of sexuality came to the surface. As in the earlier guided journey through the room, the group found it difficult to accept that two members of (pretended) opposite sex might "have fun" together. Still, this was being tolerated for a certain time, as long as the group could secretly participate as "peeping" voyeurs.

"Peeping", in fact, represents a curious combination of 'looking at' and 'looking into': an undercover 'looking at' while hoping to accidentally be able to 'looking into' someone/something private of "real" exposed in the moment of intimacy. Unfortunately, peeping flourishes where 'looking at' is restricted and 'looking into' generally discouraged or prohibited. Placed in the realm of taboo-laden and closely monitored sexuality, it becomes a powerful tool for self-satisfaction, and at the same time denunciation of others. Especially in

the latter case, peeping can lead to aggression and destruction. Within this context, it is revealing that Munir's act of aggression by pulling down the screen not only terminated the wedding night but also the whole group-play. The dreamscape of role reversal being destroyed, the group was thus back to face their confined social and professional "reality".

Building Cultural Identity: Group Survival and Group Belonging

So, what was this reality – how did the group see itself at the end of this workshop? Despite the different tensions played out in the wedding scene, the overall feeling was reportedly one of being connected. Although this could partly be attributed to the group's tendency to deny difficult feelings, it also did reflect strengthened group ties and a fundamental sense of group belonging. As Saima said after a meditative review of the workshop: "I suddenly felt that, yes, the group is important for me and I think I am important for the group".

As mentioned before, it was not in the scope of the workshop or its aim to provide easy and quick solutions to the tensions and mixed feelings present in the group. However, the group was able to face issues related to trust, personal space, judgmental behaviour, and cultural and personal identity *without* falling apart as a group. This 'survival of the group' was a particularly important experience within a culture where 'losing face' is linked to such immediate (imagined or real) threat of destruction.

It thus allowed the group members to overcome some of their fear of direct, open and personal communication. Yet, apart from the sense of personal and interpersonal achievement, the survival of the group also represents a stepping stone for SAL's development as an organisation and agent of social change. As illustrated in this article, it is very difficult to change deeply ingrained patterns of cultural identification and social behaviour. This, however, is at the heart of most NGOs in Pakistan, including SAL. In order to lay the ground for such change to take place, NGOs have created a counter culture within the parameters of their work – an NGO culture which is marked by values such as gender equality, transparency, openness and assertiveness. Within the organisation, this usually becomes manifest in an (explicit or implicit) code of conduct and perception, previously described in this article as NGO-political correctness. The NGO movement in Pakistan however is still relatively young, with NGOs additionally facing a high staff turnover. As a result, the identification with this NGO culture among staff is frequently superficial and without real inner change.

The above is in part also true for this group of staff who, on average, have been working at SAL for one year. As reflected in the workshop, the pull between the general Pakistani culture and the NGO culture is at the heart of a number of overt and hidden tensions among the staff. This is not to say that this conflict of cultures will or even should ever vanish. On the contrary, such a conflict could be seen as an important prerequisite for change. However, for real change to occur, tensions have to be openly acknowledged and worked through. As simple adoption of NGO-political correctness is thus not enough. Instead, I would like to

argue that cultural change in this context has to start by nurturing (internal) group culture, before moving into the larger frame of NGO culture.

Conclusion: DMT in the Context of Cultural and Social Change

“I suddenly felt that, yes, the group is important for me and I think I am important for the group”. As mentioned before, this statement clearly illustrates a departure from the shallow “we are all very comfortable with each other” attitude towards a deeper group identity. Yet, seen in the wider context of the group’s professional work, such deepening group identity might also mean a first step towards building NGO culture through the group. Since new values cannot be learned intellectually but have to be tested and practised in daily life, the staff team represents an ideal frame for exploring social change. After all, in order to promote change in the larger society, an NGO and the people working for it have to embody this culture change first. In this context, DMT oriented group work – as illustrated in this article – represents a useful tool for supporting as assessing cultural change. In contrast to verbal and other therapy approaches, DMT also involves the non-verbal and physical aspects of identity and communication. It thus addresses exactly that: the embodiment of culture rather than merely its intellectual adoption. In the case of the SAL workshop issues of cultural identity were brought up, for example, in connection with the experience of eye contact, touch and personal space. Improvised movement and play also provided the group members with an opportunity to represent and explore their identity in a more creative and less threatening way than it would be possible through purely verbal interaction. As Noor described her experience of the workshop, the immediacy and physicality of interaction helped her “to get out of my shell”.

In conclusion, despite the taboos placed on movement and dance in Pakistan’s society, DMT approaches and tools prove to be an acceptable and extremely valuable addition to group work within the NGO sector. DMT approaches not only support the strengthening of group ties but also contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural identity and of its embodiment within the frame of social change. Although not therapy in its clinical sense, such DMT oriented group work allows for a wider application of DMT to so far unexplored environments and thereby contributes to the enrichment of DMT in practice.