

Under the Skin: Barriers and Opportunities for Dance Movement Therapy & Art

Psychotherapy with LGBT+ Clients

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Abstract:

This chapter provides an introduction to collaborative creative arts therapies practice with clients who identify as gender and sexually diverse identities. Its objective is to examine gender identity and sexual orientation in the context of interdisciplinary therapeutic work in a community-based setting in Scotland. The authors will particularly focus on art and movement interventions, contributing relevant themes in working with clients who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or related identities (LGBT+).

The chapter reviews current research on art therapy and dance movement therapy with LGBT+ clients, identifying gaps and opportunities for further research. It follows with an exploration of the external/internal self, LGBT+ visibility and identity as key thematic areas for creative work in relation to mental health. Finally, the authors examine a case example of collaborative creative arts workshops focusing on skin as a barrier, which serves to protect, expose and transform internal and external aspects of our identity.

The authors explore interdisciplinary arts practice with a client group that has been historically marginalised and has limited representation in creative arts therapy research. It presents an affirmative stance in creating constructive experiences of therapy for LGBT+ clients, and the opportunities offered by an integration of movement and art.²

Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction to collaborative creative arts therapies practice with clients who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or related identities (LGBT+). Its objective is to analyse how gender identity and sexual orientation are manifested through felt experience, and attest to the potential of art therapy (AT) and dance movement therapy (DMT) to foster their expression in a group setting.

We aim to expand the repertoire of relevant themes for therapeutic work with gender and sexually diverse identities, thus contributing to an underdeveloped area in creative arts therapies research. This chapter represents an affirmative stance in creating constructive experiences of therapy for LGBT+ clients, and the opportunities offered by an integration of movement and art.

Gender and sexuality are universal to all human beings. They have an early influence in how our sense of identity develops and how we build relationships with others. Identity comprises the facets of human development that determine who we are and what makes us unique, which stem from a combination of biological, psychological, social and cultural factors. Gender identity refers to an individual's identification with societal denominations of female, male, a combination or neither binary gender. Sexual orientation regards the degree of attraction, including non-attraction,ⁱ towards a person of particular gender(s)ⁱⁱ, which is felt emotionally, sexually and/or romantically (HGSE QueerEd 2010; Amnesty International 2014), and may remain dynamic or stable throughout a person's life. Gender identity and sexual orientation are aspects that contribute to an individual's sense of self, lived experience, and ultimately to physical and mental health; thus it is an issue needing attention by the therapeutic community and within therapeutic spaces.

This chapter presents an example of interdisciplinary arts therapies practice with a client group which has been historically marginalised and which has had limited representation in creative arts therapy research. We will first review the literature in the fields of DMT 3 and AT relevant to LGBT+ clients. Then we will explore key themes based on our work, which highlight the opportunities art and movement-based creative work offers to improving participants' mental health. We will particularly focus on exploring the themes of the internal/external selves, LGBT+ visibility and identity that emerged from our workshops. We will examine these themes through a case example of a collaborative creative arts workshop focusing on the theme of skin, as a barrier that serves to protect, expose and transform internal and external aspects of our identity.

The Community Setting

We deliver workshops and therapeutic sessions as part of a nonprofit, community-based LGBT+ organisation in Edinburgh, Scotland. Alison Wren is a Scottish art therapist who works as a Mental Health Development Worker, and Dr. Thania Acarón is a Puerto Rican dance movement therapist working as a sessional workshop facilitator and professional development consultant. The organisation offers counselling services, social events, mental health courses (including AT), arts workshops, helpline support and information sessions. Creative arts

therapy workshops are offered within their mental health programme, which includes individual and group sessions. Adults self-refer to the services, which can be accessed flexibly through regular or drop-in sessions. Those who access the mental health program vary in age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, faith, socioeconomic status, (dis)ability and familiarity with the creative arts therapies. People who refer do not need to have experienced mental ill health, though a significant amount of people who do refer have lived experience of mental illness. This is in keeping with the recorded higher rates of mental ill health for LGBT+ people compared to the general population (Fish and UK Department of Health 2007; National Alliance for Mental Illness 2017; The Shaw Mind Foundation 2016).

After introducing our key concepts and setting, the next sections present a review of DMT and AT research pertinent to work with LGBT+ clients.

DMT and work with LGBT+ Clients

DMT and the creative arts therapies have much research work to do on sexual minorities, an area that music therapist Hadley (2013) reiterates holds great promise. Allegranti (2009; 2011) argues for an embodied approach to addressing gender and sexuality within dance and DMT, exploring gender perspectives, feminist frameworks and sexuality as expressed in performance (dance and film) and therapeutic work. Her integration of body politics and gender theory with therapeutic approaches, and the inclusion of sexually diverse narratives in her case analysis of a performance lab, brings to light issues of LGBT+ visibility and heteronormativity within group work (2011). Currently the only case study explicitly working with LGBT+ clients, Hanan's (2010) master's thesis focuses on body image through DMT sessions with six transgender clients, exposing emergent themes of self-acceptance, isolation, bodily discrimination and societal norms regarding body and identity, which we have also encountered as salient themes in our work.

There is an emerging interest in the LGBT+ community, which has sparked a focus on therapist competencies. For example, a questionnaire specifically directed towards dance movement therapists' knowledge of best practices with LGBT+ clients is currently in its analysis stages (Robyn Flaum Cruz, e-mail message to author, 10 October, 2016). Additionally, Acarón led a webinar for the American Dance Therapy Association (2015), addressing key 'body questions' regarding gender identity and sexual orientation, with an aim for more professional development training opportunities in this area. However, new research needs to be developed on therapeutic competencies, and non-verbal aspects of gender identity and sexual orientation.

Art Therapy with LGBT+ Clients

Art therapy literature reinforces there is a lack of research in the field in relation to gender and sexuality, and the impact of AT interventions on LGBT+ clients (Addison 2003, Hogan 2003, Pelton-Sweet and Sherry 2008). Pelton-Sweet and Sherry's review of current art therapy LGBT+ research addresses some common themes: the coming out process, client feelings of safety, the need for training in therapist competencies and explorations of identity. Pelton-Sweet and Sherry (2008) claim that AT interventions are well placed for exploring identity issues and contribute to the development of an evidence base for the value of creative arts therapies with this client group. Ellis (2007) argues from a phenomenological perspective that the subjectivity of sexuality can be embodied in the AT experience and the possibilities of expression that a range of art media can provide are of value when communicating conscious and unconscious lived experiences of sexuality. This provides a rationale for examining interventions that integrate movement experientials with visual art.

One of the challenging areas found in the literature with LGBT+ clients is the developing nature of the appropriate terms and concepts. Addison (2003) attempted an introduction to working with LGBT+ clients specifically in AT settings, however, due to the nature of the evolution of the language LGBT+ communities are using to self-identify, some of the language in her chapter now appears dated or inaccurate. Pelton-Sweet and Sherry (2008) also found there is consistent need for culturally competent effective care for this community, which sustains the claim for current training for therapists in this area. They specifically recommend that art therapists require "knowledge of the social, cultural and health issues facing this population, a non judgemental attitude and skill in counselling LGBT clients" (Pelton-Sweet and Sherry 2008, 175). While Whitehead-Pleaux et al. (2012, 2013) have compiled a best practice survey for music therapists supporting LGBT clients, no AT (and DMT) specific guidelines for best practice exist.

Although there have been some advances in the way creative arts therapies address sexual orientation and gender identity, AT and DMT interventions need to be analysed according to current changes in LGBT+ legislation, policies, treatment options and remain current within the evolving nature of the community. The next sections will describe the context of our work and present our case example.

Case Example: The Skin and Boundaries Workshop

We have provided collaborative creative arts therapy workshops for two consecutive years as part of the Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film

Festivaliii, which we chose as a case example. Our case example is a highlighted feature of our work with the LGBT+ community which has transpired for over six years. The twenty participants of this group comprised of cisgenderiv and transgenderiv women, aged 20-50, identifying with a range of sexual orientations. Three quarters of the participants were from the UK with an international make up of people from Ireland, Nigeria, Poland, Spain and United States. One of the participants was seeking asylum in the UK on the grounds of being LGBT+. In this intensive workshop, we used a combination of movement and art-based interventions on the topic of the skin as the boundary of the body, and also as protector. Here we will provide a selection of key interventions in this workshop to elucidate our themes: the 'skin layer' art/movement activity and the use of the folktale The Selkie Bride as a platform to work on the theme of internal/external selves. Movement-based warm-up interventions included sensory play, visualisations, structured improvisations, tableauvi work and group devising. Somatic attention to the body and with the body (Csordas 1993, Tantia 2012) was exemplified by body scanning, body tracing and movement exploration of interpersonal spatial boundaries. These exercises encouraged participants to engage with their own rituals of renewal and cleansing after the workshop:

I still do some of the exercises, especially the one we run our hands over our body without actually touching it to feel the energy then pushing out all negative energy. Actually makes me feel like I'm cleansing myself (Anonymous participant, personal communication, 2016).

The sensory play provided the participants with an encounter with the workshop space and the art materials, in order to cultivate client's presence at a somatic level and providing a multidimensional experience integrating all senses. We chose materials that had drastically differing perceptual qualities in terms of size, texture, weight and 7 malleability (i.e. rolls of aluminium wire, soft modeling materials, marbles, large rolls of paper, feathers, among other objects chosen for representational capacity). Another consideration of our choices of materials related to the immediacy of their qualities, therefore not requiring drying time or more complex construction.

Interdisciplinary working

A key aspect of the work is the embodied articulation of AT, and the visual, tangible aspect of DMT. Incorporating somatic techniques in art making and laying out objects across the space allowed an active engagement with the materials and deeper body awareness. The interventions alternated between art and movement to suit the objectives

and needs of the participants, and aid in the flow of the workshop, which is key to collaborative work. The workshop took place in a dance studio, away from a more traditional AT room setting (Case and Dalley 2014), which encouraged participants to move more and to actively engage with the art materials distributed around the room. There were no tables or chairs, as objects were laid out on the floor as an art-making surface, a shift from the 'sitting down', chair and table-focused traditional setup of AT, which invites new possibilities. This is an atypical set-up for AT, but an ideal layout for collaborative art and movement sessions. The participants crawled, rolled on the floor, and used their whole bodies in their art-making.vii Alternatively, having movement interventions represented visually aided in the reflection and revisiting of the workshop themes, which we will address more in depth in subsequent sections. Art-making allows a material representation of one's felt experience which is a useful tool to make connections between DMT sessions, helping to visually record therapeutic material, as a point of reference for in-depth exploration. There was a dynamic flow between art-making and movement, and dual interventions proposed which did not suggest a segregation of each art form.

The next sections will outline the key interventions and themes that arose from this workshop.

Skin Layer Activity

Projective work is at the heart of creative arts therapies. 'In projective art groups, themes are introduced to provide a common framework to which each individual in the group relates his or her own personal meaning' (Dalley 2008, xvii). This was the case with one of the main movement interventions, which involved the participants in outlining an imagined layer (1-2 inches) external to the skin. This was described as an imaginary 'covering' of the whole body.

Fraenkel (2010) theorizes that imagining and sensing this body boundary, and ascribing a metaphoric visualisation can aid in the understanding of one's own personal and spatial awareness, and the spatial relationships established with others. The participants could choose any material to symbolise this boundary, which led to many different types of ideas of materials the skin boundary could be composed of, some examples being: cork, foam, plastic, rubber, tar, dishwashing sponge, plush, velvet and more. This materiality, as creative arts therapists, gave us not only some indications as to the type of boundaries that were emerging during the workshop, but also suggested a materiality of the boundaries they engaged with in their everyday life. This echoes Moon's (2010) reflections on a social constructivist theory of materiality in art therapy, whereby personal artistic expressions are rooted in social schemas, here examined

in terms of gender and sexuality. In the case of LGBT+ clients, materials might be used to celebrate selfacceptance, in addition to constructing creative means to be resilient against societal oppression. In the workshop, we expanded on the skin layer exercise by asking participants to move around the space in closer proximity to others, noticing if there were potential changes in their skin layer visualisations. This exercise was offered to stimulate a shift from individual experience to fostering group awareness and interaction. In postactivity discussions, some participants struggled with visualising and maintaining body boundaries while engaging with others in the space.

For several participants, their imagined skin layer became more solid when encountering others in space, while others reported their visualised body boundary disappearing or melding with others. One of the participants said she felt surrounded by rubber, and connected it to her inability to adapt to social situations or in relationships with others. She stated things seemed to “bounce off of her”. In Newman’s (2010) case study exhibiting installation art in response to the needs of young LGBT+ people within an AT group, she describes one piece, ‘I’m Rubber’, which explores the resilience required to experience life as part of a stigmatised population. The workshop participants’ feeling of being surrounded by rubber can be hence analysed not as a barrier to connection, but as a source of strength to survive situations perceived as unsafe. Another participant reiterated the connection between material and experience:

The art activities were particularly poignant for me as they helped me to realise that the 'skin' I was enveloping myself in, saying I was fine when I wasn't, was stopping me from really processing my emotions and asking for help from those close to me. (Anonymous participant, personal communication, 2016).

In this participant’s case, representing this boundary evoked an awareness of guarding and masking difficult feelings, and the challenge in trusting others and welcoming support.

Art-making offered an opportunity to take the movement interventions into a visual, tangible form, and we proposed a visual representation of an imagined dissected ‘slice’ of their skin boundary using art materials. We encouraged participants to consider colour, texture and scale when art making. Once people had created their individual slice they were invited to bring their artwork into the centre of the room into a type of circle museum to reconnect with the other participants. We asked them to circle around each of the art objects, being mindful of their presence, and to observe others’ artwork and reflect on their own reactions, sensations and perceptions. The museum exercise was designed to not require verbal explanation in the sharing of

the art work and its associated meanings, encouraging nonverbal reflection.

In both workshop interventions participants connected their own 'skin boundary material' to specific moments where they needed more strength or protection, and described instances where they had felt more vulnerable, which holds relevance to LGBT+ clients and the anticipatory anxiety of coming out, fear of stigmatisation, discrimination and rejection that can result in increased social isolation (Haplin and Allen 2004). Herein lies the strength of metaphoric work, as the layers of visual art and movement served as a dual vehicle for alternating modes of somatic experience with projective techniques, adjudicating strength to expressing vulnerability.

The Selkie Bride

Another key aspect of the workshop linked movement and art interventions to the folk tale of the Selkie Bride (Breslin and Keiper 2012), a popular story in fishing communities in Scotland, Ireland, Portugal, and Scandinavia. The Scottish version of this story (in simplified form) centres around a selkie, a transformative creature that fluctuates between woman and seal by shedding her sealskin, who gets entrapped by a fisherman when she leaves her sealskin unguarded. The fisherman falls in love with the selkie and hides the skin. After many years, her children find her sealskin and she has to choose between her essence, the sea, and her role as mother and wife. Despite the heartbreak inflicted upon her family, she chooses to return to the sea and her true home, thus abdicating her role on land.

As our group was formed by women, this conflict between inner self and outer self, and each of the responsibilities and consequences these entail formed the basis for the design of the interventions. We used the story of the Selkie Bride as inspiration for art-making, bringing in clear latex-free gloves and a wide variety of materials (feathers, buttons, markers, metal, glitter, sequins, etc.) that the participants used to represent their inner self (internal essence) and outer self (external demands). The participants were asked to move their gloves in an exploratory journey through the space. They also created an artmovement dialogue between the boundary slice of skin layer they had created and their glove, fostering connections between interventions. The participants were asked to create short representations of these explorations in group tableaus in a group sharing and discussion. With these key interventions in mind, we will analyse the symbolic exchange created between external/internal selves and their relationship to work with LGBT+ clients in the following section.

Exploring External and Internal Selves with LGBT+ Clients

Creative arts practice aims to provide an external output to what transpires in an individual's internal world. Inner conflict and transformation are conveyed by making an experience visible, tangible and present, enabled by the therapeutic relationship. Although not specifically aimed at LGBT+ clients, art therapist Makin (2000) explored themes of 'inside/outside' through self-portraiture interventions. Self portraiture techniques in AT offer creative opportunity for feelings to be externalised that can be too exposing, frightening or shameful to express verbally (Addison 1996, Brody 1996, Fraser and Waldman 2004). We chose to portray these by creating the skin boundary visualisation and movement exploration as symbolic internal self portraits which elicited associations with LGBT+ identity and visibility.

Lasser and Wicker (2008) argue that nonverbal behaviour is a key factor in managing visibility with LGBT+ clients. Many LGBT+ clients' internal world will have aspects of negative external messages about how it is not ok to be LGBT+. Some examples of these messages include: historical pathologisation in mental health diagnosis, criminalisation, lack of equal rights, societal stigma, oversexualised identities, lack of positive representation in mainstream media. The internalisation of these powerful messages may result in internalised homophobia/biphobia/transphobia, ultimately impacting on the selfworth of the person and their capacity to live a fulfilling life with flourishing mental health (Fraser and Waldman 2003). This is something unique to LGBT+ clients, as heterosexual and cisgender clients are not usually rejected for their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Since our workshop space was explicitly inclusive of all sexual orientations and gender identities, participants made use of movement and art as tools for visibility of their own personal themes. For example, one of the participants related the weight of external demands being extremely difficult at this particular time when she was seeking asylum in the UK on the grounds of their LGBT identity. Her glove boasted vibrant colours which she related to the strength she was gaining in uncovering her own identity, despite the 2 painful memories of her hiding this from her family in her home country and her current lack of acceptance from the United Kingdom Home Office, who she was having to 'prove' her sexuality to. She repeatedly referred to herself as finding freedom in her artistic expression, and hope in the rebuilding of her true identity. Another LGBT+ participant chose to use more stereotypically associated symbols such as rainbow flag colours to externally represent their inner self. This participant chose not to move around the space as much as some others, quietly and carefully making a relatively small piece of artwork, suggesting a connection between notions of safety and visibility within the group. The symbolisation of the rainbow communicated something

celebratory about their identity that could have been potentially overlooked. This is consistent with Addison's (2003) and Pelton-Sweet and Sherry's (2008) recommendations that there is symbolisation unique to the LGBT+ community can be visually expressed but won't necessarily be verbally communicated. However, in contrast to Addison's (2003) descriptions of potential LGBT+ symbols, it is important in our practice to keep current on LGBT+ content but withhold assumptions of associations until disclosed or identified by the client. Not all LGBT+ clients will symbolise their identities in their artwork/movement in this way. This colludes with unhelpful dominant beliefs of societal stigma and stereotypes that LGBT+ people already contend with, which can considerably hinder the therapeutic relationship.

In the final group showings and discussions, the external/internal theme generated a construction of new shared meaning amongst participants akin to Moon's (2010) description of a social constructivist stance on the correlation between materiality and shared experience. Some chose to represent their family or close circles and the challenges presented by their external demands. Others chose to focus on the importance of cultivating and nurturing their inner self (expressed as passions, drives, goals). The transformative elements from the story of The Selkie Bride and the precarious balance between internal and external demands resonated with the participants in deep personal aspects, with opportunities for deconstruction and alternative meanings.

Conclusion

This chapter described the collaborative process between art and dance movement psychotherapists in an intensive workshop format within a mental health festival in Scotland. We claim that a focus on sexual orientation and gender identity, as a fundamental aspect of human life, needs careful attention. The creative arts therapies have a limited trajectory of research in this area, and while there is emerging research in both DMT and AT, further research on relevant themes for this client group are needed. We chose to focus on our work with LGBT+ clients for this chapter, but recommend further research on therapist competencies and current training on terminology and affirmative, inclusive interventions.

The art/movement interventions all related to the theme of internal versus external selves and were rooted in the folk tale of the Selkie Bride. Sensory play with a wide range of art materials, movement experientials and the visual representation of a protective skin boundary helped ground these experiences, enabling inner listening and awareness of self and others in the space. We applied projective techniques through the creation of a skin boundary 'slice' and a glove that represented either

external demands or their internal essence, which were shared and discussed.

In terms of our theme, external demands were linked to social pressures, which elicited discussions surrounding the difficulty of LGBT+ visibility amongst family members, and in one strong case, allowed one of the participants to process her current status as someone seeking political asylum. The exploration of internal essence helped participants identify current experiences that seemed to be at a liminal stage: stuck between a crystallisation and identification of the experience, but not able to be externalised and expressed. Visibility, in some respects, may represent a cost, loss or an opportunity to some LGBT+ clients. For some, though not all clients, being who they are might provoke a loss of their family, loved ones, interfere with work opportunities or put them at risk of violence. There are also many positives to being visible as an LGBT+ person: affirmation of identity, self 4 acceptance, experiences of love and support from family/loved ones/work colleagues, which offer positive themes to address through creative arts therapies. Thus the battle and assuagement between the internal and external worlds, especially in terms of LGBT+ identity was both pertinent and important to this group.

The focus of our work is to allow the somatic experience to become integral to art making, and also explore visual, tangible manifestations of movement. A group that included heterosexual, LGBT+, cisgender and transgender women in a community-focussed workshop fostered an inclusive environment, which allowed deep individual exploration and safe group interactions without pressure of disclosure. The collaborative dialogue between dance/movement and art-making allowed metaphoric connections between materiality and felt experience. Collaborative work between creative arts therapists and integrated movement and art-making interventions can offer multidimensional explorations, perspective-making, and an embodied approach to working with gender and sexuality.

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Alison Wren is an integrative Art Psychotherapist and supervisor based in Scotland. She primarily works in the voluntary sector and in private practice, specialising in working affirmatively with clients around issues of sexuality, gender and relationship diversities. She is the professional officer for Scotland for The British Association of Art Therapists and a tutor on The University of Glasgow's Art Psychotherapy introduction course. She regularly teaches Arts Therapy trainees and other mental health professionals on issues of cultural competence with LGBT+ clients. She has developed an award-winning mental health and wellbeing service for LGBT+ people, produced two educational films and published a creative writing anthology co-created with LGBT+ people with lived experience of mental ill health.

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i Please note that people who identify as asexual are not sexually attracted to any gender and are part of

the continuum of sexual orientation.

ii The term gender(s) is used to reflect the full spectrum of gender, including people who identify as male,

female, non-binary, non-gender or any combination of male and female.

iii For more information on the festival, see www.mhfestival.com. iv Cisgender definition: a person whose gender identity corresponds with their sex assigned at birth

v Transgender definition: a person whose gender identity does not correspond with their sex assigned at

birth.

vi A tableau is a drama-based group exercise, which portrays still shapes (or repetitive movements in

some variations) with a common theme, to create what can be described as a live version of a painting.

vii Chairs were available for participants with limited mobility.