

Cultural Embodiment: reflections on an ADMT conference workshop

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During the ADMT 2002 conference in Bristol, we led a one-hour workshop on the theme of Cultural Embodiment. The focus of the session was the cultural knowledge that people unwittingly inherit, and how such knowledge moves through our everyday lives. Using guided movement, individual reflection and discussion, participants were encouraged to bring unconscious culture to light. This work is in the context of our life-long engagement with these issues, which we have both explored through movement, theory and practice, around the world.

The starting point for the workshop was our understanding that each human being has multiple cultural heritage, as a result of their unique history. We can think of an individual's culture as the confluence of many streams, or a tapestry of many threads. Acknowledging that such cultural richness exists, within ourselves and in our clients, is our basis for ethical practice.

During the session, participants applied cultural lenses to their own movement. After selecting and embodying one strand of their cultural heritage, they explored interacting with other cultures in the workshop space. We encouraged awareness of their patterns of interaction and asked what these might tell people about how they typically respond to cultural difference. Twenty-three dance movement therapists took part in the session. Their movement exploration was varied, rich, deep and sensitive. This was reflected in shared insights that were diverse, subtle and interesting.

In planning the workshop, we had identified four learning outcomes:

1. Exploration and appreciation of cultural difference.
2. Increased cultural self awareness and heightened sensitivity to cultural diversity within, as well as between, individuals.
3. Discovery of how our unconscious cultural heritage may be expressed and experienced in movement.
4. Cognitive reflection arising out of movement experience (leading to the verbal articulation of key themes).

We recently reflected on our observations relating to each of these outcomes.

1. Exploration and appreciation of cultural difference.

Almost as soon as the first task was set, the room filled with a diversity of unique movement vocabulary, colours and textures of movement and different uses of flow, weight, time, and space. We observed people staying within their own kinesphere, while making full use of the environmental space. This matched our intention to encourage diversity, which was reflected in our starting the session by inviting individual reflection, and not creating an initial circle.

Participants engaged readily with the task of cultural introspection, taking this into movement with a high degree of skill, passion and capacity to work with oneself.

Witnessing the work evoked for us both a panoply of psychic images – landscape, music, colour, food, dances and fragments of conversation.

2. Increased cultural self awareness and heightened sensitivity to cultural diversity within, as well as between, individuals.

Once people began to explore culture, they started to move beyond their everyday movement range. It appeared that the task enabled participants to embody personal attributes to which they did not have ready access. This was borne out in the final circle, when one participant spoke of discovering qualities in her movement – and in herself – which will be of significant value in her work as a dance movement therapist.

We feel that this endorses the importance of recognising inner diversity (within an individual) rather than working from an assumption of cultural 'identity'. Such movement exploration can liberate us from the constraints of abstract generalisations about who we are and what we do.

The movement dialogues between individuals in different cultural 'spaces' revealed surprising and spontaneous encounters, with a marked lack of hesitancy. Participants recognised their own responses to difference; for example, reinforcing one's own movement pattern; adjusting or compromising to meet the other; or co-creating a shared movement language for dialogue. One participant described how she had recognised a pattern of response in herself and decided to change it by applying her movement skills. She explored relating differently, returned to the interaction with her new vocabulary, and experienced another response. The starting point was cultural embodiment; the end point was fresh possibilities in relating.

3. Discovery of how our unconscious cultural heritage may be expressed and experienced in movement.

Participants described the experience of embodying unconscious heritage as a release, a relief, liberation, promoting choice, giving space and freedom.

One participant was uncertain of her cultural heritage and decided to start from the here-and-now. Another described how, by following a cultural strand, she found herself in places that she recognised from previous in-depth movement exploration. This may be seen as a way of mapping our experience of self, as located in culture and history.

We reflected that through cultural embodiment, the body reveals its knowledge to the mind. Movement releases trans-generational, cellular memory and it becomes clear that we don't know how much we know... about ourselves, our ancestors, our stories and our histories.

4. Cognitive reflection arising out of movement experience (leading to the verbal articulation of key themes).

We invited individual reflection, discussion in pairs and a short group feedback. Although this was brief, powerful themes emerged:

- The liberating and empowering potential of identifying one's own dominant and minority cultures
- Recognition of our parents as our closest ancestors, as a first step on the ladder of ancestors
- Identifying our own cultural strands helps us to make sense of uncomfortable prejudices, judgements and impulses to punish. This awareness can be a first step to healing transformation.

The one-hour workshop clearly succeeded in developing awareness, but did not allow us to address the development of the associated therapeutic and life skills. The untouched areas include:

- Developing skills in working with the conscious and unconscious culture within the therapeutic relationship and its wider context.
- Challenging the risk of identifying with a minority culture as a way to avoid a 'dominant' or colonial cultural identity.
- Identifying difference and power relations within ourselves, as a means of ultimately honouring our own different cultures as equal to one another.
- Articulating an approach to cultural diversity, investigated through movement as a foundation for ethical practice in dance movement therapy.

We are both in an ongoing journey of practice-based research and are now exploring how the models and approaches we have developed may inform and challenge one another. This may enrich our approach to working with diversity in dance movement therapy. As part of this ongoing dialogue, we are offering further workshops and events, to provide an extended exploration and skills training. A one-day workshop for expressive arts therapists and other professionals is offered in June (see listings).