Dance Movement Therapy

Second edition

Theory, Research and Practice

Edited by Helen Payne

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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Chapter 7

Hidden treasures, hidden voices

An ethnographic study into the use of movement and creativity in psychosocial work with war-affected refugee children in Serbia

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Introduction

This chapter is drawn from PhD research in dance ethnography that examines the use of movement and creativity in psychosocial work with war-affected refugee children. It is based on one year's fieldwork in Serbia and draws on my experience, skills and training as a performance artist, dance movement therapist, ethnomusicologist and dance ethnographer. At the time of my fieldwork, dance movement therapy (DMT) as an independent and recognised profession and training did not exist in Serbia, and access to training opportunities were very limited. Two central questions formed the basis of the research:

1. How effective are movement and creativity as a source of development in psychosocial work with war-affected refugee children?
2. How effective are movement and creativity as a source and medium for integration and understanding between different communities, specifically refugee and host communities?

In this chapter some of the ways in which movement was used in the work with children are outlined together with my participation and observations of this work. Consideration is given to why and how movement and creativity may contribute to international development work with war-affected refugee children, and the place of DMT within this.

The field

Refugee or internally displaced people (IDPs) arrived in Serbia in several waves and from different parts of former Yugoslavia over the ten-year period of the war (1991 to 2001). Some of these people were housed in collective centres in Serbia created from converted schools, hospitals, factories, hotels, sports centres and barracks. A number of people remained in these centres for the duration of the war and continued to live in them after the war had ended.

The problems that refugee people face as a result of war can include the physical and emotional effects of experiencing or witnessing violence; and problems brought about through the migration and resettlement processes including language and access to basic resources such as housing, education, training, food, transport, sanitation, medical facilities and work opportunities. Development work can lead to further problems as donors take on a caretaking role leading to disempowerment and dependency. For many refugees the process of disempowerment begins immediately, 'when traditional familial or social support systems are lost as a result of migration' (Baron 2002). Refugee children may also experience loss of appropriate care from parents or caregivers because of the adults' responses to the war. In Serbia, children and families faced additional problems as a result of the economic sanctions imposed from 1992 to 1996, and the 78 days of NATO air strikes in 1999. Many informants stressed that all children in former Yugoslavia had been affected by the war. Graca Machel (1996) an expert appointed by the United Nations (UN) in June 1994 to make a study on the impact of armed conflict on children proposed:

> War violates every right of a child – the right to life, the right to be with family and community, the right to health, the right to the development of the personality and the right to be nurtured and protected.
>
> (Machel 1996: 11, Article 11.30)

War permanently changes the development of the child by fundamentally changing the world in which they live and their relationships within this world (Rieber 1998). One informant, however, stressed that life continues regardless of the conditions that surround it: 'I realized life needs no conditions, life is life all on its own . . . life creates conditions for itself' (extract from interview with a founding member of the organisation). The organisation I worked with recognised that refugee people have opinions and resources both within themselves and within the communities of which they are a part. They tried to harness and develop these resources through activities that used creative media including movement.

Methodology

The methodology used for the research was drawn from both dance ethnography (Buckland 1999) and DMT (Payne 1992, 1993a; Pearson 1996). This integration simultaneously facilitated and created challenges within the research. To my knowledge this is the first piece of academic research that has attempted to bring together dance ethnography and DMT from both practical and theoretical perspectives in the context of war-affected refugee children. I believe that this research is important in that it can begin to open doors to collaborations within and between these two fields and

methodologies. It can also begin to open more doors to the acceptance of the value of the arts therapies within the context of international development work with war-affected refugee children.

Ethnography is a methodology derived from anthropological research and includes both the process of the research and the way it is described. The basis of ethnographic research is participant observation conducted through fieldwork and undertaken over a defined period of time, usually a minimum of one year. Through participant observation the researcher begins to understand the processes and meanings of the phenomenon being studied from the perspective of the participants. Ethnography has the potential to draw on various methods in response to participation, observation and negotiation in the field. Like DMT, dance ethnography works with *'multiple realities'* (Payne 1993b: 30).

In the field I used participant observation which included keeping daily field notes and journals, devising and organising formal interviews, documenting these using video and photography; and recording workshops using video and photography. I lived with a non-English speaking elderly Serbian woman, undertook intensive Serbian language training and had regular academic and clinical supervision by telephone and email for the duration of the fieldwork. In addition, a selection of informants in the field acted as informal translators and interpreters.

During the fieldwork I primarily participated in the work of a Serbian non-government organisation (NGO) called Zdravo da ste, which worked with refugee and internally displaced children and families living in collective centres and private accommodation. It was founded at the beginning of the war by a group of Serbian psychologists in response to individual concerns for the welfare of children. Teams composed of teachers and psychologists facilitated regular workshops with children at the offices of the organisation in different towns and cities in Serbia; at local cultural centres such as galleries, museums and parks; and at the collective centres. I participated in the work of one of these teams based in Belgrade. My work with this team involved participating, co-facilitating and occasionally leading regular workshops with pre-school and school-age children at the various venues. I also participated in weekly planning and evaluation meetings. In addition to this work, I facilitated several practical presentations and training on different aspects of DMT and drama and movement therapy for this and two other Serbian NGOs.

When I co-facilitated or led workshops for children I tried to integrate my understanding of the aims, objectives and approaches of the organisation with my knowledge and experience of DMT and community arts work, so that my work would complement and not contradict their work. The organisation was very clear that the work they did was not therapy, but was concerned with 'building relations' and finding 'possibilities for living' (extract from interview with a founding member of the organisation).

Through my participation I became an apprentice of their working methods with children. I was both an insider as a practitioner working in a field close to my own and an outsider as a researcher studying a specific situation.

I had initially entered the field with the intention of setting up individual and group DMT sessions with war-affected refugee children. I very quickly realised that this approach would not be possible because it would interfere with the work of Zdravo da ste. I therefore participated in their workshops as a volunteer. My knowledge and experience of DMT allowed me to interact with the children and facilitators within the workshop context and, when asked, to give feedback on the workshops and ideas for follow-up workshops. As the research progressed, I found tensions between my roles as a dance ethnographer and dance movement therapist. My increasingly involved participation as a volunteer appeared to be interfering with my research. In order to focus on the research, I tried to stop contributing to the evaluation and planning of the workshops, but this was not very well received by the people I was working with because of a fundamental notion and expectation of exchange. By withdrawing I was no longer sharing my understanding, skills and insights. My perceived experience of tension between dance ethnography and DMT, and between myself as a researcher and the people I was working with as a volunteer, persisted for the duration of the fieldwork.

Notions and applications of movement and creativity in the field

The movement work I observed in the workshops occurred in the context of a 'social frame', 'social happening' (extract from interview with a member of the children's team), or an 'event' (Torp 1989); where an event is set apart from daily life and occurs within a specific and limited time and place, and usually involves the coming together of a group of people for a specific activity (Bakka 1989). An event can also offer social interactions that are not necessarily allowable or possible in day-to-day social living (Dunin 1989).

The workshops occurred weekly, once or twice a month or at less frequent intervals. Before each workshop there was some kind of preparation time. These were often lively affairs where women from the Belgrade team gathered at the main office to make things for the workshops. Much time and care was put into this preparation and the activities were accompanied with discussions and evaluations of the work, strong black Turkish coffee and gossip. They were creative meetings where skills and ideas were shared and exchanged. I also wondered at their importance for the members of the organisation as a way to explore and express their own creativity and to help in their individual preparation and assimilation of the work.

The different workshops appeared to follow a similar pattern. They began with the journey to the workshop. On arrival space and time were given to

arrive and explore the environment before the main workshop activity began. At the beginning of the main workshop activity the whole group were often brought together into a circle for introductions and preparatory work such as warming up the body, name games, greeting gestures, and introducing the main theme of the workshop. The large group was then divided into smaller groups often using games. The small groups then began preparing for, and becoming involved in, the main activity which they shared with the other groups on completion. The whole group was then brought together once more for a closing activity and clearing up. Frequently after a workshop had ended, food was shared between the participants and the workshop facilitators, either provided by the organisation or by the adult participants. I observed two kinds of workshops over the year: the first were self-contained workshops where the activity was completed within the one workshop; in the second the activities extended over several workshops. Sometimes the extended workshops were pre-planned, but sometimes they emerged as a response to the development of the activities in the workshops.

The organisation considered movement and dance to be one of a number of 'human potentials for expression', tools that could be 'discovered and actualised', and used alongside other media to find and develop the hidden potential inside each individual, and the 'voices of the future' (extract from interview with a founding member of the organisation), the potential for the future development of the society. They considered this human potential for expression to be 'indestructible' (extract from interview with a founding member of the organisation) and fundamental to human nature. Movement was often embedded within the activities of the workshops and used in the following ways:

- to create physical shapes, embody visual images, create and develop a story, prepare for or complete a workshop, explore and define an environment, remember previous experiences, acknowledge cultural festivals, facilitate exchanges between cultures, facilitate participation and activity, acknowledge the seasons, consolidate and share an individual or collective experience, acknowledge thresholds and boundaries, and learn written language
- as a medium for making choices, learning, documentation, communication, and as part of a journey
- to engage with sound, games, gesture, names, drawing, collage, and objects.

I was familiar with a multi-arts approach to using movement with other arts media from my own therapeutic work and training. What was different about this work was that members of the organisation did not consider their work to be therapy. The workshops did not target specific emotional or

psychological problems present in the lives of the participants, or that emerged within the workshops, although this material was recognised and worked with by the psychologists and teachers on their regular visits to the collective centres and individual families outside the workshop context.

When they completed a workshop the organisation did not intentionally or ritually let go of imaginative and emotional spaces created through the work. In the work of the organisation, movement was considered as part of creativity, where creativity was not restricted to one art form, instead many 'aspects of creativity' (extract from interview with a member of the children's team) were used:

> I see creativity as life. It's not a means, it's not a tool, it's life and the people have such a capacity to create, an endless capacity to create. That's the life, to be creative. To create means to be alive. (Extract from interview with a founding member of the organisation, Belgrade)

The different creative media fed into one another within the activities, and the activities themselves developed in response to the children's participation in them. The description below, by a member of the children's team, is an example of how creative elements, including movement were applied within the context of a workshop at a collective centre:

> The thing that happened, happened through children playing. The workshop fell into following everything that was happening in the group of children. The workshop was at a collective centre, it was a mixed group of children from pre-school to first grade of secondary school. We started with a game but in some way we ended up with some important words. From the words that appeared we again tried to build up our new game. We divided into several groups. From the words the game was developed. The words were: stream, bird, kittens, and a dog. These words were written on pieces of paper, put into the basket and then everybody pulled a piece of paper with a word on it. My word was truth. Everybody made a movement, starting to relive these words. The children got into that fairly quickly. The story developed into a thing – there was a tree that grew in a field, it was a sunny day, birds were flying and you could hear the stream gargling, in that field the animals played, the kittens were playing hide-and-seek. Because my role was truth, I was all over the place following children and constantly asking the question 'Where is the truth?' Simultaneously [the children] said 'The truth is in our lives.' It was so strong that I am never going to forget about it. That was 'the thing' that happened in that workshop, it doesn't have an end. The important thing for me is that that potential will be preserved in children. The game and playing with children is not something simple, but is actually very complex work and our joint work was brought into it. This was just one part of the workshop.
>
> (Extract from an interview with a member of the children's team)

I was often given this example to show me the effectiveness of the work of the organisation in the context of their work with children. These primary school age children had ideas and concepts that appeared to be beyond their age, which contradicted traditional notions from psychology. Many of the psychologists within the organisation felt that their work was breaking new ground. The work had developed in response to the needs of the participants and the interactions within the workshop, the ways in which the work had developed did not necessarily fit into the traditional paradigms of psychology.

The above example not only illustrates how different creative media could interact and support one another within a workshop, but also shows how other activities developed through the activity itself and the children's interaction with the process. Movement was used as part of play and games. It was also used to relive the words or *embody* the words and in this way created the basis for the formation and development of a narrative. Through these activities, children uttered what one informant described as fundamental truths, 'philosophy' (extract from interview with a founding member of the organisation). The above example also illustrates the importance of play and games within the work.

One result of experiencing war is that children stop playing (extracts from interviews; Lindon 2001: 17), two informants suggested that children and adults can become 'frozen' (extract from interviews with members of the organisation 2001–2) in response to their experience of war. Zdravo da ste tried to create possibilities for these children to find their resources for play again, through different activities and opportunities to meet and interact with other children and adults. Work with play was not restricted to work with the children but also extended to the adults.

Applications of movement in the workshops also included *etno*. 'Etno' or 'ethno' dance included regional structured choreographed movement forms from the region that had encompassed former Yugoslavia. Ethno was considered to belong to everybody. One informant described ethno to be 'a kind of living . . . ethno is taking care about our lives' (extract from interview with a founding member of the organisation). Ethno was seen as a resource, part of a constantly changing living tradition passed within families, through the generations. Early in the development of their work, members of the organisation noticed that many people in the collective centres told stories about their lives before the war. Working with ethno created opportunities to tell the stories and to have them heard, allowing the stories to be placed in 'another social frame, not how it was, but how it is now' (extract from interview with a member of the children's team). Experiences from the past could be

incorporated and used as resources in the present and for the future. In some of the workshops with adults I observed how movements from ethno dance usually accompanied by song would sometimes emerge out of the activities of the workshop. In the workshops with children I sometimes observed movement and song motifs from ethno dance that appeared to be incorporated in the children's games and play. These motifs included creating and passing under arches, and making circles and chains. One informant told me that dance could not be separated from other aspects of ethno because it was part of the 'whole social frame' (extract from interview with a member of the children's team), part of the way in which people organised and responded to their lives.

Creativity and movement were not only literally part of the work but were also metaphorically part of the language which the organisation used to describe their work: for example, 'we are building our relationships . . . some little steps through activities' (extract from interview with a member of the children's team); 'for the local people it was a journey of discovery' (extract from interview with a founding member of the organisation). Movement metaphors or metaphors from the creative process were used within the work to describe the process and the development of the work.

The experiences and effects of the workshops extended beyond the boundaries of the events themselves into the everyday and the future lives of the participants, as the example below describes:

> A few years ago we went to give the training to teachers. Among the teachers was one mother who used to be in a collective centre with her family in Belgrade. Her son is now in secondary school. They remembered the experience and workshops. We went to their small apartment and on his noticeboard there was the badge of [our organisation], he still keeps it, it's very important to him. I really think and believe that children have a chance. They can keep this in memory, they will keep this experience, but they can overcome this through development, through education, through meeting people. No one has the right to say 'It's ended', we have to do our best, that's to keep this process going on. (Extract from interview with a founding member of the organisation, Belgrade)

The activities of the workshops were part of a developmental process that facilitated the development of participants, including members of the organisation, and the development of the organisation itself; and by implication the wider society (Rieber 1998).

Conclusion

The problems that war-affected refugee children and families face are specific to their experience of conflict, migration and resettlement. This research suggests that work with the children is multidimensional both in terms of the disciplines and in terms of the creative media used. It cannot occur in isolation from other factors including access to choice and to basic resources and rights such as accommodation, health, transport, education, work opportunities, the families and communities in which the children belong and are surrounded by. Within the work of Zdravo da ste, creative movement was a central element but it was holistically connected to other elements. It was the whole event, as well as the elements that made up the event, that was important. The whole event was a process that had a beginning, middle and end, and was one stage within a larger life process.

Moving between different creative media within one activity created the possibility to move between different modes of understanding, expression and communication. Working between these different media gave the children a 'freedom' (extract from interview with a member of the children's team) to explore and the potential to find their 'treasures' (extract from interview with a member of the children's team) and 'hidden voices' (extract from interview with a founding member of the organisation).

I was asked by several different individuals and organisations from the field to give training in DMT. I did give a number of one- and two-day trainings as a way to give back to the people who had helped me in the research. These trainings were met with mixed responses. Some trainees felt that they had learnt a lot from the work and wanted me to do more long-term work in the future. Some people felt the work was no different from things they already knew from trainings in psychology and other forms of therapy such as transactional analysis. However, the overwhelming response was that further training was wanted, both to gain familiarity with skills and methods and to gain local and international professional qualifications and recognition. Providing opportunities for long-term and short-term professional training in DMT and other arts therapies in conflict or post-conflict areas is a potential area for development.

In terms of DMT practice with war-affected refugee children in the context of international development work, it would seem important to adopt a working practice that is flexible in its approach and in its use of the term 'therapy'. The working practice needs to be able to incorporate ideas and practices from other cultures which may seem to contradict basic tenets of DMT, such as ways of perceiving and understanding the client–therapist relationship. The notion of exchange is very important in this work, as is respect for the professional and personal experiences and approaches of the people from the home community. The approach also needs to adopt a multidisciplinary and multi-arts approach in order to be able to work with as many

people as possible and with the immediacy of the situation. Learning about, and working with, ethno or folk movement and arts forms both practically and theoretically can contribute to understanding of images, symbols and metaphors that emerge in the process of the work. Learning or speaking the spoken language or languages of the children, where possible, is also an important aspect of the work.

DMT is a unique form in that it actively attempts to use movement and dance to transform emotions and experiences. There are inherent skills which dance movement therapists have that can be passed on to other professionals in a context where little is known about this form. There are also many opportunities for the therapists to learn from members of the field and in this way to develop their own practice. Dance ethnography has an important role to play in DMT work with war-affected refugee children both in the United Kingdom and in the context of international development work. It can provide theories and methods that can contribute to understanding cultural difference, the importance and place of movement and creativity within a particular society, and understanding of cultural symbols that may emerge through the therapeutic process.

There are many themes that have emerged through the process of undertaking the research. The first concerns the definition and understanding of what a child is, what they are capable of, how their psychosocial processes develop and the effects of war on this development. The second theme concerns the negative and positive aspects of the notion of *refugee* and *refugeeness*, both as a label and as a way to construct a collective and individual identity as a survival tool and as part of the psychosocial process. The third theme concerns international development and the potential for change in working practices with, and perceptions of, war-affected refugee people. The fourth involves the notion of creativity and its fundamental place within developmental work. The fifth refers to the concept of play and its importance for both children and adults within the psychosocial process. Finally, the sixth theme concerns movement itself and its relationship to creativity, play, ethno and psychosocial development in the context of war-affected refugee children.

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