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Reconnecting to the feminine: Transformative effects of Sensual Movement and Dance

ABSTRACT

Dance is documented to produce substantive neurophysiological, psychological and quality-of-life benefits. Adding to that research we document the therapeutic effects of Sensual Movement and Dance in restoring women to a state of wholeness, enhanced self-expression and a general sense of ease. Specifically, we report on the physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual findings of an eight-week pilot research study. Informing the design of the pilot are reports over a ten-year period by women participants in a Sensual Movement and Dance programme that indicate consistent growth in self-confidence, reduction in stress, marked decrease in levels of self-consciousness, and improvements in women's senses of autonomy and overall quality of life. In the pilot study, most participants also reported improvements in emotional regulation and a decrease in anxiety and depression. According to study

KEYWORDS

sensuality
women
self-consciousness
self-efficacy
goddess
transformation
depression
dance

participants, more than simply talking about sensuality, women want to feel more of it in themselves and in their lives.

INTRODUCTION

Sensual Movement and Dance is considered to be a conscious connection to and expression of the senses, including one's sexuality, accessible through specific style and moves of this dance genre. This dance style, in turn, evokes in women the simple sense of feeling comfortable and at ease in the body, the emotions, and the overall state of being. It will be demonstrated that Sensual Movement and Dance is both an inner and expressive art form that evokes, activates and increases feelings of self-expression and pleasure and decreases self-consciousness in women as they immerse themselves in this genre.

Although widely recognized as an innate and instinctual part of the life force – and an essential component in self-esteem and self-confidence – sensual expression can be frequently misunderstood, particularly in women (Helminiak 1989). Overall, sensuality is an inadequately explored area in American society from an academic perspective. Furthermore, and with the most far-reaching detriments to modern-day women, Sensual Movement and Dance has been unrecognized as a therapeutic method for bringing women to increased quality of life. Research such as ours, shares kinship in returning to the *felt life* of the moving body with Somatic Movement Therapy and Education, in addressing sensuality in movement as a healing agent.

As context for the findings presented here, this article highlights the societal barriers that exist within American culture, which discourage women from fully experiencing themselves as sensual beings (Eagly and Mladinic 1994). This viewpoint is reinforced by both the self-reported comments of participants as well as facilitator observation over a decade of experience in training women in the area of Sensual Movement and Dance. Based on that experience, the authors propose the premise that sensuality is a common and essential quality found in women over all ages and walks of life in American culture. The article details the specific transformative effects that our programme has demonstrated.

This article first outlines a theoretical frame of reference for the pilot, then describes the methodology used, and finally offers a summary of quantitative and qualitative data on the personal experience of transformation reported by the women participating in the study. These consistent improvements provide the focus of our further research.

BACKGROUND

Loss of female sensuality in culture

Women participating in the programme of Sensual Movement and Dance over the past ten years have consistently reported a compelling desire to understand and explore the sense of themselves as women. Specifically, they have expressed an immense curiosity and excitement about their sensuality/sexuality, whether they are a blossoming teenage girl or a grown woman. At the same time, participants routinely couple their curiosity and excitement with varying degrees of shame and/or repression.

Box 1 outlines the general societal proscriptions determining the women's lack of experience of themselves as sensual/sexual beings.

This part of women's essential nature has:

➤ **Gone unnamed and undistinguished**

Western society has blurred and devaluated authentic feminine sensuality so that it is not clearly experienced and expressed (Mies 1986).

➤ **Suffered from an absence of encouragement**

Civilization has moved forward with a predominantly male-centric, linear, and productive viewpoint, giving little emphasis to possibilities of women having their own predominant viewpoints and productivity (Mies 1986).

➤ **Enjoyed few places in American culture where this inner, innate essence can be experienced and demonstrated or performed**

Belly-dance, some forms of Latin dance, and gentleman's clubs are the predominant areas where American women are able publicly to experience and express sensual movement; the innate essence evoked by these outlets is not readily accessible or desirable to many women.

➤ **Been misunderstood and misconstrued societally**

As a result, many women have been made to feel even further ashamed of their sensuality or not known how to express this essential inner power and essence in a positive way. Sensuality is often proscribed by injunctions: 'Be a good girl/ Do what you are told/ Do what is expected of you.' Sensuality is discouraged/forbidden: 'Do not identify with sensual/sexual part of yourself; follow the lead of productivity.'

➤ **Been unfamiliar or available only in unfulfilling modes of expression**

American women have been confused about their own natural impulses and instincts and had difficulty integrating these seemingly opposite – yet in reality, complementary – parts of themselves.

Box 1: Cultural proscriptions of female sensuality.

The pilot study reported here was designed to use Sensual Movement and Dance as the expressive form to address these societal proscriptions and the expressed concerns of women.

Cultures around the world have used the ancient art form of dance in creative ways specific to their society. In its original form, dance was used as a form of celebration of rites of passage such as births, onset of menstruation, marriage and death.

Schmais and White (1970) have noted that rhythm has always been the vehicle for connecting people in almost every aspect of their daily lives. Historically, people of various ages have united to dance before harvests and hunts, to proclaim war and to celebrate important events.

The goddess cultures used dance as a primary way of activating, celebrating and ensuring fertility – from human reproduction to the output of

farming. It was the expression of female sensuality and sexuality that ensured the continuation of all life (Sjöo and Mor 1991; Gimbutas 1982, 2001).

As modern western culture put more emphasis on output and productivity, this expression and celebration of the feminine as a conscious, expressed and valued ideal declined and almost disappeared. The prominence of the male qualities of competition and dominance resulted in women's innate and essential natures being devalued with a tendency to dominate or suppress the feminine rather than experience it as the very source of life itself (Mies 1986).

Over the decade that we have offered our programme of Sensual Movement and Dance, women participants have also consistently expressed their experience that a woman in her full power and expression is seen as morally incorrect. Women said they often feel shame or guilt in the presence of their sensuality. Correspondingly, the women participants report that they feel the loss of freedom to express their innate sensuality innocently and in full measure for fear of arousing condemnation and/or domination. As a result, the women have consistently reported having diminished – or even completely eliminated – their own awareness of and/or access to their sensuality.

The programme has been based on the idea that reconnection with the pre-patriarchal feminine can reawaken and restore this most essential creative function of the feminine. Moreover, evoking sensuality through movement can lead to a natural healing within oneself. The study echoes the sentiment of the Dutch psychoanalyst Joost Meerloo who stated that 'the dance of the medicine man, priest or shaman belongs to the oldest form of medicine and psychotherapy in which the common exaltation and release of tensions was [sic] able to change man's physical and mental suffering into a new option on health' (Moore and Yamamoto 1988, p. 168).

Therapeutic movement and dance

A quarter of a century of research has underscored the benefits of dance and dance movement therapy (DMT) on generalized mental well-being (Koch et al. 2014), on brain development in adults and children (Brown and Parsons 2008; Karpati et al. 2015), on mood stabilization in adolescents (Anderson et al. 2014), and in reducing depression and anxiety across the age-span (Bräuningner 2012; Koch et al. 2014). In short, dance has been shown to combine many different factors that contribute to improvement in the competence needed in everyday life (Ritter and Lowe 1996).

Research across the age-span has highlighted the differing benefits of dance for different age groups. Children – especially girls – have been found to make significant physical advances as well as improvements in measures of psychological well-being through dance training (Jeong et al. 2005). Adults have been found to undergo structural brain changes associated with creativity and artistic expression (Karpati et al. 2015). Mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression have been reduced through participation in dance and DMT. A report in the online newsletter of the Harvard Mahoney Neuroscience Institute in the Harvard Medical School states that: 'Studies show that dance helps reduce stress, increases levels of the feel-good hormone serotonin, and helps develop new neural connections, especially in regions involved in executive function, long-term memory, and spatial recognition' (Edwards 2016). Survivors of sexual abuse have benefitted from DMT, with trauma reduced through the ability to give expression to pain and deeply troubling memories (Mills and Daniluk 2002).

Older-aged dance participants have shown improvements in mobility in the case of Parkinson's sufferers, reduced tremor and improved social outreach

(Westheimer et al. 2015). A *New England Journal of Medicine* study examined a range of physical and cognitive activities associated with a reduced risk of developing Alzheimer's Disease (AD). The study found that cognitive activities such as reading, playing board games and playing musical instruments were associated with a lower risk of dementia. However, of eleven physical activities, 'dancing was the only physical activity associated with a lower risk of dementia' (Verghese et al. 2003: 2512).

Women participating in a programme named *Dancing Mindfulness*, a fusion of dance and a mindful approach to meditation, reported improvements in emotional and spiritual well-being, increased acceptance, positive changes to the self, and increased application of mindfulness techniques and strategies to real-world living (Marich and Howell 2015).

Although at present, DMT is the most recognized therapeutic dance method, the transformational effects of Sensual Movement and Dance, as well as other burgeoning dance systems, are slowly becoming more widespread as individuals and medical establishments begin to recognize its potential '... to reach people's feelings through the exciting, enlivening and calming power of dance' (Moore and Yamamoto 1988).

As one expansion of this base research into dance, the pilot study reported here is designed around an experimental Sensual Movement and Dance programme developed for adult women over the past decade. The study is grounded in understanding the potential of freeform, sensual movement to encourage women to explore their innate, inner senses of pleasure and enjoyment. The programme offers instruction and guidance, without specific steps to learn or follow, in line with Halprin's conceptualization of improvisation, and provides ongoing encouragement.

When movement is liberated from the constricting armor of stylized, pre-conceived gestures, an innate feedback process between movement and feeling is generated.

(Halprin 2000)

Through individual, creative self-expression through movement, the programme facilitates physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual personal growth.

The pilot study is underpinned by a research-based approach to generate insights into the experiences and growth trajectories of participants. Participant self-reports from both individual and group discussions document an increase in self-awareness and self-empowerment among the women. Such increases are evident across age groups and provide encouragement for the ongoing development of the programme.

While this pilot was small in scale and thus does not provide a statistically-significant inference, its results are reported here to offer an objective dimension to the subjective reports recorded throughout the years of development of the methodology. The pilot study is also a precursor to more comprehensive research that is planned using similar methodology.

The programme: Primal Elegance – Sensuality in Motion

The methodology used in the pilot study, called Primal Elegance – Sensuality in Motion, was developed by co-author Lisa Fasullo. Fasullo developed the programme to blend traditional therapeutic healing modalities with movement-based, creative and expressive arts, specifically focusing in the areas of

sensuality and creative self-expression for women. This methodology is based on the premise that when women are given the environment to move and dance freely, they can experience, and thus rediscover and re-experience, sides of themselves that are more self-expressed, enlivened and happy. The programme objective is for participants to feel more uplifted, energized and confident, both on the dance floor and in all areas of their lives. Expressed in other words, participants experience a restored connection to their innate femininity and, therefore, a more complete (or 'whole') version of themselves.

The collective experience of participants over a decade has fed into an ongoing process of programme evaluation. Using both leader and participant observation, as well as formal and anecdotal evaluation, Fasullo has developed a dance approach built around promoting mental, psychological, emotional, physical and spiritual well-being. Individuals report increases in their overall experience of satisfaction and feelings of inner confidence, as well as decreases in their levels of self-consciousness, both on and off the dance floor.

The programme revolves around free-form intuitive movement, which is primarily self-guided, with few, if any, steps to follow. Instructors provide a safe environment for self-expression, specific techniques as a starting point for creativity, and ongoing encouragements such as: 'Move your body; free your mind'; 'It's a lifestyle'; 'Your way is the right way'; and 'You can't get it wrong'.

Design and aims of the programme

Fasullo set out to design a programme that would address for individual women the often 'missing' qualities of feminine expression and experience. The programme provides a conceptual context for a woman's centre of sensuality and innermost strength as a safe and natural part of herself and redefines the experience of sensual/sexual vitality into the simple sense of feeling comfortable and at ease in the body, the emotions and the overall state of being. Essential to the programme is the creation of a safe space in which to access and explore that inner nature.

Once the context is established, programme facilitators first demonstrate how the movement and dance can look and feel and then encourage each participant to discover their own expressive possibilities. Women are able to directly access and experience – many for the first time – the playful, provocative, powerful, passionate and sophisticated sides of themselves.

This positive and liberating experience is reinforced through the sharing with other women in the group. Participants are encouraged to observe and feel their own increased joy and ease and to infuse those sensations into their lives everywhere – in their relationships, their body image, and their expression in their clothes and their environment.

Dance elements

Using a mix of contemporary, rhythmic music with pronounced 'beats' and/or 'waves' throughout each song, the dance incorporates a number of sensual dance moves and sequences designed to allow each participant to reawaken and experience the powerful and sensual parts of herself. Sensual movement used is comprised of specific types of moves such as hip rolls (circles), emphasis of sensual shoulder movements, and slow movements punctuated with more angular, outward expression. The dance also includes a style sense of incorporating smaller, more inward 'shy' and 'demure' movement, along with movement that is larger, literally taking up more space and expressed emphatically and boldly.

To further enhance the unique creative expression of each participant, the physical exploration of movement is enhanced with the use of 'props' (such as wall dance and sensual movement using scarves, veils, canes, body bands, etc.) The use of props is extremely effective in providing a fun and effortless way for participants to experience different parts of themselves.

Sensual movement and dance is created by actually feeling 'moved' to move. This is the essence of what the programme inspires in women and provides the environment and opportunity for them to experience this elevated and pleasurable state of being on and off the dance floor.

Each one-and-a-half-hour session opens and closes with a sharing circle. Group discussion uncovers and reinforces the learning as women have the opportunity to talk about an area that is very personal and important to them. Additionally, participants report that hearing about and relating to the experiences of other women greatly aids them in normalizing their own issues.

Physical learning

> Style elements

The program's movement is based on a synthesis of different dance genres including ballet, hip hop, jazz and modern dance. As stated above, an important style element is incorporating the sense of small, inward movements with more outward, larger expression.

> Moves

The programme has developed specific moves that are simple to learn, and most importantly, can be integrated into daily activities such as walking with more composure, adding in some of their new moves to a yoga class, etc. The moves are simple and participants are invited throughout the program to come up with their own moves.

> Sequences

The programme aids participants in practicing linking together favourite moves, interwoven with selected props (scarves, style of their outfit, etc.) to create a dance routine individually tailored as their unique expression.

> Sharing the Dance

The program culminates with women offering/performing the dance they have created, danced and practiced over the course. Dancing for the group is a very moving and transformative process for the women, and many report feeling a renewed optimism about themselves and life, freedom from self-judgement and any perceived judgement from others, in other words, alleviation of self-consciousness.

> Discussions and Sharing

Inner Bodily Awareness/intuition
Sensual dance history and context in current society
Opening and closing sharing circles
On-going evaluation of the program by both participant insights and program leaders

Box 2: Sensual dance – the learning experience.

Box 2 gives more specific details about elements of the programme.

The dance methodology reported in this article was developed to highlight those movements that are more universally understood to be feminine: e.g. blending circular, gyrating hip movements with arching – the position in which the whole or upper body is extended, without any forced backside hyperextension. ‘There has been in global popular western cultural belief that some movements are essentially “feminine” and this belief has been mythologized to the degree that excludes the fact ‘that in many movement styles across the planet, including those of the south seas and central Africa, men do many of the same movements’ (personal communication Sellers-Young 2017). With awareness of this argument advanced by authors such as Barbara Sellers-Young (2015), Lisa supported participants in engaging with movement often culturally associated with the feminine because non-linear spiraloid and circular patterns ‘somatically engage the centre line of the nervous system along the spine from the hips through the top of the head. Many soft martial arts teachers use the circles and rotations of the pelvis as well as undulations of the spine for this connective reason’ (personal communication Sellers-Young 2017). In many somatic systems, non-linear circular motions and non-directional free-flow aims to contact cerebral spinal fluid, and synovial fluids, supporting ease and release from rigidity (Williamson 2015).

Specific style elements were added to basic instinctual human movements and life developmental movement stages such as walking, crawling, hurdler’s stretch.

The programme developed as a fusion of such polarities as:

- moving of body parts simultaneously; or isolated activity stemming from one primary body part
- element of the expected – i.e. regulated; and elements of the unexpected – i.e. surprise
- angular, upper body movements; emphasizing contrasting lower body circularity

There was also a fusion of elements borrowed from classical as well as from more contemporary dance styles:

- arm positions borrowed from ballet
- body isolations based on a main tenet of different styles of belly dance
- staccato movements borrowed from hip hop dance
- playful expressiveness borrowed from jazz genre
- fluid gracefulness stemming from classic ballet
- modern – lyrical
- yoga – stretching from tips of toes to gently pressing cheeks/crown of head and nose to create wave-like motions

Self-reporting by the women participants

Through years of experience in running the programme, facilitators have found that participants consistently report a deep and seemingly innate craving for reuniting with a part of themselves perhaps long forgotten in childhood – a playfulness, confidence and ease – that has also come to be recognized as a woman in her power, in her self-love and thus, in her sensuality.

In this work with hundreds of women, Fasullo and the Primal Elegance team have documented how a woman's sensual well-being affects all areas of her life – career, family, self-esteem, relationships and body image. Self-expression, confidence and inner strength all evolve naturally from this awakened awareness. What has emerged from this research is an understanding that those who have a healthy relationship with their sensuality are more satisfied. More than simply talking about sensuality, the women want to *feel* more of it in themselves and in the different areas of their lives.

Over the years of offering this method, and specifically during the pilot study, many women shared very intimate details about a sense of dryness in their lives, a lack of vitality, and feeling uncomfortable in their own bodies. It was a continuous surprise to the team how comfortable and open women felt in the company of other women who were strangers. Through discussions with participants about the teachings, many stated that it felt like something had guided them to sign up for the study, even though they thought something along the lines of: 'I can't dance; I don't know how', 'I'm so uncoordinated', or 'I'm just not a sensual person'. A few women were even *chorophobic* (feeling an intense fear of dancing) as the sessions began, mustering extreme courage to move their bodies rhythmically at all.

Sensuality through the age-span: Maiden, mother, crone

The loss of something essential that has been reported over the years by all women participating in the programme can be further detailed and examined by the unique concerns and experiences of various age groups. Twentieth century poet and scholar Robert Graves first termed what he referred to as the Triple Goddess, depicting a triplicity of women through the age-span broken down as follows (1966):

- He introduces the Maiden as a woman in the outset and beginning of her adventure of being a woman navigating the world in front of her, and metaphorically symbolizing new starts, freshness and the creative force behind any undertaking or project.
- Graves's conception of the Mother was a woman in the second stage of life who embodies nurturance through her sensual, sexual, fertile directive force. She is the one who is able to give birth to, and find fulfilment in the birthing of a child, career or other creative manifestation. Metaphorically, she is about nourishment of something outside of herself, and finding fulfilment within these life endeavours.
- Graves refers to the third archetype of his trinity as the Crone, a woman in the third and final stage of her life. A woman in this stage is able to demonstrate leadership through her gathered wisdom and to realize gracefully the ending and completion of her life accomplishments, both inwardly and outwardly directed. She is about endings and able to act as a bold and dignified example of the natural maturation process for both maidens and mothers to come after her.

As discussed from different perspectives throughout this article, many women in modern day American society, face challenge, obstacles and confusion related to sensuality. From our research over the years it has emerged that the disconnection from their own sensuality continues through life as women

move through the three classical stages of (1) maiden, ages 18–30; (2) mother, ages 30–45; and (3) crone, ages 45+, although each of these stages is also unique in how the disconnection expresses itself.

Thus, in the following section, it is reported by age group how women's senses of their femininity and power have been increased through participation in the programme.

Women 18–30 years

- Conceptualized, many for the first time, the knowledge and personal experience that their sensuality is discernable, an inner strength and a source of confidence.
- Deconstructing and diffusing some of the confusing messages they have picked up growing up in our culture, they have experienced some or much of their self-consciousness alleviated. And in turn, they feel more free and happy.
- Exiting from a world of mixed messages about sex, sexuality, attractiveness and popularity, they experience a marked decrease in their dependence on men to validate their attractiveness and their newly identified and enlivened sensuality.
- Feel more empowered simply by becoming aware of their sensuality. In this way, they report an increased ability to choose more intelligently to share themselves with another or not.
- Are empowered by being in the company of both middle-aged and elder-age women. Throughout the programme, women learn, play, laugh and share their dances together – all ages intermingling. In this way, young women are able to experience the similarities in all ages to explore this innate, yet oftentimes misunderstood topic of sensuality.
- Learn ways to creatively and authentically express their sensuality in different parts of their lives. They also report understanding about and being more comfortable in their bodies. They note that this is not something widely offered to their age group.
- Value having a place specifically designed for them to feel safe, learn and talk about their sense of sensuality; this safe place makes it fun, rather than solely educational, embarrassing or even alienating to them.

Women 30–45

- After having been in the career world for several years, many feeling burned out and having a decreased sense of themselves as women, the programme gives them permission to bring more of their authentic, confident and autonomous selves into their workplace. They also report that other women in their workplace notice and are curious to learn the source of change in their refreshed and energized coworker.
- Many new as well as seasoned mothers report feeling unattractive, over-taxed and doing their best to juggle the responsibilities of motherhood with other fulfilling parts of their lives.
- Sentiments of never being able to regain their youthful ease and carefreeness are common in this age group, especially in the area of their femininity, their relationships and their sex lives.
- Women sometimes feel resentful towards their mates, stemming from a gradual feeling of receiving less appreciation and attention than they

might like. Men, in turn, can miss and long for their formerly happy and sexually responsive wife, who might now, because of her responsibilities and building resentments, feel decreased sexual attraction for him. This can become a self-perpetuating feedback loop.

- Participating in the programme helps mothers who feel distanced from their husbands due to devoting most or all of their time to children and no longer feeling like ‘themselves’. Many do not have any opportunities to express and address these issues.
- Most participants in this age range report feeling a combination of relief that they are now reclaiming this innate part of themselves that has simply gone undernourished up until then.
- Conceptualizing that sensuality is an actual and integral part of themselves, participants reported being excited internally, and energized externally, in and out of class. Many reported loving to have a fun thing to share with their friends, knowing that even the conversation about classes and the programme can have positive ongoing effects.

Women 45-65

- Often no longer feeling the fulfilment of having raised families, or a chosen career path, women of this age range report feeling a sort of renewed optimism about rediscovering a part of themselves they thought they were too old to ever recover.
- Described how sensual movement amplified feelings of pleasure, desire and helped them reclaim their inner sense of feeling like a sacred, playful and sexy woman.
- Experienced more of an inner spark and sparkle that positively outweighed and replaced emerging concerns of entering into the second half of their lives, minimizing fears of feeling invisible or irrelevant.

Women 65+

- Report that they feel: ‘Where have I been my whole life?’ and ‘Let me at it!’
- A significant benefit for participation for this group is that they now have a direct, fun and educational connection to a younger generation. Amidst a rapidly-evolving technological culture, older women can sometimes feel invisible, outdated and irrelevant, as most do not have access to a vital, embracing community such as this.
- The elders of this generation reported having grown up in a more repressed era when sexuality was not an appropriate topic to be discussed in public. Being a part of this programme helps those elders learn to become more allowing of their sensuality through feeling the permission the programme generates in its participants. Simply knowing this in and of itself can be very liberating.
- Participants in this age range also reported a renewed excitement and ability to connect with a partner. For many in this generation, discussions and teachings around sensuality can lead directly to increases in both activity in, and regaining the ability to enjoy sexual relations with a partner. This is healthy modelling for this group, as there was little, if no modelling around how to be a sensual woman in touch with her sensuality in her younger years.

These self-reported experiences from women participants in the various age groups over the years led the authors to be clear about two essential programme elements –

1. Although each woman expresses uniquely, each woman entering the programme expressed an awareness of something ‘missing’ in their lives, something lost or never fully expressed.
2. After having participated in the programme each woman experiences transformation of some kind – and in varying degrees – in her sense of self-confidence, self-awareness and alleviation of self-consciousness.

From this data authors were able to design a small pilot study using objective tools for the first time to measure programme outcomes. The pilot study also included subjective self-reports to round out and complete the picture of participants’ experiences.

THE PILOT STUDY

The authors designed a pilot study as the first quantitative step in Primal Elegance’s ongoing process of evaluation and exploration. The study focused on meaningful areas of personal transformation related to participants’ sensual dance experiences.

All participants answered a Call to Participants sent out to a mailing list and then forwarded by recipients to friends. This was shared via social media in the Boulder area. All those who participated gave their consent and signed an agreement to participate in study and share personal information in their verbal pre/post interviews, personal videos accounts and also for the use of their image.

The eight-week pilot study examined the physical, emotional and transformative effects of learning Sensual Movement and Dance in subjects between the ages of 18–70 years. Participants were assessed using formal pre/post psychological questionnaires, pre/post verbal interviews and participant self-assessments throughout the pilot.

As in the programme developed over the years, the pilot study utilized a combination of:

- Conceptual Learning – Mental/Emotional
- Instruction in Movement – Physical/Self-Expression
- Group Discussion/Processing/Bonding – Social/Connection (Development of close relationships among participants).

Participants

Eight women self-selected for this study based on marketing to announce the project, its content and the relationships to be studied. The women participants fell into the following age groups one woman was 18; two women were in their 30’s; three women were in their 40’s; one woman was in her 50’s; and one woman was 70. All of the participants were upper middle class and college-educated. All the women were either students during the pilot study or worked professionally outside the home. Most of the women were mothers.

Pilot study results

Following are responses of the eight participants on each of the written measurement tools utilized in the pre- and post-pilot surveys:

- *Sensuality: Neff's Self-Compassion Scale, 2003, 2016*

There was an overall trend towards greater self-awareness, bodily awareness and awakening of a sense of sensuality and autonomy. The following summarizes the responses for each of the questions on the scale:

- I feel confident in my body: *three reported increased confidence in their body; four reported no change; one reported less confidence.*
 - I feel loose in my body: *six reported an increase in feeling loose in their body; one reported no change; one person reported a decrease in looseness in their body.*
 - I feel likely to be open to an intimate encounter or relationship: *five respondents reported an increase in openness; three reported no change.*
 - I feel generally excited about things in my life: *two reported more excitement; five reported no change; one person felt less excitement about her life.*
 - I am aware of my sensuality and I am confident that I can engage it when I want. *Five reported an increase in their awareness of their sensuality and ability to engage this; three reported no change (see bar chart below).*
 - I feel confident as a woman. *Three reported an increase in this type of confidence; four reported no change; one reported less confidence.*
 - I feel confident in a relationship as a woman. *Four reported an increase; four reported no change.*
 - I have a confident internal sense of myself. *Six reported no change. Two reported an increase.*
 - Self Esteem (exact statement not available at submission date). *One reported an improvement; six reported a decline; one reported no change.*
 - I am disapproving and judgemental about my own flaws and inadequacies. *Six reported an improvement. Two reported a decline.*
- *Anxiety.* Form Y-2 of the State Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger et al. 1983). *Five respondents reported a decline in anxiety. One person reported no change. One person had an increase in anxiety. One person did not respond.*
 - *Depression.* Beck's Depression Inventory (Beck and Steer 1987). *Six respondents reported a decrease in depression – three with a greater than 50 per cent reduction in depression scores. One person reported an increase depression. One person did not respond.*
 - *Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)* (Gross and John 2003). Responses to the two questions addressing Emotion Reappraisal and Suppression were as follows:



Figures 1 and 2: Photographs courtesy of Lotus Sattva.

1. When I want to feel more positive emotion (such as joy or amusement), I change what I am thinking about (*reappraisal*). *Five reported increased capacity in this area; one reported no change; one reported a decline in positive emotion. One person did not respond.*
2. I keep my emotions to myself (*suppression*). *Five reported decreased tendency to suppress emotions; two reported an increased tendency to suppress emotions; one person did not respond.*

Qualitative data from interviews

The teaching exercise and discussions engaged study participants' interests and, they reported, led them to reflect on why they might have experienced certain emotional states up until now.

In general, women in the study felt that the standardized testing instruments took too much time and did not access what they felt was most important in their dance experience – *i.e.* freedom to experience their sensuality, joy/ecstasy, increased sense of autonomy, etc. Given the opportunity to discourse on their experiences, some women described these as follows:

- 'I felt so happy to reconnect with this part of myself, a part that we sometimes lose after becoming a mom'.
- 'I have never felt so free and supported in exploring and playing with my sensual, female energy before. I feel more comfortable in my own skin, and I have a deeper respect for myself as well as a deeper sense of my own power now'.
- 'I can truly say that in this class I learned how to get to know myself better, dance sensually, feel confident in myself, and be a more passionate, happy person'.
- 'I love the way I feel when I am doing sensual dance, and I carry this dance through my life'.
- 'These classes have had a profound effect on me. I feel like a strong powerful woman after today's class! Every woman could benefit from a class like this. Thank you for showing me how natural it is to evoke the divine feminine'.

The qualitative study was consistent with the earlier material presented in this article, where self-reports from women of different ages over a period of ten years all pointed in the direction of age-related transformation and an increase in personal autonomy and joy – both inner and the joy of living.

Conclusion

Even though our sample size was small, our pilot study did show statistically significant increases in the psychological and emotional elements measured. However, what is most notable, are the larger transformational gains expressed through the anecdotal data collected throughout the study. This anecdotal data – results of the pre- and post-programme verbal interviews, participant self-reporting in group discussions, and overall observation by study facilitators – reflected significantly higher positive shifts in each woman's own sense of sensuality, her increased confidence, her decreased levels of self-consciousness, and her increased overall sense of well-being.

The women reported an immediately more elevated, carefree sense of themselves and a decrease or alleviation of self-consciousness. This release of self-consciousness was not only experienced while dancing, but also extended outwardly into their daily routines, making them more directed while easeful, more capable while feeling a sense of effortlessness, and more accomplished with accompanying feelings of satisfaction and fulfilment.

DISCUSSION AND NEXT STEPS

In the pilot research presented here into the transformative effects of sensual dance with women, additional elements were added to the body of outcomes already recorded in traditional dance research literature. These include ecstatic feelings and the discovery/rediscovery of a deep identity experienced as sensuality and freedom to express this renewed part of themselves in all parts of their lives. Women reported experiencing an innate ability to use bodily sensations as a refreshing way to self-soothe inwardly and also to express themselves more authentically outwardly. This was felt to have incorporated into their selves, the ability to invoke and radiate a sense of sacredness through the body – a deliverance from the day to day-ness of things.

The conventional psychological instruments used in the study were felt by participants to be inadequate in capturing their experiences. Based predominantly on depression and anxiety scales, the pre- and post-measurement devices seemed unable to capture what the other, anecdotal data collections demonstrated. These included:

- Pre/Post-programme 30-minute verbal interview with study facilitator
- Self-reports of participants both in person and in their filmed personal accounts
- Observations and notations by facilitator of participants at differing stages over the course of the eight weeks.

Both personal interviews and the opportunity for women to express their dramatic increases in well-being in the group setting came out as the preferred methods to tap into the experiences and outcomes from participating in this dance programme.

There was recognition by the women participating in the evaluation, as well as by the research team, that other, possibly novel instruments need to be found to accurately capture how lived experience translates into ongoing personal development and transformation.

Just as there is now an extensive body of research documenting brain and bodily changes during and after meditation, movement and dance research has the potential to expand beyond the use of anxiety and depression scales, even beyond quality of life scales – all of which, of course, have descriptive value – to develop methods for establishing an evidence base for how sensual, ecstatic and transcendent experiences are associated with deep brain and bodily changes and enhanced quality of life.

Some important work on positing higher stages of human growth throughout the lifespan, with transcendence as an ultimate endpoint (Maslow 1971; Alexander and Langer 1990; Koltko-Rivera 2006), may reflect aspects of the outcomes described by participants in this programme. Yet, to date, no theories of adult development address the potential influence of movement,

joy, pleasure and ecstasy in accompanying and contributing to higher experiences of adult growth.

Measuring how the bodily, brain and experiential effects of dance contribute to changes in lived experience, quality of life, enhanced mood and relationships, and overall generativity (e.g. Williams et al. 2016) will take the study of dance to a level where it may be understood in the context of its ancient origins: as a means of elevating human experience and insight towards experiences of freedom, wholeness, ecstasy and transcendence – *i.e.* going beyond the limits of ordinary experience. As Amanda Williamson has noted:

Spirituality and its variant expressions are reflective and indicative of the wider changing socio-cultural and economic landscape (*i.e.* that the substantive/functional content of the sacred/spiritual is highly malleable and open to numerous constructions and creative expressions). As such, personal spiritual truths and faiths are instrumentally shaped by the wider socio-cultural landscape.

(Williamson 2010: 40)

Elsewhere, Williamson (2010; Eddy et.al 2014) has argued that when viewed through a broad and inclusive definition of spirituality (e.g. Kraus 2009: 52), somatic practices may encompass or contribute to individuals' experiences of their own spirituality.

Jill Hayes has given this perspective personal expression: 'I believed that by way of the body I would awaken creativity again. I wanted to breathe life into every cell of my body (...) to reawaken my capacity to sense and feel my inner life, and I hoped that this somatic awareness would rejoin me with a greater swell of creativity. Through my body, I could be in active relationship with the delicate hidden life of organic forms all around me' (Hayes, cited in Williamson et al., 2014: 66).

Towards the goal of seeking new metrics for capturing such experiences, assessment methods are needed that account for more than simply mental health, such as depression and anxiety metrics. Such methods point to future work in the context of transpersonal psychology applied to therapeutic dance. As the current study is only a pilot consisting of eight individuals, further research will attempt to incorporate new methods along with traditional ones.

One possibility may be that a natural language-processing algorithm would be used to assess the pre- and post-interview responses. One such algorithm is IBM's Watson Personality Assessment (WPA). Based on machine learning techniques applied to text and responses from many thousands of individuals, this WPA algorithm is capable of assessing various personality traits such as openness, conscientiousness and introversion/extroversion as well as various personal values such as achievement, helping others and stimulation. The usage of such tool could yield deeper insights into personality metrics in comparison to those used in the present study.

Another possibility is the usage of expert observers. These third-party observers would judge to what extent participants were able to connect to their sensual selves and lose their senses of self-consciousness. Losing self-consciousness and letting go of shame surrounding the body and sensuality is at the heart of sensual dance. Having the participant experience the power and flow of the dance and group sharing and then remove herself from that

experience to focus on answering more cerebral and linear survey questions may not be the best way to judge programme effectiveness.

Though the pilot study reported on here had a small sample size (eight participants) and does not feature powerful statistical inference, results were highly encouraging. Women reported increased confidence, better awareness of sensuality, improved self-compassion, reduced anxiety, reduced depression, changes in emotional regulation. They reported feelings of having been restored to their innate and instinctual female nature of sacredness, sensuality, and the ability to express these. The pilot study also provided an opportunity to focus and refine the vision of what really are the most important elements of sensual dance's effects on personality.

We learned that the reduction of self-consciousness, personal empowerment and ease were the most important effects of immersing themselves in a programme based on sensual dance. Being in the company of other women to compare their feelings and insights with seemed to be a large factor in these effects. Also, in addition to the movement component, the teachings and related discussions which helped participants deconstruct sensuality, sexuality and their feminine nature were found to be especially beneficial in aiding the women to get the most out of the programme.

In addition to these implications for the design and evaluation of expressive dance forms for adult women, the transformative value experienced by participants in this Sensual Dance programme is likely to be there – in possibly differing but also empowering ways – for men, as well as for younger people when taught according to appropriate peer priorities and standards of their age cohort. These are horizons that our group is now pursuing.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

- Fasullo, L., Lurquin, J. and Bodeker, G. (2016), 'Reconnecting to the feminine: Transformative effects of Sensual Movement and Dance', *Dance, Movement & Spiritualities*, 3: 1+2, pp. 69–88, doi: [10.1386/dmas.3.1-2.69_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/dmas.3.1-2.69_1)

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Professor Gerry Bodeker (Ph.D.), whose doctoral studies were at Harvard, researches and advises on traditional (indigenous) and complementary medicine and wellness. He has researched and taught in medical sciences at Oxford for two decades, and is adjunct professor of epidemiology at Columbia University. Gerry Bodeker works with governments, private sector, UN organizations, including WHO and the UN University, advising on culturally-themed wellness strategies (www.giftsofhealth.org). Gerry writes: As a young clinical psychologist working with indigenous children and families in Australia, the need to understand indigenous views of life, causality, problem and solution led me to a markedly different outlook and approach to intervention than those in which I had been trained. Enabling indigenous women to take on career roles with community members in rural outback and urban settings, my colleagues and I saw a rise in empowerment, inner change and group change emerge as these women grew in a sense of autonomy and influence. This experience from the 1970's has been formative, continuing to the present (Bodeker 2017). Knowing Lisa Fasullo through our joint work for more than 15 years at Columbia University with Professor Fredi Kronenberg, then-Director of Columbia's Rosenthal Center for Complementary Medicine, Women's Health and Aging, and learning over time of Lisa's program of empowering American women through dance – and in documenting this objectively – made me aware that something important was happening here related to dance, personal transformation, self-efficacy and empowerment. Hence suggesting to Lisa a collaboration that has evolved to be fruitful, stimulating and open-ended. Lisa's role is as the dance and empowerment innovator and mine, while not yet a member of Lisa's dance group, has been one of systematizing and contextualizing her group's experience and making it accessible to the scholarly community as an important innovation in the field.

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