

# Couples Dance/Movement Therapy: Bringing a Theoretical Framework into Practice

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**Abstract** Romantic relationships have a highly-charged nonverbal component making dance/movement therapy (DMT) an ideal treatment modality. While a handful of dance/movement therapists have written about work that explores romantic partnering and some dance/movement therapists offer therapy for couples, couples DMT remains a new theoretical frontier. As of 2017, no theoretical framework exists to guide therapeutic intervention in the relational dances of romantic partners. Borrowing from counseling and marriage and family therapy theories, integrated with DMT theories and supported by recent neuroscience, the authors propose a theoretical framework for therapists and educators to consider. Much of couples counseling theory comes out of attachment theory which dance/movement therapists understand kinesthetically if not yet in specific application to couples movements. The field of DMT and counseling both note that relational dances are influenced by cultural context and thus this proposed theoretical framework acknowledges the importance of therapists maintaining cultural awareness. Finally, healthy sexuality requires the kind of embodiment that DMT facilitates, which supports the authors' proposal that couples DMT contributes such a valuable addition to traditional couples therapy that the development of a theoretical framework for that work will serve DMT practitioners as well as the therapeutic field as a whole.

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## Introduction

We create templates for our romantic relationship dances very early in our developmental process (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Significant relationships throughout our lives can adapt and improve those templates but romantic relationships, because of their sexual component, elicit our most primitive patterns (Kaplan, 1975). When we seek body-within-body connection with another person, the feel of that type of connection draws out old infant patterns. If there were dances from infancy and childhood that were not developmentally effective, we have the opportunity to work with those patterns again during our romantic relationships. Because dance/movement therapy (DMT) offers ideal formats for adopting new movement patterns, the time has come to create a protocol for DMT that focuses specifically on romantic relationships. Borrowing from counseling and marriage and family therapy theories, integrated with DMT theories and supported by recent neuroscience, the authors propose a theoretical framework for therapists and educators to consider.

A few dance/movement therapists have written scholarly papers about their work with romantic partners (Chatara-Middleton, 2012; Spencer, 1978). Dr. James Milton Murphy (2011) wrote about his ideas for combining DMT and marital therapy in a do-it-yourself training manual for couples, *How You and Your Mate Can Become a Super Couple: With Exercises to Get You There*. Other dance/movement therapists have written about their use of partnered dances like tango in populations such as those diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and the elderly (Hackney & Gammon, 2010; Hackney, Kantorovich, & Gammon, 2007; Lima & Vieira, 2007). Padrão and Coimbra (2011) examined interoception—the felt sense of the body—and its relationship to sexual interest in patients diagnosed with anorexia. Davis, Weitz and Culkin (1980) explored differences in movement styles based on participant-identified gender within the dual gender identification that was more the norm at that time. Naess (1982) wrote about a developmental approach to the interactive process in DMT, and Lewis (1996) looked at DMT theories with attention to romantic dyads as part of a larger and more general exploration of a developmental journey toward Spiritual Consciousness. Fraenkel (1983) identified echoing as opposed to synchrony as a marker for empathy, and she co-created the Fraenkel-Franks Index of Shared Behaviors which might be useful with couples. As of 2017, no dance/movement therapist has focused specifically on the areas of overlap between DMT theory, the new scientific understanding of the relational aspects of nervous system functioning, and the theories used in couples counseling (including marriage and family therapy) for the purpose of creating a framework to guide dance/movement therapists in their work with romantic partners. This paper will begin the process of documenting a theoretical framework for the application of DMT within couples therapy for both clinician and educator alike.

## **Pulling Together Appropriate Theories to Create a Proposed Framework**

The biology of bonding is foundational in a workable theoretical framework for couples DMT. As a result of new scientific discoveries, polyvagal and attachment theories suggest ways that nervous system functioning relates to bonding. These foundational theories will be addressed first. Next, the authors will explore various relationship theories that look at familial and cultural dynamics, all aspects of which play out in romantic partnering. DMT theory—specifically in regard to interpersonal movement relationships—helps therapists to recognize and work with the nuanced components of relational dances non-verbally. Guided by these major theories that offer understanding of romantic bonding, the authors offer techniques that repattern ineffective romantic relational dances. These techniques will be further supported by aspects of the movement observation/analysis lenses of Laban Movement Analysis and the Kestenberg Movement Profile. In speaking of relational dances, the authors refer to the entire continuum of interactional movement from the minute energetic interactions that occur during all types of nonverbal communication to the larger moves of pushing and pulling on each other that have been stylized into social dance steps, martial arts, sports and all other types of engagement.

### **Polyvagal Theory**

At the 2016 American Dance Therapy Association conference, Porges and Carter were keynote speakers addressing nervous system functioning. They explained the existence of a state of mobility and a state of immobility that become possible only with a felt sense of safety (Porges & Carter, 2016). Porges named the nervous system functioning that allows these types of active and passive states our Social Engagement System because safety is often cued through relational dances (Porges & Carter, 2016). In her article “Polyvagal Theory and Peek-a-boo: How the Therapeutic Pas de Deux Heals Attachment Trauma,” Wagner (2015a) suggested that relational games played with infants—like peek-a-boo—develop ventral vagal nerve functioning, which is key to social engagement system functioning. Because of the influence of relational dances on ventral vagal functioning, an understanding of social engagement system biology serves therapists who work with couples.

Porges’ polyvagal theory is based on Porges’ (2011) studies of the ventral vagal nerve, one of the two major branches of the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve serves the parasympathetic nervous system, which is the part of the nervous system that calms the body down (Porges, 2011). Ventral vagal nerve training allows mobility without shooting into the state we call fight/flight (Porges, 2011). Diamond (2015), addressing the role of nervous system functioning in attachment dynamics, explained that the release of the ventral vagal nerve can happen in milliseconds while fight/flight chemistry takes seconds. This time delay allows space for nuanced release and engagement of ventral vagal nerve functioning before the firing off of fight/flight chemistry. Ideally, we want to reserve the fight/flight response for

situations in which life-saving actions are possible. Fight/flight exhausts the body and time is required to return to homeostasis. The quick activation and deactivation that is possible through ventral vagal nerve functioning, facilitates more nuanced relational dances.

When we sense a life-threatening situation, we shoot off fight/flight chemistry with the intent to fight or flee the danger. If fighting or fleeing becomes impossible, the body goes into shut-down. Our primitive shut-down responses have been termed: freeze, faint, feign. Feign refers to dissociation which is a version of shut-down and can occur in response to trauma from life-threatening situations that could not be abated with fight or flight. Borg, Brenner, and Berry's (2015) book *Irrelationship* addresses romantic partners who present in shut-down. The authors identify those who hide in their romantic relationships to avoid the potential anxiety that can arise with true intimacy.

According to the work of Levine (1997), a colleague of Porges and author of *Waking the Tiger*, when we wake up from shut-down, we experience the hyperarousal that results from waking up. Our animal bodies are designed to go into fight/flight when we wake up because we may likely need that burst of energy. The life-threatening danger that led to the shut-down response may still be near and may need to be fought or fled. We may startle awake to avoid the death that shut-down eventually facilitates. We can bounce back and forth between shut-down and fight/flight if we cannot find a sense of safety.

Wagner (2015b) also wrote about how couples can polarize into defense modes as if they are one body with one nervous system between them. One partner will take on the fight/flight anxious energy and the other the dissociative shut-down energy. In the same way that shut-down occurs when fight/flight seems useless, the dissociative partner distances from the anxious partner. This distancing stirs more anxiety from the partner who has taken on the fight/flight, like when the body shoots into fight/flight in a last ditch effort to escape before shut-down leads to death. The increased anxiety of the fight/flight partner continues to elicit more emotional distancing from the shut-down partner—often identified as the *Distancer/Pursuer Dance* (Fogarty, 1979; Gottman & DeClaire, 2001; Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Johnson, 1996, 2008; Johnson, Makinen, & Millikin, 2001).

## Attachment Theory

In the mid 1900s, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, attachment theorists and researchers, discovered that humans are born biologically predisposed for connection with our primary caregivers and that these early attachments set the stage for our later relationships as adults (Bowlby, 1969). Ainsworth's (1978) Strange Situation Experiments studied infant behavior in relationship to the mother's presence, absence and the inclusion of a stranger. Ainsworth observed various interactions related to proximity and contact that led to a categorizing of what became known as attachment styles. These styles align with polyvagal theory's explanation of nervous system functioning (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002, 2007).

Social engagement system functioning aligns with behavior suggestive of what Ainsworth called a *secure* attachment style. While the nervous system that is under continuous traumatic exposure creates one of two insecure attachment styles. What Ainsworth called an *anxious-ambivalent/resistant insecure* attachment style is associated with the fight/flight nervous system response and what she called an *anxious-avoidant insecure* attachment style is associated with the shut-down nervous system response.

When we have a secure attachment style, we will have developed what Kaplan (1978) called constancy—the ability to connect without feeling suffocated and disconnect without feeling abandoned. We are likely to operate out of our social engagement system even during stressful situations. We are able to postpone fight/flight until there are clearer signs of life-threatening danger. For all therapists working with couples but especially dance/movement therapists, it helps to understand the dances that create secure attachment and thus a more functional use of social engagement system biology.

The still face experiments of Tronick (1989, 2007) demonstrate how a mother's display of flat affect—sends infants into fight/flight anxiousness and rather quickly into shut down. Without lower body ability to flee and limited ability to fight, shut-down becomes the infant's more likely response when faced with a sense of life-threatening danger such as the loss of the parental figure. Tronick's work also helps us understand the dance of connection, rupture and repair. Attuned parents are able to sense when the dance between them and their babies is out of sync. They are able to explore interactional moves toward the dance that offers the baby the needed kinesthetic empathy for reconnection. Good enough ability to repair disconnection on the part of the parental figure trains social engagement system functioning in the child leading to a securely attached individual.

Margaret Mahler and Daniel Stern also studied extensively the mother/infant relationship. Stern and Mahler wrestled with terminology in an effort to name the dance that exists in every relationship and to which infants contribute—a dance we now call “co-regulation” (Whitehouse & Pallaro, 2007). Schore (1999) helps us understand that the suffix *co* in the term *co-regulation* when describing the caregiver/infant dance does not imply equality as in the term *co-parenting*. When applied to parental figure and child, the mutuality of the dance cannot even be compared to co-pilots who each have outside training in flying planes before their relationship begins. A proper metaphor would be trainer/student driving the special vehicles for driver's education where the student has increasing control of the automobile but the teacher has the ability to take over as needed and maintains the responsibility for safe operation of the vehicle.

In 1987, Hazan and Shaver wrote the ground-breaking article *Romantic Love Conceptualized as an Attachment Process* noting the similarity between adult romantic partnering and mother/infant partnering. Prior to the late 80s, therapists untangled family of origin issues from couple dynamics using family systems theories. These theorists had begun to focus on patterns of interaction between family members in the same way that an observer of a mobile at an art museum might focus on the movement created by the connection of the objects rather than focusing on the individual objects themselves. This focus on interactive dynamics of

families foreshadowed Porges' choice to name the nervous system functioning that allows more nuanced relational options our Social Engagement System. Family systems work began in the 50s with systems theorists Haley and Minuchin and experiential therapists Whitaker and Napier. In the late 80s, Napier (1988) wrote *The Fragile Bond* about romantic partnering.

Since Hazan and Shaver's work in the late 80s, many couples therapy models have come more directly out of attachment theory such as Hendrix and Hunt's IMAGO therapy (Hendrix, 1988; Hendrix & Hunt 2004), Johnson's Emotionally Focused Therapy (2008), and Schwartz's Internal Family Systems (1995) particularly framed by the work of Herbine-Blank et al. (2016). Levine and Heller's book *Attached* (2012) offers readers a view of how an understanding of attachment theory can improve relationship dances. Perel's book *Mating in Captivity* (2006) identifies ways that couples sexual relationships suffer from efforts to replicate infant/caregiver dances that act out old hungers for an internal sense of security.

## Internal Family Systems Theory

Grounded in internal family systems theory, the work of Toni Herbine-Blank and colleagues is a pioneering approach to couples therapy. Both Herbine-Blank and Dr. Richard Schwartz, creator of internal family systems (IFS), have worked extensively on developing this working model for couples therapy. The theory proposes that each individual in the couple take responsibility for caring for their own Parts that may be triggered within the relationship.

Within the internal family systems theory, each individual is understood to have a multiplicity of Parts within their internal system. In addition to Parts, the individual is also understood to have what Schwartz (1995) called a "Core Self." The Core Self is comprised of qualities such as calmness, connectedness, curiosity and creativity—qualities of those with secure attachment styles who operate mostly out of Social Engagement System functioning. By suggesting that we all have a Core Self, Schwarz identifies that we are all born wired for Social Engagement System functioning.

As infants mature, Parts are developed to cope with various challenges. At best, Parts support optimal functioning in the infant's world and help the individual contend with life's stressors. Parts can also stunt Social Engagement System functioning, creating more insecure attachment styles. Schwartz's (1995) model helps us see the creation of these Parts as an effort to manage within external systems and therefore an attempt at functionality.

When therapists help couples become aware of the Parts within themselves, the process of learning to witness themselves developments more mature ventral vagal nerve functioning, creating more nuanced Social Engagement System functioning. Schwartz (2008) suggested that this viewpoint from which we can witness ourselves is the viewpoint of our Core Self. It is from this place of Core Self that couples are able to be aware of how these aspects of themselves—Parts—interact. Therapists can inquire about whether or not each member of the couple has ever noticed themselves reasoning out a problem, thinking that one part of themselves wanted

one thing while another part of themselves wanted something different. When therapists guide individuals to detect their Parts, they bring more awareness to their system's dysregulation by inviting Core Self to notice when the internal family system has become "hijacked" by a Part. After inviting Core Self to witness a Part, the therapist can help the individual return to optimal Core Self functioning—back to Social Engagement System functioning—using various body-based techniques for resourcing.

In the IFS model, couples are encouraged to care for their own Parts by using a format in which individuals speak *for* their Part—from their Core Self—versus *from* their Part. Rather than saying, "I hate it when you interrupt me," which is speaking from a Part, a person could say, "A Part of me hates it when you interrupt me." The individual in the couple-hood is thus more focused on how they are managing themselves within the relationship, so that the Parts of themselves that may move into protection/disconnection from their partner are attended to directly by the Core Self.

As both Schwartz (2008) and Herbine-Blank et al. (2016) stated, each individual can be perceived as the primary caregiver of their own Parts, while the partner in the couple can be the secondary caregiver and not solely responsible for the happiness of the other. This implies that each person in the couple-hood is able to tend to their own Parts that may become activated within the relationship. This self-lead approach to couples therapy will be suggested within this proposed therapeutic framework for couples DMT and the use of the moving metaphor.

When considering combining an internal family systems couples approach to DMT, the following questions can be asked:

1. Might movement be an inroad to explore the impasse and enter the couple's relational system from the non-verbal to help the couple remain in their social engagement system functioning?
2. Can the dance/movement therapist meet the couple in their relational dance to assist their understanding of how their individual nervous systems functioning—developed out of their individual histories—impacts the relationship?
3. Might movement offer a quicker, more direct solution for the couple to restore their ventral vagal nerve functioning and bring their relationship into a healthier state?
4. Can common couples therapy themes of communication, trust, boundaries, power differentials and expression of needs be explored by the couple through the nonverbal movement metaphor?

## Cultural Theory

Miller and Stiver (1991), developers of the Relational-Cultural Model, suggested that although individuals yearn for connection with others, they concurrently develop strategies that keep them out of connection as a means to protect the system. This corresponds directly to the Internal Family Systems Theory. That is, there are two sides of the relationship coin: the Self that yearns for connection,

which Bowlby (1969) would suggest is based on biological needs, and the aspects/Parts of the individual that protect the heart from being hurt, thus keeping the individual out of connection. The Parts of the individual that protect the system are quite often, if not always, informed by early childhood attachments and the family's cultural beliefs and norms.

If early life experiences train more mature ventral vagal nerve functioning—for instance more of the kind of nervous system training provided by peek-a-boo-type play—individuals are less likely to fly into fight/flight (Wagner, 2015a). These individuals are more likely to have secure attachment styles and therefore seek connection. In communities facing frequent possibility of life-threatening danger, parents may sense the survival value of fight/flight and shut-down. These parents can unconsciously promote insecure attachment styles by offering less parent/infant play and more parent/child interactions that activate hyperarousal. Because hyperarousal exhausts the body, individuals may avoid those fight/flight responses by avoiding connection. Shaver and Mikulincer (2007) identified adults whose more independent coping strategies are actually signs of shut-down representing avoidant attachment styles.

All theories have been influenced by the context in which they were created. Many, if not all of the psychological theories familiar to us today, were founded in Euro-American culture; many of which value autonomy and independence. However, in the 1970s ideas about autonomy shifted when Miller and Stiver (1991) developed the Relational-Cultural model, formerly known as the Feminist Perspective (Miller, 1976), which suggests that all healing takes place within relationship. More recently, the newer theories based on interpersonal neurobiology and nervous system science (Porges, 2011; Siegel, 2012) validate Miller's theories.

The development of couples therapy theories are no different in terms of the changes that have taken place over time. These theories are highly affected by the cultural norms and values placed on relationships in general, as well as cultural norms and values that have historically been placed on the gender-identified individuals in those relationships. Gottman (1994), notable marriage researcher, noted that men and women are very different in the way each handle conflict. Therefore, in his perspective, if each person could understand each other's differences then they might have more compassion and appreciation for the other (this in a heterosexual relationship). Historically, we also might have seen couple's theorists propose that it is the partner's responsibility to meet the needs of the other. Or that if a couple could simply learn tools to communicate better or understand the other's "Love Language" (Chapman, 1992), then they could be a healthier couple. As partner roles become less culturally prescribed, each partnership must find its own unique dance that clarifies workable roles for its members. A functional internal family system within each member helps the negotiation of roles become more possible.



## Dance/Movement Therapy Theory

Throughout life, individuals seek love and support. If the choice is made, a partnership is developed and the intimate dance of attachment that began in infancy is regenerated—an integration of two systems to create one committed relationship, whether the commitment is for a lifetime or for each individual moment during one sexual encounter. Often, the intention for the partnered relationship is something that can be relied on; something that supports each individual through life that is deeply connected. However, as it is in most all relationships, there are inevitable struggles and ruptures. Clashes occur, and each internal system gets activated as the partnership bumps up against growing edges—residual left-overs from primary relationships.

Used as an observation tool and inroad to non-verbal interventions within the context of the DMT session, the Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP) identifies developmental movement patterns as well as clashes and matches between infant and caregiver (Kestenberg Amighi, Loman, Lewis, & Sossin, 1999). Within the KMP—specifically System I of the theory—tension flow rhythms have been identified as an expression of needs. These identified developmental tension flow rhythms alternate between those that are more indulgent and those that involve more struggle. The rhythms that create more struggle are called fighting rhythms. Both the indulgent rhythms and the fighting rhythms lead to the accomplishment of particular developmental tasks (Kestenberg Amighi et al., 1999). The necessary developmental pushes and pulls that result when the infant moves into periodic exploration of fighting rhythms can concern parents (Loman, 2016). KMP-informed dance/movement therapists help parents see the value of these fighting tension flow rhythms for the role they play in functional embodiment. Likewise, therapists can help couples discover underdeveloped movement patterns within themselves, each other and in the interpersonal realm. In turn, this can increase self/other acceptance of the various tension flow rhythms' functional health—especially the fighting rhythms.

Lovers can feel an urge to wrestle out unsatisfied fighting rhythms. During infancy and early childhood, the parents of one or both of the lovers may have responded to fighting rhythms in ways that discouraged their expression and therefore those underdeveloped rhythms impact their relationships later in life. Because these parent/child dances come from a time when the playing field was uneven, versions of these dances between lovers may erupt into power plays. If parents were not able to appreciate the fighting rhythms/urges and guide those urges into appropriate expressions, lovers may have fearful internal Parts that are triggered by their partner's gestures and vocal patterning should those expressions suggest even mild versions of fighting rhythms. (As seen from an internal family systems perspective.) Dance/movement therapists can help couples identify dances that attempt to resolve childhood attunement needs, complicating their romantic dances. These dances can be addressed within the DMT counseling relationship both within the couple-hood and between therapist and client.

One of the core principles of all DMT and counseling is the therapeutic relationship between therapist and client. The therapeutic movement relationship

was identified by Marian Chace, founding mother of DMT. Young (2017) defined this previously elusive relationship as:

...a shared presence of body, mind, and spirit between the dance/movement therapist and client where healing occurs within the safe containment of a creative collaboration, and results in a resonance. Rooted in the tenets of humanism, it is born out of one's ability to kinesthetically attune and respond to the implicit and explicit movements of another informed by knowledge of one's own body sensations and movements as well as continual observation and assessment of the client's movement. (p. 104)

The therapeutic movement relationship defined above is descriptive of the relationship the dance/movement therapist has with his/her client. However, since individuals are always in relationship, some aspects of this idea could potentially be expanded and applied to any "moving" relationship. This moving relationship can be explored and developed from Self-to-Self, as seen when an individual explores Authentic Movement (Adler, 2002), client-to-client in the context of a DMT couple session and within the context of DMT family or group therapy where multiple moving relationships are occurring simultaneously. Caregivers and therapists provide the container for the individual through continual observation until the individual can provide the container for their own internal family system. Peers take turns observing and offering the occasional container, looking to the therapist for the ultimate containing of the group/couple therapeutic experience. Couples are each caregivers to their own internal Parts and secondarily to their partner.

Dance/movement therapists noted four areas of focus explored by Chace in her use of dance/movement to foster health and well-being in her patients. These areas of focus would later be named Chace's Four Core Concepts: *rhythmic group activity, symbolism, body action and the therapeutic movement relationship* (Sandel, Chaiklin, & Lohn, 1993). DMT with couples also involves focus related to all four concepts.

While the dance/movement therapist is observing with an eye on the *therapeutic movement relationship*, the therapist can be looking for unresolved KMP *rhythms*—the fighting rhythms and even unresolved indulging rhythms as observed through the KMP lens. The authors imagine that dance/movement therapists with specialization in KMP will surely see more application of the KMP within core concept work with couples than the authors offer here in this proposed weaving of salient theories providing a framework for couples DMT. Understanding how the fighting rhythms influence couples dances hones in on one aspect of the KMP. Awareness of the interpersonal nature of the fighting rhythms especially informs the DMT couples practitioner because the existence of these fighting rhythms is often what brings couples into therapy. First sessions with couples frequently include complaints related to fighting.

Dance/movement therapists who specialize in KMP application and want to apply the use of the KMP tension flow rhythms to couples, can support their work by understanding how the internal family systems model addresses the internalized parent/child dance. When these fighting rhythms show up in couple dances, identifying them as child Parts that exist within an individual can help the individual

and the couple. Therapists can examine how one individual's Parts are triggered by their lover's Parts in this relational dance.

*Body action*—another of Chace's four core concepts—is being utilized any time a dance/movement therapist is working from a movement observation lens. Part of a dance/movement therapists' training is either Laban Movement Analysis—a system for observing movement—or the KMP. Whether using the KMP or Laban Movement Analysis, the dance/movement therapist who creates an intervention on a movement level is implementing the body action concept. These interventions almost solely live in the non-verbal realm and therefore offer reparative experiences for those earliest interactive times when words offer no more than vocal patterning.

The dance/movement therapist working with couples can also utilize the Chacian core concept of *symbolism* as a tool to explore the thematic material present in the couple's dynamic within the context of their moving relationship. Movement as metaphor can form a more advanced couples DMT modality. When the therapist creates a movement metaphor task for the couple to explore, each individual in the couple can understand their relational dynamics from a non-verbal lens and may discover something about themselves that was previously out of their conscious awareness.

## Applying the Proposed Theoretical Framework

Here the authors offer two general application tools that grow out of the proposed theoretical framework for couples DMT—palm-to-palm interactions and moving the metaphor. Each of these applications has been explored in the practice of one or both of the authors for a considerable amount of time. We offer them to generate discussion about the theoretic framework and its possible applications. Palm-to-palm interventions are primarily driven from KMP observations of tension flow rhythms while moving the metaphor is grounded in the system which framed KMP—Laban Movement Analysis.

### Palm-to-Palm Interactions

When working with a couple, exploration of palm-to-palm connections becomes a useful tool. Palm-to-palm interactions offer potential for exploring versions of the developmental KMP tension flow dances that occur between child and caregiver.

The therapist might notice gestures or content related to taking up personal space within the couple-hood. Perhaps one partner's gestures tend to extend into the other person's personal space, or one partner's gestures are very percussive and aimed in the direction of the other person. Maybe the couple is discussing one partner's wish for more time with the other, or one person describes hunger for more intimacy than the other person seems to want. After the therapist describes an observation of gestures or topic that indicate space-related issues, the therapist might inquire about whether or not each of the two people would be willing to explore an experiment that would involve palm-to-palm touch where the two people would face one

another, the palms of one person's hands connecting with the palms of the other person's hands.

The therapeutic dance that occurs in the course of the suggestion of the experiment, the movement into the experiment and within the experiment itself hold rich, nuanced information for all involved. With attention from a polyvagal-theory-informed lens, the dance/movement therapist can look at how possible it is for the members of the couple to come at such experiments playfully. If even the thought of such experimentation stirs hyperarousal, that could indicate that internal family system Parts within one or both of the individuals are activated. Distress signals areas where ventral vagal nerve training could be of benefit.

When caregivers dance well with each of the rhythms that develop as their child passes through various stages, the child trains his/her ventral vagal nervous system functioning toward greater flexibility. With more flexible and therefore mature ventral vagal functioning, the child can tolerate more relational mismatches without going into distress. Waisman (2014) named the value of a certain amount of mismatching as it supports the differentiation process. Mature ventral vagal functioning allows us to tolerate the mini-mismatches and creates time for resolving clashes so disruptive that they require repair.

When one of the people in the romantic partnership is experiencing distress, that partner has likely had confusing urges and may have unconsciously put their lover in the role of the caregiver. When this type of transference occurs, the person who is doing the transferring often wants their lover to respond like an ideal caregiver, not only by providing the ideal complementary movement response but by understanding the intensity of the distress without feeling distressed themselves. When dance/movement therapists recognize this kind of transference, they can look for specific KMP tension flow rhythms that seek an ideal caregiver's responsive dance.

As discussed earlier, moving through the KMP fighting rhythms is crucial for infants and children in order to accomplish developmental tasks. If parental figures respond to the fighting rhythms with alarm, they can discourage them rather than appreciating them with redirection into socially appropriate expression. Unappreciated fighting dances from childhood can underlie couples urges to fight—urges that are so strong that all communication becomes useless. KMP informed dance/movement therapists can recognize that this kind of fighting within couples comes out of the need to resolve old relational dances rather than any specific verbal content. In fact, the topic chosen to allow the fighting interaction often has no real significance because the couple will have “the same fight” over and over again due to these underlying reasons.

## **Palm-to-Palm Work as the Dance of the Internal Family System**

Palm-to-palm interactions allow the dance/movement therapist to look at the dances of each lover's internal family system through the lens of the KMP. The therapist can look for each of the lover's comfort with various KMP rhythms. When couples explore interacting with both palms touching, the shape of the arms combined with strong but flexible muscle tone in the whole body can suggest what ballroom

dancers refer to as a “dance frame.” This kind of framing allows an ownership of personal space and creates a sense of there being room for two internal family systems. Each person’s internal family system space meets at the hands, and the palm-to-palm interaction creates reactions within each system. As people bump into unfinished developmental dances—often the KMP fighting tension flow rhythms/dances—this creates opportunity to re-pattern dysfunctional nervous system responses through reparative relational dances.

Due to the authors weaving of attachment theory, how it is supported by polyvagal theory, how the internal family systems model works with attachment dances within each individual as well as within the culturally-contexted couplehood, KMP-informed methods have been limited. However, with this basic understanding of what the KMP illuminates about developmental dances, the authors propose that dance/movement therapists can use this multi-theory-based model effectively with couples. For more in-depth understanding of the rich developmental information provided by the KMP, the authors guide readers toward *The Meaning of Movement: Developmental and Clinical Perspectives of the Kestenberg Movement Profile* (Kestenberg Amighi et al., 1999).

As preparation for any couples DMT exploration, therapists can guide couples to explore the KMP twisting rhythm. Twisting is crucial for swinging the head into the gesture that says “no.” Knowing that “no” is an option makes “yes” a choice. The gesture “no” comes from babies turning away from a spoon offering food. To say “yes” when “no” does not feel like an option would require swallowing something that might not smell right. Checking in with what is happening in the head/neck area can keep the palm-to-palm work nuanced in order to untangle and identify any old unresolved clashes that contaminate the lover dances. When tension in the head/neck area is identified, lovers are more likely to discover what they want to refuse. Maybe one lover is simply full of delicious sensation and wants a momentary break for some digestion or maybe there is a need to stop the couples dance for a longer period in order for one partner to reorganize internal family system dynamics.

When the neck area is free to twist, the spine may continue the spiraling movement on down to the tailbone. KMP names anal twisting as an indulgent rhythm. When we operate from our social engagement biology, we feel safe to express preferences and energy moves freely between head and tail. These are important energy paths for dance/movement therapists to observe because they play such an important role in sexual expression. When twisting rhythms can flow from tailbone to head and back, movement can be flirty—coy in a playfully manipulative manner.

Three types of palm-to-palm exploration that dance/movement therapists can offer include:

1. Patty Cake
2. Press
3. Play (exploring leading and following).

## Patty Cake

Exploration with patty-cake-type moves highlights connections and disconnections. Patty cake can playfully satisfy urges for the first fighting rhythm, which is the snapping/biting rhythm. It can also stir deep unresolved wishes within child Parts to snap/bite as a way of claiming differentiation. When child Parts wish to reenact KMP fighting tension flow rhythms, they may wish their partner to tolerate piercing stares, verbal jabs, comments that hit below the belt with the kind of understanding that an ideal parent would have. The therapist can help those clients resource Core Self to bring curiosity and compassion to their child-Part urges whether their partner understands or not.

When a lover does not respond as an ideal parent would, individuals have the opportunity to distinguish between the vulnerability felt in the parent/child relationship and the vulnerability of the lover relationship. The caregiver/child relationship evolved on an uneven playing field. Lover relationships work best on an even playing field—two well-working internal family system dances. Resolving lover mismatches often requires grieving unresolved dances that occurred within the family of origin, growing supportive dances within the internal family system, and accepting the limited but lovely possibilities that exist within the lover dance. For lovers, playful competition can make sexual tension more powerful.

When the exploration of patty cake moves brings up urges to use the snapping/biting tension flow rhythm, the palm-to-palm position allows partners to contain both a partner's snapping/biting urges and their own child-Parts who feel hurt by a lover's desire to "bite." The circle of the arms and the shape of the hands—which get aimed forward like baseball players with catcher's mitts—feel protective. In this position, each person is more able to field the energy exchange should either person have a Part hijack their internal system. If their lover should act upon an urge that manifests in a snapping/biting rhythm, each person can field the energy that is thrown their way—remaining in Core Self—and not allow that energy to affect their feeling state.

When clients use words like, "You made me angry," or "You hurt me," the therapist is more capable of helping them recognize their responsibility for taking care of their own internal system once they have discovered the hands-like-catchers-mitts positioning. In this shape, partners are more likely to remain in their social engagement system biology and out of fight/flight because they feel protected but ready for play. Fight/flight is designed to prevent thought before action. Using patty-cake dances to help each person develop this shape that elicits a playful but protected feeling allows each person to stay out of fight/flight and thus maintain executive functioning. In this shape, partners are more likely to thoughtfully manage internal systems without doing what is meant by the expression *taking it personally*.

## Press

With palms together, couples have an opportunity to experiment with degrees of pressure. This experimentation helps lovers discover what kinds of touch they like. Some people find light pressure tickly in a way that feels unpleasant and they seek

harder pressure. If one partner prefers light touch and the other has difficulty with light touch, a distance/pursuer dance often begins. Having this distress manifested and identified through the palm-to-palm dance, allows internal family system needs to be addressed.

When pressing palm-to-palm, leg support becomes an issue. If people lean their weight forward to create a firmer push, they force their partners to support them. Leaning into a lover creates vulnerability for both partners should the lover not be able to support their partner. Therapists can help couples discover that a foot forward and a foot back creates a more stable base and couples can experience the earth as the ultimate support.

When the experimentation parameters suggest a planting of the feet, the distancer/pursuer dance is prevented and alternate hand pressing may begin. These wrestling moves suggest negotiation—a little more of this and less of that. The moves created by alternate hand presses can manifest another early-infant KMP fighting rhythm—strain/release. The earliest KMP rhythms seem the most important to explore with couples because—as attachment theorists point out—much of attachment patterning is established within the first 3 years (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969; Schore, 1999). As with snapping/biting, strain/release may trigger Parts of the system, depending on each partner's history with strain/release moves. Therapists can help couples use the more complicated alternate hand press moves to recognize internal system dances for which it is best to use the earth as the supportive wrestling partner. Couples can be guided toward moves such as lying on the floor side by side and playfully pushing their backs into the earth until they scoot in the direction of their heads. Perhaps they could race in this fashion. When the underdeveloped strain/release rhythm becomes more developed, the couple can begin to play with alternate hand press dances again to find the supportive versions of strain/release that can enliven romantic engagement.

## Play

With palms together, couples can explore dances that involve leading—initiating movement in space that leads the connected palms—and following. While one person is initiating movement, the other can explore the feeling of flowing with the movement—allowing their hands to be moved in space. The partner in the follower role can also explore resisting the led movement with playful strain/release—staying connected but making the movement difficult by following in a more resistant way. The child-Parts might enjoy a playful game that suggests the internal monologue, “I will start being agreeable. I will stop being agreeable. I will start again.”

In the beginning of exploration of play—with focus on leading and following—the dance/movement therapist may suggest a designation of leadership to last for an agreed upon amount of time. At some point, couples may enjoy and benefit from shifting leadership nonverbally using movement cues. Shifting of leadership is further explored below in the section about moving the metaphor.

When any of the palm-to-palm possibilities stir up old unresolved family of origin clashes, indulgent rhythms can aid the internal family systems. Grounded

rocking and swaying movements can help install the earth as the ultimate mother for grown-up internal systems. Returning to the earth to rock and sway can be an option as part of grieving the old unsatisfied urges for more ideal caregiver response.

When distress accompanies the emergence of fighting rhythms in couples work, dance/movement therapists can help redirect those fighting rhythms toward the earth. In KMP work with children, dance/movement therapists offer suggestions for expressions of fighting rhythms that appreciate the socially appropriate use of those rhythms. With couples, redirected expression of biting/snapping, strain/release, and starting/stopping can happen with movements such as stomping (improvisational tap dancing), kneeling to drum on the floor or wallowing around like a horse in a field. When one of the partners needs to explore fighting rhythms in relationship with the earth, the other partner in the couple can move into the role of witness and then take a turn exploring what was stirred in their bodies while in the witness role.

In any of the palm-to-palm explorations, urges to control a partner can surface. Sometimes playful shifting to alternate hand pushing eases that pressure but other times it ignites it. Alternate hand pressing does allow more negotiation of the space and pressure but if earlier rhythms have not found functional expression, relational interactions can elicit the nervous system responses designed for life-threatening danger. Shifting toward work with the earth allows the developmental movement regressions that may be required for internal family systems dances that train more mature social engagement system functioning. When the urge for rhythms that stem from old, unsatisfied relational patterns show up in the palm-to-palm work, grief for the loss of those dances can make space for new ones that are more appropriate for the lover dance.

## Case Example

What follows is an account of one of the author's use of a palm-to-palm movement exploration with a couple. The names are changed for confidentiality. The couple came into therapy because Lee struggled with depression and Chris felt frightened by Lee's struggle. While Lee was the identified one in need of help, Lee suspected that Chris could also use some therapeutic expression. Chris's mom had died when Chris was young and Chris's dad had never grieved or talked to Chris about it.

When the couple first experimented with press, palm-to-palm, Chris (who was seen as the supportive partner) leaned way into Lee and Lee looked surprised, but was able to match the move and provide support. When Chris returned to an upright position, Lee made a slow, strained attempt to lean into Chris. The strain did not have the quality of the fighting rhythm strain/release. In fact, Lee looked afraid that there would be a release in the form of a fall.

The therapist paused the work to check in, curious about Chris's comfort with giving Lee so much weight to support. The therapist wondered if Lee had sensed that Chris would have been able to swing a foot forward and plant it to find stability should Lee not have been able to maintain support of Chris. Lee nodded in the affirmative. It was Chris's ability to support the whole couple that allowed the big



initial lean of Chris into Lee to be playful. Had Lee not been able to hold the weight, they both sensed that Chris would find a kind of self-support.

The therapist then asked if the two of them sensed the same possibility of self-support in Lee. There was silence. Lee said that Chris' support was so ever-present that the idea of Chris not providing support seemed unimaginable and yet Lee's leaning into Chris had been accompanied by a great deal of bound tension flow.

The therapist educated the couple a bit on the value of a stance that allows personal support when partners explore increasing the pressure palm-to-palm. Variations in pressure can be experimented with in a freer way knowing everyone will be fine even if one member were to lose their footing. Then the therapist invited Lee to practice personal support with a stance that places one foot out in front of the other. Both Chris and Lee were encouraged to find the kind of quick, bouncy sense of freedom in the hip, knee and leg joints that creates a supple sucking up of the earth's support—both a movement that uses the sucking rhythm and a kind of springiness that might later become a jump.

The therapist invited the couple to use the dance that had happened when the press became about support. The therapist suggested the couple could try Lee leaning into Chris again and then Chris releasing support enough to encourage Lee to put a foot forward to find personal support. With each subsequent experimentation, Lee became more playful about the strain/release rhythm that was developing between them when Lee leaned into Chris and when Chris released the connection and Lee connected with the earth using the personally stable stance where one foot was forward from the other. There were smiles and laughs.

When the therapist invited Chris and Lee to switch the dance and to have Lee do the release of support that would result in Chris swinging a foot forward to find personal stability, Lee started moving in a playfully percussive way that offered a biting rhythm. Lee teased Chris, jovially threatening to do something unexpected. Chris's body tensed. Chris did not seem able to join Lee in this biting dance.

The therapist asked Chris about the tension, sensing that the mismatch of the rhythms of Lee and Chris in this moment might feel to Chris like the mismatch of the family during the confusing time after the death of Chris's mom when no one would speak of her death or display any grief. When the therapist wondered out loud about this, both Chris and Lee relaxed. Chris seemed freed and expressed sadness through facial expression and breath. Despite the fact that Lee had sensed this sadness existed, the actual expression of the sadness seemed to surprise Lee in the same way that Chris's initially giving of weight had been surprising.

The therapist suggested that the couple could each focus now on the feel of their feet on the ground and the support of the earth underneath them. Chris and Lee both seemed to appreciate the reminder that, with the supple flexing of ankles and knees and hips, they could surrender a little to the earth and also push the earth away, thereby feeling their grown-up ability to support themselves using the support of the earth. After the palm-to-palm work, the couple reported feeling amazingly good. They were intrigued by how the palm-to-palm work had helped them connect to unexpressed energy they had sensed in their relationship but not ever been able to explore.

Over time, the palm-to-palm work evolved to explore many variations of patty cake, press and play. As Chris woke up child Parts that had been in shut-down due to the trauma surrounding Chris's mother's death, there were moves such as palm-to-palm pushes into the earth that processed the hyperarousal that naturally follows when we move parts out of shut-down (Levine, 1997). Lee chose to mirror those pushes at Chris's side and through those explorations found more social engagement system functioning in life in general—less shut-down (depression). Lee found access to creative internal Parts long dormant, which delighted Chris.

## Moving the Metaphor

In this, the second of the two applications offered by the authors, the reader will notice how the proposed framework can be applied in a variety of different ways given the style and focus of the dance/movement therapist. This particular application focuses on the creation of movement tasks for the couple to explore based on the material they are bringing up in the session.

Moving a metaphor in a couples dance/movement session serves to:

- distance the subject matter (content) from the couple thus making the content more manageable.
- give the couple a “task” to explore, which can make explicit the way they might typically work together.
- allow the couple to explore the one “fight” they may be having over and over again in various forms (Herbine-Blank et al., 2016).

For the dance/movement therapist engaging in couples work, she/he needs to be aware of multiple happenings simultaneously, beginning with the use of basic observation skills—such as eye contact, facing/proximity and touch. Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) is an observational tool that offers much more refined and detailed scrutiny of movement than people tend to use during basic examination of others. LMA breaks down human movement into its basic components of Body, Effort, Space and Shape affording the therapist the opportunity to observe movement in much greater detail. *Body* answers the question of ‘what is moving?’, *Effort* answers the question of ‘how is it moving?’, *Space* answers the question of ‘where is it moving?’ and *Shape* answers the question of ‘why is it moving?’ Each category is broken down into many subcategories that are too exhaustive for the span of this paper, but the authors encourage the readers to continue exploring how LMA and KMP theories are applicable in the couples therapy setting. As mentioned earlier, KMP was developed from the framework set forth by LMA and further elaborates on the Effort and Shape aspects of the Laban taxonomy, with emphasis placed on infant development and the parent-infant dyad relationship (Kestenberg Amighi et al., 1999).

The dance/movement therapist can use LMA observations even during verbal exchange, with emphasis placed on *how* individuals interact. Looking at the Effort life of the clients serves as a means of observing subtle shifts associated with feeling/emotional states. LMA calls these energetic shifts *flow fluctuations*. Laban

Effort theory proposes that feelings/emotions are most observable within the Effort motion factor of flow. According to LMA, flow exists on a continuum between flow that is binding/more restrictive and flow that is freeing/more released. One difference between Laban's Effort flow and Kestenberg's tension flow rhythms is that Laban quite simply observed flow on a continuum of freeing to binding flow and Kestenberg saw how the child utilized flow in a patterned way to get certain developmental needs met. Warren Lamb, student of Laban, assisted Judith Kestenberg to understand she was in fact observing flow (Kestenberg Amighi et al., 1999).

Of course it is extremely important for the clinician to take the couple's cultural context into consideration so as to not impose his/her own beliefs and values onto the couple. Listening for what is distressing to the couple and how they handle/manage ruptures and repairs is critical to the culturally informed couples therapist. Additionally, the therapist should inquire about each individual's personal background regarding family of origin and intimate relationships. If they are a heterosexual couple, then an understanding of how men and women are viewed in their cultural context would be advisable. If they are of LGBTQ orientation, then understanding how this may impact their couple-hood from a familial and larger cultural context would be prudent. Listening to the couple and the dynamic that they bring into the session, rather than judging from the clinician's perspective of what a so-called healthy relationship looks like, should be ever-present in the therapist's mind.

## **Incorporation of couples Themes**

Themes the couple brings into the session can be explored in various non-verbal ways. The dance/movement therapist should feel free to use his/her own creative approach when developing movement tasks for the couple to explore, based on the presenting thematic material. What follows are suggestions of ways to conceptualize the use of DMT in couple's work. It is by no means an exhaustive list, nor should it be thought of as appropriate for every couple. The clinician is encouraged to use best practice when applying any of these techniques/tools in a session.

According to Johnson who traditionally uses more verbal therapy techniques, "Research shows that behaviors such as mirroring, attuned listening, eye contact, reaching out and tender touch lead to secure bonding and attachment in relationship, whether between parent and child, or between adults" (as cited in Herbine-Blank et al., 2016, p. 74). By bringing these into the couple's awareness at key points during a session—with awareness of the difference between the parent/child version of these behaviors and the lover/lover version—the dance/movement therapist can foster secure bonding between partners.

By slowing a couple down during their interactions and encouraging examination of one of the above behaviors—eye contact, reaching out and touch—much can be illuminated. *Are they really listening to one another? Can they verbally reflect back to the other what they hear? Do their bodies appear to be listening by the way they position themselves? Can they look at and really see each other? Do they ever reach*

*out and touch during the session?* These are simple, yet profoundly impactful aspects of the couple's interaction that the therapist can observe. These non-verbal relational skills can be explored in a session while the therapist tracks how each partner manages the task—being keenly aware of moments of dysregulation.

As with palm-to-palm experiments, Parts can be triggered by interactions involving eye contact, reaching out and touch. In infancy, if there was not the appropriate amount of matching and mismatching required for connection and therefore survival, these same connecting movements can trigger the adult partners' nervous system functioning that is designed for life-threatening danger. As a way of working with couples using these rich and potentially triggering movements, the dance/movement therapist can guide the couple to move the metaphor of their relational dynamic to foster a greater understanding of how their own Parts get in the way of what they are seeking to find in their partnership.

As dance/movement therapists devise moving metaphor tasks/interventions, they can seek guidance and support for their ideas through the use of Relationship Concepts in Movement Studies (Moore, 2012, p. 155). Carol-Lynne Moore—certified movement analyst—outlines movement concepts based on: Laban Movement Analysis, Movement Pattern Analysis by Warren Lamb and Relationship Play by Veronica Sherborne. Areas addressed in Relational Concepts in Movement Studies are: touch styles, holding techniques, sharing weight, shaping of bodies, positioning/facing, just to name a few. These relationship concepts seemed originally to be used as choreographic tools and creative movement teaching tools for children. The authors have discovered ways in which these simple relational concepts can also be applied in the context of couple's therapy sessions serving to both inspire the dance/movement therapist and keep the experimentation process playful—therefore more likely to encourage Social Engagement System functioning.

The following is a list of possible movement interventions, based on the above mentioned Relationship Concepts in Movement Studies, along with an associated relationship theme that many couples find themselves struggling to work through:

1. Following/leading/contrasting-addresses power differentials (*dominant/submissive*). *Who speaks up? How do they negotiate? Can they explore opposition without distress?* The palm-to-palm exercises create opportunities to explore opposition but dance/movement therapists who notice dominance/submission issues with a couple could move the metaphor as well. For instance, the therapist could invite one person to be the leader, either demonstrating ways to move around the room and interact with objects, furniture, etc. or verbally instructing their partner who is invited into the role of follower.
2. Mirroring-addresses attunement. Different from the above example of leading/following, the mirroring activity is explored with the couple facing one another. While one partner begins to explore movement, the other partner faces them and creates the same movement in their body (like a mirror). This face-to-face experience directly reflects back to the partner that they are being seen. It also provides the mirroring partner with an opportunity to feel what it might be like to be in the other's experience, holding them in the non-verbal

- realm in a non-judgemental manner. *The therapist observes if the couple can mirror each other and respectfully be with their partner non-verbally? Can each partner—with the support of the therapist—notice Parts that get triggered?*
3. Moving from point A to point B—using Effort dynamics with regard to Space, Weight and Time—*addresses functionality*. The couple explores different ways of getting a task accomplished. *Can the individual in the couplehood tolerate the Effort dynamic differences within their partner? If one person tends to move through tasks slowly and the other tends to move through tasks with more speed, are these differences respected and managed with creativity and maybe humor? If not, are Parts of either of the individuals being triggered?* The therapist can assist the client(s) in understanding what beliefs these Parts hold regarding such movement.
  4. Support—various holding techniques that explore each partner’s ability to shape to the other partner’s body physically—*addresses interdependence/trust/differentiation*. *How does the couple honor each other’s needs without feeling responsibility for those needs? When the bodies mold together, are the individuals able to hold their personal space without merging? Can they connect without feeling suffocated and disconnect without feeling abandoned? Can they name the limits to which they can offer support without feeling guilty when/if their limits do not fulfill their lover’s wishes?*
  5. Exploration of Shape Qualities—*addresses emotional expression*. LMA describes Shape qualities as a plasticity within the torso. When these qualities are present, an increase in the emotionality of expressions is often observed and felt. Facilitation through Shape qualities can increase the depth of the emotional connection between lovers. This goes hand in hand with the holding techniques described above. *Is the person able to soften their body so as to invite their partner to shape with them in relation? Can each partner maintain a sense of themselves so as not to merge energies?*
  6. Kinespheric relation—*addresses boundaries and expression of needs*. *How are they present with each other?* The therapist could have the couple explore various ways to sit in relationship to each other or have the couple stand at a distance from each other and use a version of the childhood game “red-light, green-light.” Red-light, green-light can challenge a couple to explore expression of needs regarding boundaries. Requesting or denying advancement of the partner can illuminate unspoken issues between the couple.

These suggestions are ways to conceptualize how to bring a theme into a moving metaphor task for the couple to explore. After sharing the movement task with the couple the therapist can observe/witness the way the couple:

- (1) approaches the moving metaphor task.
- (2) explores the moving metaphor.
- (3) processes the exploration after the task.

While observing the couple as they explore the moving metaphor task, the therapist can track significant moments to return to and inquire more about during

verbal processing. Moments of stuck-ness, disconnection, raising of an emotional state, or authentic connection can be illuminated while the therapist encourages the couple to get curious about what the moment held for them and their partner during the exploration. This experience and whatever new learnings arose, can then be related back to the way the couple may typically interact, giving special attention to Parts of them that may have been triggered during the task. Using movement to discover how to be in relationship differently would be the next step for the couple to explore. How can they take this new learning out of the therapy office and into their everyday experience?

### Case Example

An example of such an intervention was made when one of the authors witnessed the theme of *support* between a couple in her office. The man in the couple said he would like to support his wife. The wife had been craving support but because of her history of avoidant insecure attachment, she was asking for something she both craved and feared she would not get. Parts of her were trying to protect her from being disappointed with the support she may not get, as was true in childhood. *What if she couldn't receive the support she so desperately needed and wanted?* The therapist witnessed the husband reach out his hand to his lover during this portion of the session and state "I'm here to support you." She did not seem to notice he had done this. So the therapist asked her if she could notice his outstretched hand. The therapist asked if they would agree to do an experiment. They both agreed. The therapist suggested that the husband slowly repeat his words and his gesture while looking at his wife. The therapist suggested that the wife consider responding to this gesture by reaching out for her husband's hand while verbally agreeing to try and receive his support. Bound flow was apparent in her body—indicating her withdrawal—possibly due to Parts getting activated. The wife clearly struggled with this challenge and was able to share what Parts of her were activated when attempting this simple yet relationally challenging movement task.

After the verbal processing, the challenge for her was to receive the support. To help her regulate ventral vagal nerve functioning in order to remain in her social engagement system functioning, she was coached to proceed slowly and with a great deal of body awareness. She was encouraged to separate out her Core Self from her Parts which remained avoidantly insecure. As she was able to observe the Parts that were awakening from a more shut-down place, she tolerated the fight/flight that followed by holding on to the more observational position of her Core Self. Then, she was able to observe the existence of this opportunity to receive support from her husband. Because she was able to stay in her Core Self, observing the journey of the more shut-down Parts into fight/flight and then into a tentative agreement with Core Self to be in a space of curiosity—Social Engagement System Functioning—she could play with the possibility of support from him. With this transformation of avoidant Parts into a state where they were able to lean into Core Self, she felt less fear that he would duplicate her primary parent/child dynamic. This was a challenge given the evolution of this couple's relationship. Because the

husband struggled with consistency and follow through, a Part of him would often behave in ways that replicated her primary relationship, thus triggering a Part of her to disconnect with anger. This Part of him would unconsciously attempt to activate her mothering role to meet his unresolved childhood needs.

This moving metaphor task was meant to illuminate the way that support shows up in their couple-hood—how each gives/receives support. Moving the metaphor offered a way to directly process their experience in the moment. This task also served to extract the thematic meaning (support) out of the content that they could waste time on rehashing in the therapy hour. It pushed each of them to take a closer look at this theme and the best ways they could support themselves in the relationship, as well as support each other. They were able to see how their own histories and their own Parts were present during this moving metaphor of support. Each brought greater compassion towards their own Parts' struggle and increased clarity about their partner's intention.

## Summary

The authors propose a theoretical framework for couples dance therapy based on the science of polyvagal theory and its overlap with attachment theory. Ideally, couples relate out of their social engagement systems. However, the biology that facilitates social engagement system functioning can only be accessed when we feel an adequate sense of safety, which many individuals have not experienced due to insecurities developed during earlier attachment dances. The authors suggest that internal family systems therapy offers important ways that dance/movement therapists can recognize and process unresolved development dances such as those identified from observations based on the Kestenberg Movement Profile. When dance/movement therapists notice romantic partners having disruptions in their internal family systems, they can look for KMP rhythms to discover developmental dances that need repatterning. Using the movement observation lens of Laban Movement Analysis as well as other DMT resources combined with couples counseling theories used by more traditionally verbal therapists, dance/movement therapists can offer unique tools to help couples move through conflict and find more satisfaction.

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**Dee Wagner**

is a board-certified dance/movement therapist, a licensed professional counselor, writer, dance and drama teacher, director and choreographer. For twenty-one years and continuing, she has worked with individuals, couples, families and groups at the Link Counseling Center in Atlanta. She has presented workshops for many organizations including The American Dance Therapy Association, The Expressive Therapies Summit, The Licensed Professional Counselors Association of Georgia, and Converge17: The International Coach Federation Conference. Dee has two articles in peer-reviewed professional journals: Polyvagal Theory and Peekaboo: How the therapeutic pas de deux heals attachment trauma in Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy and The Big Dance: My love affair with the science of nervous system functioning in Voices: The Art and Science of Psychotherapy (Journal of the American Academy of Psychotherapists). Counseling Today published her articles Polyvagal Theory in Practice, and Using New Nervous System Science to Help Clients with their Digital Dating. The online mindfulness magazine Elephant Journal has published seven of Dee's articles about various popular applications of polyvagal theory. Asana International Yoga Journal published Yoga and Yogurt: What Mindful People need to Know about the Vagus Nerve, and Movement and Stillness: A Dance Therapist's Kryia. A podcast interview of Dee discussing polyvagal theory is available at TheThoughtfulCounselor.com. She is co-creator of a book/workbook that helps with the emotional rollercoaster of digital dating, Naked Online: A DoZen Ways to Grow from Internet Dating.

**Stacey McGinn Hurst, LCPC, BC-DMT, GL-CMA**

owns and operates Mind Body Connections LLC, a private practice in the western suburbs of Chicago. She works with adolescents, adults and couples on a variety of mental health issues using her skills as a dance/movement therapist and counselor with additional training in the Internal Family Systems model. She also enjoys participating in and leading women's circles in the community and within Estuary Center for Living & Healing Arts where her practice is located. In addition to her private client work, Stacey has taught in the Dept. of Creative Arts Therapies at Columbia College Chicago since 1998 in both the Dance/Movement Therapy program and the Graduate Laban Certificate Movement Analysis Program. She presents annually at the American Dance Therapy Association national conference and enjoys a guest lecturer/presenter position in the Tanter Dance Therapy Program in the Czech Republic. On a national level, Stacey served on the board of directors for the American Dance Therapy Association for 8 years as both central region member-at-large and secretary. Currently she is on the R-DMT panel of the Dance Movement Therapy Certification Board. Giving back to the DMT community is something Stacey is passionate about, which is one reason for co-authoring this article with Dee Wagner. She has thoroughly enjoyed collaborating with Dee to crystallize a theoretical framework for couples dance/movement therapy. She hopes it can be a guide post for other dance/movement therapists as they embark on embodied couples work.