Breaking Free: One Adolescent Woman's Recovery from Dating Violence Through Creative Dance

Indrani Margolin¹

Published online: 4 November 2019
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Abstract

Dating violence against adolescent women can devastate their health and long-term quality of life. While high school programs have been developed to address this worldwide epidemic, somatic antidotes are still not widely utilized despite evidence from the psychophysiology of relational violence trauma that there is an inextricable link between the body and mind and effective recovery requires a holistic approach. Creative dance, derived from dance education, can support female adolescent trauma victims of dating violence to reconnect with physical, mental, and emotional experiences that were severed during traumatic exposure. This qualitative arts-based case study narratively explores one adolescent woman's experience of creative dance as an intervention for survivors of dating violent relationships. Conceptually, I draw from dance education, Authentic Movement, and Amber Gray's Restorative Movement Psychotherapy. A feminist lens is utilized in an attempt to address calls to action from previous DMT researchers to tackle oppressive structural forces and increase activism in dance/movement therapy. Findings show that inner-directed dance can therapeutically facilitate restoration after trauma by recovering the social engagement system and decision-making capacity, reducing social isolation, and increasing bodily self-awareness, and self-esteem.

Keywords Violence against women · Dating violence against adolescent women · Dance/movement therapy · Case study · Trauma · Teen dating violence · Creative dance

✉ Indrani Margolin
indrani.margolin@unbc.ca

¹ School of Social Work, University of Northern British Columbia in Vancouver at Langara, 100 West 49th Ave., A167c, Vancouver, BC V5Y 2Z6, Canada

Introduction

Dating violence against adolescent women (DVAAW) can devastate their health, well-being and long-term quality of life. While high school programs have been developed to address this worldwide epidemic, somatic antidotes are still not widely utilized despite the inextricable link between the body and mind in recovery processes. Creative dance, derived from dance education, can be applied to support trauma victims of teen dating violence to reconnect with physical, mental, and emotional experiences that were severed during traumatic exposure. This inner-directed movement helps young women move out of flight/fight responses, fear and isolation states, reorganize their perception and capacity to manage danger, recognize their social supports, and experience joy and rest. In this qualitative case study, I narratively explore one adolescent woman's journey through dating violence from a creative dance program I developed for my PhD dissertation in Holistic and Aesthetic Education. Conceptually, I draw from dance education, Authentic Movement, and two Restorative Movement Psychotherapy courses for survivors of trauma facilitated by Amber Gray, a dance/movement therapist. These courses were part of the West Coast dance/movement therapy masters program in Vancouver, BC. I also draw from my interdisciplinary background in Clinical Social Work, including strength-based practice, and facilitation of young women's groups as an Adolescent and Family Counsellor. Furthermore, Caldwell and Leighton (2016) illustrated that the field of DMT needs to consider the goals of feminism, which include women's freedom from violence and oppression. They highlighted that if we do not reflect on and include tackling oppressive patriarchal structural forces, we can potentially harm clients. In an effort to promote feminism and DMT activism, I answer their call and include a feminist lens and feminist language in this article. The paper begins with a background of the severity of male inflicted violence against females in teen dating heterosexual relationships from a feminist lens, provide methodological context, and then focus on the therapeutic effects that creative dance had for Shirley (self-chosen pseudonym) as she endured dating violence.

Learning to form and sustain romantic relationships serves to socialize and prepare adolescents for healthy adult relationships (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007) and dating is one of the most important rites of passage among peers in this period of development (approximately 71% of youth in Canada report being in a relationship by the age 15; Mahoney, 2010, p. 6). However, a significant health problem associated with adolescent dating is that young women are violently victimized physically and/or sexually by male dating partners in heterosexual relationships at alarming prevalence rates; 20–30% of adolescent girls were the victims of dating physical and/or sexual violence across North America for the past two decades (Kyle, 1991; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001; Vagi, Olsen, Basile, & Vivolo-Kantor, 2015). Furthermore, gendered dating violent crimes against girls are severely underreported (Hlavka, 2014). The large majority of young women do not recognize their experience as rape or sexual assault, even though they are the victims of incidents that meet legal criteria for sexual assault (Senn, 2010). Being young and being female combined pose as the two greatest risk factors of victimization by a male

dating partner in Canada (Senn, 2010; Sinha, 2013); thus, young women in heterosexual relationships need strategies to detect danger and cope with the repercussions of dating violence.

Traditional heteronormative family, school, and popular media discourses normalize male dominance and aggression and female submissiveness and vulnerability (Hlavka, 2014). With regard to the family, Simon and Furman (2010) found that boys mirror fathers' actions by employing verbal attacks or physical aggression when fathers coerce partners as a way to achieve their goals. Girls, on the other hand, mirror a heightened sensitivity, from their mothers, to avoid negative conflict. This coping style sets a stage for young women to avoid taking action in the face of increasingly severe violence.

From childhood fairytales, girls learn to expect they will be saved by a prince and their love can and should tame monsters (Rosen & Bezold, 1996). Adolescent women often hold themselves and their peers responsible for not doing enough to resist male sexual harassment and rape while adolescent men are excused as they chillingly have learned that they are entitled to maneuver intimate sexual encounters until they receive a 'yes' (Sanday, 1990; Hlavka, 2014). Victims of dating violence not only experience trauma from the incident but also a secondary trauma of internalizing shame and self-blame for its occurrence (Henry & Zeytinoglu, 2012). Media violence additionally influences adolescents' perceptions of gendered relations. Popular music videos often portray women as men's sexual property through women's intensely sexually objectifying clothing and submissive performance roles while depicting strong, assertive men that demand control and have the money and power to enforce it (Henry & Zeytinoglu, 2012). Peers and popular culture still impress upon females that conforming to their male partner's expectations provide the means to maintain their social power as desirable.

Young women experience tremendous pressure to date in high school from both male and female peers and their self-esteem often becomes tied to finding and maintaining a boyfriend (Sanders, 2003). In the face of learning that being female in relationships means sacrificing one's own desires for others from 9 years old (Gilligan, 2006), for example, girls feel they are expected to listen more and talk less among male peers (Mulford & Giordano, 2008), girls internalize this notion and perform in self-denying ways around boys. These detrimental socialization processes serve to perpetuate the construction of hegemonic masculine identities among teen boys and teach teen girls to objectify their own bodies to appease male sexual desire. Springer (1997) highlighted that in adolescence, young women explore their new embodied sense of power, which includes joy, desire, and sexuality, through multiple expressions of dress, hairstyle, makeup, jewelry, and attitude. She warned, however, that when girls objectify their own bodies, they identify with and internalize sociocultural notions of women as commodities. Adolescent women need the mentorship and social support to explore their power from within and each other.

Young women enter the dating arena with heightened insecurities and increased body dissatisfaction (Slater & Tigger, 2016) due to the dramatic physical and psychological changes of puberty (Yuan, 2010), unclear boundaries and expectations concerning respect and sex, and internalized attitudes about normative gender relations. Across culture, class, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexual orientation, the

adolescent female body is the subject of intense societal interest, and scrutiny, which often diminishes adolescent women's self-esteem and well-being in general (Frost & McKelvie, 2004). Girls born into bodies that fit idealized notions of feminine beauty, often form a self-image wholly determined by their appearance because they internalize being primarily viewed as sex objects (Pipher, 1994). Shirley, who will be the focus of this inquiry, reportedly experienced this precarious dependency on peer praise to feel worthy.

Hegemonic patriarchal societal structures confine adolescents to normative gender relations, especially ones that advance traditional male dominance and female submission (Reed, Raj, Miller, & Silverman, 2010). These relations create a context in which young women are at risk for victimization of violence. Lack of female mentorship additionally contributes to girls entering dating relationships unequipped with necessary assertion skills (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). When an insecure male partner externalizes his own fears and anger in controlling and manipulative ways, his female partner often brushes off his possession. She perceives it as intense love (Sanders, 2003) through desire for her time and attention because her self-worth becomes tightly woven around being partnered with a male. Thus, according to Springer (1997), building an awareness of and relating to the body is central for adolescent women to detect and avoid violent dating relationships.

Van der Kolk (2014) illustrated that trauma involves not being seen, mirrored, or taken into account. He explained that when a victim cannot escape or fight the assault of physical, emotional or sexual violence, that is, her social engagement system and older limbic brain cannot return her to physical safety, they shut down and the most primitive reptilian brain activates to preserve her life by entering a freeze state to expend as little energy as possible. To further protect the self, consciousness severs the connection between physical experience and perceptual, emotional or mental experience when the sensations become too unbearable to tolerate (Gray, 2015). In this process, trauma survivors shut down brain areas that transmit the visceral sensations and emotions that accompany their terror to protect themselves during the traumatic exposure and afterward from invasive flashbacks (Van der Kolk, 2014). The tragic aspect of this compartmentalization is that all emotions and sensations are registered in those same brain regions. Thus, trauma survivors have great difficulty sensing and feeling, especially pleasurable feelings, in their everyday lives after traumatic exposure.

Immediate impacts for girls who are victims of male teen dating violence include extreme elevated stress levels on a daily basis and fearing for their lives (Hutchins & Sinha, 2013). Other outcomes include disruption of daily activities, sleep deprivation, and for 26%, the need to take medication to cope (Hutchins & Sinha, 2013), high rates of depression, substance use, school problems, low social support, and suicidal ideation/attempts (Banyard & Cross, 2008). In addition, poor quality of life, poor self-concept (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002), low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction (Ackard, Eisenberg, & Meumakr-Sztainer, 2007), future revictimization (Sanders, 2003), disordered eating, fears of pregnancy from forced sex, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Ullman and Brecklin, 2002) are common symptoms for female dating violence victims.

Conceptualizing the Gender-Based Nature of Violence Against Adolescent Women

Teen dating violence (TDV) is defined as psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse within the dating relationship of an adolescent aged 13–19 regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation (Noonan & Charles, 2009). It can encompass a range of abusive behaviours from verbal and emotional abuse to sexual violence, physical assaults and homicides. Adolescent dating violence is often represented in the literature as a gender-neutral phenomenon (Cutler-Wilson & Richmond, 2011). Reed et al. (2010) highlighted, however, that “... leading public health institutions frame [violence against women] unambiguously as rooted in the social construction of being female, both in the United States and most all other nations (i.e. deprivation of social and economic status and consequent power within sexual relationships, families, and communities,” (p. 349). Canadian women between 12 and 17 years of age are eight times more likely than their male counterparts to be victims of violence (Sinha, 2013). Young men perpetrate more severe and more physical violence more often that require young women to receive emergency medical attention for sustained injuries, including rape and other forms of sexual assault. This occurs for girls at a rate twice as likely as boys (Hutchins & Sinha, 2013). Moreover, young women suffer much graver psychological consequences and perpetuate far lesser significant forms of physical violence (Ackard et al., 2007). Reported motivations also vary between male and female adolescents (Mulford & Giordano, 2008). While young men report a need for control and dominance as a primary motivating factor in enacting violence, young women report self-defense (O’keefe, 1997) and counteractive responses to controlling and abusive behavior (Lopez, Chesney-Lind, & Foley, 2012).

Despite the United Nations’ (1993) and World Health Organization’s (2013) recognition that this is a gender-based issue, the naming of this phenomenon has moved to a gender neutral framework, i.e. intimate-partner violence (IPV) from *woman abuse* or *battering of women by men* (Senn, 2010) and *teen dating violence (TDV)*. The way we name problems shapes the lens through which we see and thus not only allows for the conception of a phenomenon, but points to its causes, risk factors, and solutions. To play a part in tackling oppressive patriarchal structural forces and reduce the risk of harm to clients, I rename this phenomenon to more accurately identify the gender identity of victims of perpetrators within heterosexual teen dating violence. Inspired by Reed et al. (2010) and Senn’s (2010) illumination of the need for a gender-based framework, I coin and incorporate the terms *Dating Violence Against Adolescent Women By Adolescent Men (DVAABWAM)* and *Dating Violence Against Adolescent Women (DVAAW)*, to appropriately name, define and “...acknowledge the multiplicative impact of gender-power abuses that occur across context of women and girls’ lives... within intimate relationships,” (Reed et al. 2010, p. 350).

I additionally employ the term *bodyself* to advocate for body equity (Caldwell & Leighton, 2016) in the human system. Speaking and writing the body as *bodyself* serves to enliven the body as a living entity rather than an object (Margolin, 2014). Core identification of self often aligns with intellectual rationale modes of thinking that occur in the brain rather than the intuitive thinking that occurs at a cellular level

throughout the body. My bodyself endeavour seeks to invite, encourage, and validate whole body and being consciousness so that girls can remain psychologically aware of their sense of physical and emotional safety and prevent the emotional dislodging that occurs when girls are not attuned to their body's warning signs.

Most community and school-based prevention models do not include somatic oriented interventions (Spinazzola, Rhodes, Emerson, Earle, & Monroe, 2011) despite the clear evidence that relational and violent trauma exposure causes intense dysregulation in bodily processes and healing requires intervention with a bodymind component. From the psychophysiology of trauma, survivors cannot attain a sense of safety and mastery in their bodies without it (Chang & Leventhal, 2008; Van Der Kolk, 2014). Being disconnected from sensations and feelings disrupts the very foundation of self-awareness and identity. Dance/movement therapists (Chang & Leventhal, 2008; Gray, 2015; Koch, 2008; Springer, 1997; Stromsted, 2001; Whitehouse, 1999) as well as pioneers who work with trauma (Van der Kolk 2014) and battered women (Walker 1979) have extensively revealed the potency of working directly with the body-mind connection and its potential for sensory and emotional integration, moving out of a physical and psychic immobilized state, and internalizing a positive self-concept over time. Dance/movement therapy (DMT) is repeatedly and successfully employed with rape victims (Chang & Leventhal, 2008). Adolescent women need to re-establish body-based agency after they have experienced direct bodily violence (Springer, 1997) and creative dance offers a path to this without having to discuss the problem at the outset (Kierr, 2011). The creative movement group process is ideal when working with victims of sexual abuse as it reduces the characteristic social isolation of victimized girls (Chang & Leventhal, 2008); provides body-based agency through kinaesthetic empathy with others (Koch, 2008); and facilitates spontaneity and unity while maintaining identity (Margolin, 2014; Mills & Daniluk, 2002). I next exemplify how creative dance can assist a young woman through the traumatic terrain of living through male inflicted violence even when she has not quite recognized she is in such a relationship.

Methodology

Framed within a qualitative arts-based research design, I concentrate exclusively on one young woman's narrative that emerged from a larger explorative inquiry who was enduring DVAAW throughout the inquiry. To provide a context of the larger study, I worked with four girls in a group setting, aged 16–18, in a Canadian urban public high school after receiving university and public school board research ethics board approval. I chose to work within the participants' high school because a strengths-based social work perspective suggests that working in naturally occurring community settings foster client empowerment where individuals feel most comfortable and more readily draw from their inner and environmental resources (Saleebey, 2006). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. I developed an after-school movement program and invited participation at one urban school from three grade 10–12 dance classes. We met for 3 months, 1 day per week, in the dance studio of their school. My research

question was: “In what ways does creative dance affect adolescent women’s bodyself relationships with themselves?” Data included investigator field notes, participant journal entries, video-recorded movement and selected audio-recorded transcribed discussions that focused on participants’ dance processes during a debriefing after each dance session. These debriefings (including a beginning check-in and an ending check-out) were guided by semi structured interview questions. I employed Performative Inquiry (PI) as a methodology, which views the creative act as transformative because an essential aspect of self becomes temporarily visible and available for reflection and conscious integration (Fels, 2008; Phelan, 1993). I also incorporated poetic transcription (Glesne, 1999) for this case study. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six step thematic analysis was implemented to repeatedly read, find patterns, code interesting features, locate data extracts and eventually create themes from the data. I viewed participants’ video recorded dance data to deepen my understanding of what the movement meant to Shirley against the backdrop of being victimized in her everyday life. Member-checking was conducted. A feature of arts-based qualitative data analysis is that literature is often intertwined with data findings to reveal the contextual significance and create a more cohesive representation of the inquiry. Rather than maintaining a distinction between my findings and a discussion of the findings relevant to the literature, I interlaced the literature with my findings to highlight their significance. My background as a dancer and a strength-based group counsellor for young women’s groups was foundational to create a safe, inclusive environment.

The strengths perspective is grounded in the importance of language in creating our socially constructed realities. Through re-viewing and renaming deficits, deficiencies, and diagnostic labels with capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes, social work practitioners open up a possibility and opportunity for clients to follow that thinking and change their paradigm to an expanded more confident view of self (Saleebey, 2006). Strength-based practice brings’ individual, familial and community strengths, resources, abilities, and accomplishments into clear view to provide a balanced perspective of the whole person for both counsellor and client and shifts attention away from emphasizing problems, deficits, and labels (Saleebey, 2006). Recognizing resilience and resistance in the face of oppression and trauma along with exhuming inner and outer resources as social workers continually assess risk and protective factors are key to strength-based social work practice. The Canadian Social work code of ethics maintains as its first Value, upholding the inherent worth and dignity of all people we serve (CASW, 2005). In practice, this means working with integrity, accountability, confidentiality, and alongside clients to expand their opportunities for more positive relationships and higher aspirations.

I theoretically draw from Gray’s (2015/2016) interdisciplinary Restorative Movement Psychotherapy (RMP) approach throughout this paper. RMP is rooted in multiple theoretical influences which include: somatic psychology, dance/movement therapy, developmental psychology, counseling psychology, polyvagal theory/social engagement system, Continuum Movement, Body-Mind Centering, The Moving Cycle, Contemplative Practice, and Vodou. A core principle of polyvagal informed DMT (Gray, 2017) is “the human right to embody,” (p. 44). Gray elucidated that the application of this principle rests in recognizing our bio-intelligent resources that

equip us to survive “dangerous (mobilization with fear) and life threatening (immobilization with fear, or terror) events,” (p. 44). Lasting psychological and emotional state shifts cannot occur without physiological state shifts (Gray, 2016) because of the intertwined nature of the body, mind, and spirit. While these imprints often create traumatization or PTSD, they become central to healing trauma in the body and mind and thus, are referred to as therapeutic resources. Belongingness is intertwined with our embodiedness through the vagus nerve, our complex social engagement system (Porges 2008). This core principle is central to working with trauma survivors who necessarily dissociated during traumatic exposure in order to protect their lives and now need a path to relocate themselves back in their bodies. Gray (2016) emphasized that we restore responsiveness in non flight/fight states, and builds upon Kelly McGonigal’s pause and plan response. Gray focuses on a process through pathways of engagement: breath, spine, and heart. She (2016) highlighted that the breath is a bio-rhythmic regulator and a primary portal for embodiment and compassion. To relocate the self in the body after trauma, she integrates a process of tracking sensation (the foundation for affect; Caldwell, 2002), finding a baseline, making small movement shifts, and then coming back to the baseline as a form of rest. She also integrates Body Mind Centering concepts of yield, push, reach and pull (Cohen, Nelson, & Smith, 2012).

Creative Dance

Creative dance or movement involves perpetually attending, without interpretive or critical thought, to feeling, sensations, and desires as they spontaneously manifest in bodily movement. When the mover remains receptive to the presence within her body she yields to her inner consciousness that arises in the form of images, sensations, feelings or visions (Margolin, 2014). With the understanding that self-doubt, fear, and condemnation can distract consciousness from creative attunement, I guided participants with a caring and accepting tone throughout their movement processes to attend to and come back to their breath, sensational impulses, feelings, and playful exploration when negative self-talk interrupted or overwhelmed them. Laban’s (1963) structural qualities of movement form a foundation from which much of dance education was built. I incorporated simple structural guidelines with my participants such as imagine water flowing through and around you, imagine moving as wire or through clay to provide a container and way into the creative movement process (Hawkins, 1991). The embodied creative process, with its symbolic expression, can sufficiently invite and safely contain feelings while integrating personal narratives and illuminating people’s connections to the external world (Margolin, 2013). This expression of self, invites others to open themselves, and holds great potential for rich and layered responses, in group format. Caring for the body and trusting the self form the philosophical basis for creative dance.

I also chose to conduct this research in a group format because my experience with therapeutic group work highlights the rich learning and therapeutic potential of providing a microcosm of members’ real worlds. Group members are encouraged to experiment with novel behaviour, give and receive honest feedback, increase self

and other knowledge (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2018) and receive peer validation to reduce intense feelings of isolation and loneliness that plagues young people. As a facilitator, group leadership skills that I diligently aspire to included compassionate and empathetic presence, active listening, reflecting, linking member experiences, summarizing, modelling, and providing a positive ending to the group process as I collected meaningful in depth data. Coming from an intersectional and liberatory feminist lens, I welcomed diverse value orientations so members felt comfortable sharing their world views as they made meaning of their dance experiences. The group format, along with my counselling skills and conscientious effort to apply my leadership to create an emotional climate of compassion and inclusivity allowed participants to learn a new and potentially vulnerable form of dance expression with their peers in a supportive and enjoyable manner and feel inspired to reflect on it together.

I had a transformative agenda in that I wanted to work alongside young women to help them move out of isolation and oppression. Given that adolescent women struggle with internalized notions about normative gender relations, which include contradictions about how to be in relation with other, and pubertal changes I hoped this method would serve to open up a space to explore their feelings as it did for me in my life. To ask girls to view themselves as the primary authority on their thinking, feeling, and dancing (as I did here) requires a new act of faith; faith in themselves as knowledge bearers and faith in the process of learning through experience. According to Shirley, it was “a concept not embodied since childhood.” To mentally prepare for this new way of learning and being, I guided meditations (Sen, 2016) each week to invite receptivity to the young women’s inner landscapes of creativity.

Box Dance

In the sixth workshop, after a meditation and physical warm-up, I facilitated a two-part intervention (based on Hawkins, 1991) that provided participants an opportunity to work with relational boundaries through the use of imagined physical boundaries. After demonstrating, I asked participants to find their own place in the room (a large open dance studio of their school with mirrors covered) and imagine they were in an imaginary box with their eyes closed that restricted their movement to a standing kneeling position with their arms out to the sides and slightly bent elbows. I guided them to begin on the floor kneeling with torso and head resting on their knees and then to explore the parameters of the box with different parts of their bodies. I suggested, “Try to feel where your body wants to go rather than following a predetermined idea of how you want your body to look. There is no rush. You have all the time in the world.” I intermittently reminded them to breathe, and attend to bodily sensations throughout. This lasted 15 min.

After a period of adjusting to the confinement I guided them to find a way to break free from their box where they could roam, extend, run, and jump freely. I guided them to explore pathways and levels and acknowledge others through gesture or movement. I suggested, “If you feel preoccupied with what you look like, stop

and breathe. Tell yourself, “What I look like does not matter. What matters is what I feel and where I want to go.” This lasted 30 min.

I employed this box dance, because adolescent girls are wrought with boundary dilemmas. Girls and women struggle to create space to think and dwell in ourselves because we are socialized to cater to others, and attune ourselves to their needs to the point of tuning out our own (Gilligan, 2006). One function of a boundary is to block. Though I was unaware of Shirley’s victimization at the time, my rationale for imposing an imaginary boundary was to block out other internalized restrictive notions about femininity. This effort was my attempt to provide a mentoring voice of trust in participants’ capacity to attune to their own bodily wisdom. This bodyself awareness could then be relied upon as a source of knowledge and guidance from which to make decisions and act: first, in the supportive and playful atmosphere of our dance research and then, to take into their broader social context where it mattered most. Additionally, strength-based social work, along with feminist ethical research practice is premised on collaboration and mutuality in relationships. Power (to the best of one’s ability) is consciously shared with one another rather than used over another.

It was important for me to foster Shirley’s sense of relative safety (a concept introduced by Gray, 2001) by working to invite her to take authority in her own self-directed dancing and make meaning of the experiences afterwards in reflection. In the process, I deeply attended and attuned as both a witness (Stromsted, 2001) without judgement or interpretation during the movement and as a compassionate listener, and ally in her recognition of her insight and strengths during group reflections. My efforts in presence allowed Shirley to be the expert and, I believe, furthered cognitive and emotional connections for restoration.

Findings

Shirley’s History and Context

Shirley grew up in a small town with her two older siblings and birth parents. Her parents divorced when she was nine and she moved to a big city with her older brother and father just before eighth grade. She was very close to her mother and missed her Buddhist influence, guidance, and friendship after she moved. From 5 to 13 years of age, dance was a major part of Shirley’s life. She danced ballet and jazz in a competitive studio. Shirley attended 6 schools in 5 years moving to an alternative school in grade 10. She socialized with older peers as she did when she was younger with her older siblings. She had a series of tumultuous romantic relationships that began in grade 11 with a boy who cheated on her, a second that dealt drugs that resulted in a serious stab wound, a third that committed suicide after they broke up, and a fourth that was emotionally, physically and sexually abusive at the time this dance intervention took place. After her second boyfriend survived, Shirley decided to return to high school after dropping out. She focused on learning

rather than bending the rules and enjoyed scholastic achievement for the first time. The suicide of one ex-boyfriend and its publicity in her school traumatized her for months. She struggled with invading thoughts of self-blame and loss. The extent of abuse by her last boyfriend was disclosed to me 3 years after my program was complete.

Shirley presented as a caring insightful young woman. She dressed conservatively and walked with a concaved spine. She often crossed her arms in front of her, which appeared as if she were trying to cover or hide herself. Shirley's physical attributes, of which her tall, thin body and long blonde hair were most prominent, naturally fit within the hegemonic thin ideal of female physical beauty perpetuated by popular culture. I wondered about how this embodiment impacted how she navigated the double-edged sword of being in a body that reflects what female peers strive for and male peers strive to be with. Through our dance work, Shirley explained how she wished her breasts and her hair did not draw so much unwanted sexual attention. Part way through, she dyed her hair from blonde to brown as a test to see if this would relieve her from unwanted male attention and it did. Shirley reported, "Girls stare me down less and guys lustfully gawk at my breasts less." Shirley additionally noticed both male and female peers gossiped less and took less interest in her affairs in general. She additionally noted that teachers spent more time speaking with her about her ideas and opinions. She felt acknowledged for her personality and intellect. Her grades dramatically improved. Shirley highlighted, "I just feel calmer and more confident with brown hair."

Restorative Movement Psychotherapy Perspective: In the Box Observations and Responses

Gray (2015) indicated that variations in the developmental movement patterns of kinesphere, yield, and push can reveal signposts of emotional and psychological states. I apply Gray's (2012) Restorative Movement Psychotherapy (RMP) concepts of kinesphere (the space bubble around the body), yield (the most efficient relationship to gravity where we relinquish muscle effort) and push (to expand bodily presence in space; Gray, 2015) to analyze shifts in Shirley's movements. At first, Shirley's movements appeared rigid and one-dimensional. She only rocked. She reportedly felt "stuck and cramped in the box." Over the duration of her movement, I saw Shirley settle into a relationship with the space around her and her movement range expand. She became receptive to a smaller kinesphere, and her perspective expanded. Shirley moved from perceiving an obstacle to perceiving a possibility. She said, "I learned that even with a really small space you can do a lot of different things. I was able to turn over, do different rolls, sit in unique positions, and bring my legs up strangely. I felt very calm too because I had to stay low to the ground like a baby in a crib cuz I was all curled up." After settling in, Shirley felt comforted by the box boundary because it encouraged a state of yield. Gray (2015) highlighted that because this bodily state refers to our weight in gravity; it necessarily refers to our mental presence. According to Gray (2015), yield involves a physiological capacity to trust a larger body of support which in turn provides a foundation to

yield emotionally and psychologically in social engagement. This is psychically and physically significant for Shirley because she was in a violent dating relationship and could not yield in her personal life.

Therapist and client self-care is also integral to Gray's (2015) approach in RMP. Yield, in particular, is employed to reduce physical and emotional pain. Gray also applies yield as a construct to the therapeutic relationship. As a therapist, one must be comfortable and surrender to whole body, mind, and heart listening in order to be receptive and engaged simultaneously. My own 25 years meditation and visioning practice has awoken an awareness of the profound embodied and energetic connection humans share. Thus, I deeply resonate with Gray's application of yield to lean into the therapeutic encounter and be fully present to hear the bodily and emotional stories within and beneath the uttered words of our cherished clients. I believe this heightened awareness and presence in this research process supported the excavation of the young womens' meanings, insights, and inner strengths through group reflections after each sequence of creative dance.

In RMP, "The [capacity to] push is related psychically to our ability to be fully present, to define our sense of self, and to establish boundaries. It is often a useful and effective way to increase a client's sense of strength and choice," (Gray, 2015, p. 186). I observed an increase in Shirley's pushing movements, which lay a foundation to begin to reach physically and psychically for emotional support in relationships. Where at first Shirley timidly explored the inner parameters of the box, over time she appeared to press harder, as her hands or feet periodically shook as she pushed with concerted effort. Shirley returned the following week excited that she performed in a male only dance circle at a party for the first time as the first female to do so. This example of extending herself in her social world to receive support from her peers sequentially followed practicing push the previous week. Chang and Leventhal (2008) emphasized that it is through small steps of progressive action that a woman in a violent relationship can lift herself out of feelings of helplessness and increase her self-worth, thus all change should be acknowledged. I distinctly remember feeling a sense of exhilaration and victory as Shirley recounted this event. I validated and complimented her for listening to and following through on her bodily wisdom in an intimidating social context. Other group members also expressed amazement with regard to her courage. As a counsellor, I knew it exemplified a significant step in placing her own needs and desires above others.

RMP and Feminist Perspective: Out of the Box Observations and Responses

I felt free when I got out of the box. I was not confined. I started moving the way I wanted to feel- natural, slow, and calm. I remembered that is how I used to dance. I realized I used to go all out. Lyrical was a side of me. I felt secure and happy with myself. I didn't want anything about me to be different. Wow! (Shirley)

Objectives of a restorative process include, "Restoration of previous held beliefs, positively experienced feeling states, and the ability to experience pleasure in the body," (Gray, 2015, p. 170). The act of dancing slowly and calmly allowed Shirley

to enter a consciousness of being slow and calm. In this state, she made two significant changes. First, Shirley recognized her ballet side as the way others see her—controlled and uptight- and Jungle as the way she sees herself—wild and passionate. Previously, she explained, these two sides were separate, however, after breaking out of the confines of the box in her dance, she harmonized these fragmented aspects together allowing the paradox of control and abandon—to exist simultaneously within her through the frame of lyrical dance. This realization is noteworthy because Shirley moved out of the characteristic polarized thinking, which often marks victimized womens' cognition. In narrative therapy, externalizing and finding relevant metaphors to name and contain life problems are important therapeutic tools to assist clients to cognitively distance themselves and discover/create an inner voice: a stronger empowering voice that can begin to dialogue with the problem voice and expand self-identification beyond the problem (Harms & Pierce, 2011). By practicing inner-directed dance and then naming distinct aspects of her social identity with relevant dance terms from her embodied memory of her previous dance life, Shirley unearthed a former contented, and integrated image of herself, which she was now relying on to think, choose, and act with her peers. Second, in our group, she voiced out loud and recognized that she does not feel 'secure' and 'happy' as she once did—a difficult task for a young woman experiencing DVAAW. Working with the creative process invokes what Sen (2016) referred to as our spiritual umbilical cord. When this organizing integrating power is invited into the treatment arena, "...symbolic and metaphorical representations of a literal reality too painful to bear, remember, or recite" are created (Gray, 2015, p. 182). Shirley drew upon a cultural and social resource from her past (her former dance life) to return to a body-based sense of safety.

I next guided participants to write forgiveness letters to themselves about something they did not feel proud of in their lives (Barnhardt & O'Quinn, 2003). Shirley brought me her journal the following week. A disturbing passage read: "I forgive you for chasing after [Jordan] when he was hitting you. You did not realize what was going on. It was not your fault. I forgive you." I confidentially asked Shirley about this incident. She told me that he was simply drugged and it had not occurred before or after that event. Saddened and troubled, I let Shirley know I was concerned for her safety. She let me know she had multiple friends in abusive relationships and knew that her relationship looked very different. When asked what steps she took to heal from that night, she replied that she informed her family and close friends so it would not remain secret. I commended Shirley for this. With my feminist counsellor hat on, I disclosed that I had a boyfriend who was emotionally abusive but I did not listen to my friends nor leave until I was ready so I would not advise her to stay or leave the relationship because that is her decision. I hoped, however, this disclosure, would serve to both validate and plant a seed for critical self-reflection at a later point. She stated she could relate and cried when she thought about leaving him. She abruptly asked for our conversation to end there.

I respected Shirley's decision and recognized the trust she imparted by disclosing this knowledge. From a feminist clinical perspective, it was important I showed her that I believed in her capacity to choose her own direction (as discussed in Kierr, 2011). However, I found myself thinking about Shirley's safety throughout the rest

of the project. I found ways to remind Shirley I was here if she needed any support or resources when we were alone. Her responses reassured me that she understood but did not want to further discuss it. While challenging, I took comfort in knowing that participating in this group provided Shirley necessary social and developmental resources (Southwick, Bonnano, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014), through a relatively safe and enjoyable body-based means of experience, that she later confirmed she was not receiving elsewhere in her life.

Three years after my data collection was complete I contacted Shirley to clarify some details of autobiographical stories she gave me. She disclosed to me the severity of the violence in her dating relationship during our dance work. I learned that she was punched by her partner and suffered a concussion. After that incident, her boyfriend became emotionally and sexually abusive. The following poetic transcription is a direct quotation from Shirley. I formatted the layout of the text and repeated some of her statements to draw attention to them (as suggested by Glesne 1999).

Immobilized

He yelled so hard I would forget my point.

If I disagreed, he told me I was stupid.
When I cried he told me I was stupid.
He shut me down.
I stopped bringing up anything.
I felt stupid and confused and angry.

I would explode every 2 months because I could not express myself.
He did not care how I felt. He took me for granted.
After eight months I completely went into his life.
Over time, I stopped talking to my friends. I stopped talking to my mom.

He had two personalities: aggressive and loving-sweet. He switched between them in a flash. Whenever I thought about leaving I couldn't.
The good parts were too good.

I changed into this other person.
I stopped liking myself.
He cheated on me.

He made all the major decisions.
I let it happen because I thought I liked a guy in control ~with confidence.
I did not realize what that meant to me.
I did not realize what that meant to him.

I lost myself.

I still feel ashamed.

I still doubt myself.

He controlled when and how we had sex.

He hurt me with sex.

Numb. Detached from my body.

So this is how it feels to be raped.

No one knew. I kept it all hidden.

Relationships with abusive dating partners become negotiations between self-sacrifice and meeting normative gendered expectations of being female (Gilligan, 2006). Above, Shirley disclosed, “He made all the major decisions...I thought I liked a guy in control-confident, protective.” Sanders’s (2003) seminal work on DVAAW revealed the seductive and abusive cycle within which young women can become entrapped and enmeshed. Shirley said, “Whenever I thought about leaving I couldn’t. The good parts were too good.” It begins with intense romance and charm but also includes controlling actions to isolate his partner. Shirley explained, “He had two personalities: aggressive and loving-sweet...I could not express myself...I...completely went into his life.” Sanders elucidated that when a girl acquiesces to these unrealistic expectations, she unknowingly signals that she is willing to be controlled. She gives away her personal autonomy to an insecure, angry partner, who uses that power to dominate her. “Over time...I stopped talking to my mom.” The second, acute battering phase is marked by an abusive partner suddenly losing his temper and assaulting a girl physically and/or sexually. Shirley narrated, “He hurt me with sex.” A violent dating partner further uses his power to claim entitlement over his female partner’s body.

The courting and intense romance from the beginning phases of the relationship make the acute battering phase an utter shock because for the first time girls clearly see their partner’s insecurity, mistrust, poor self-esteem, and rage. In the third phase, Kindness and Contrition, the abusive partner becomes charming, remorseful, apologetic, and caring. These swinging boundary violations make it very difficult for a young woman in an abusive relationship to feel a defined sense of self. Shirley questioned if her love could and should endure her agony. She wondered whether she expected too much and became unsure of herself. Entrapped by the pressure to believe that girls cannot live without boyfriends and the notion that the job of feminine love is to tame monsters (Rosen & Bezold, 1996), Shirley explained, “I was just so desperate for a boyfriend. Being able to say I have one kept me there and then I fell in love and by then I could not get out.” Shirley felt trapped. She recounted:

My life at that time was such a box. I felt boxed in. There was no going outside. My life was mapped out daily. I could not break out. The box exercise relates to that because when we got out of the box we had to improvise movements. Everything was new. No pattern. Nothing preconceived.

The directive of finding movement within an imaginary confined box became a symbolic representation of Shirley's immobility. Shirley's experience of her life feeling trapped in a box also echoes one woman's experience in Chang and Leventhal's (2008) work where she thinks she should leave when her female partner verbally abuses her but her "feet are frozen" (p. 17). Creative movement promotes both activity and innovation, which can take the place of conditioned habits of immobilization and passivity. Chang and Leventhal highlighted that mobilizing is overwhelmingly difficult and even unimaginable for a victimized woman of violence because ingrained thought patterns of rigidity and self-degradation control her cognition. When she is encouraged to explore bodily movement, she recognizes her capacity to act.

Understanding How Creative Dance Can Help Mobilize an Immobilized Victim of DVAAW

The integral connection that exists between movement repertoire (physical motion) and affect range (emotions) is crucial. Because muscles contain and retain emotions and memories, expansion of movement repertoire inevitably work to release repressed feelings and to increase the range of feeling, as well as thought patterns and belief systems, a person is capable of experiencing (Gray, 2015, p. 181).

In the box, Shirley expanded her small movement range, which allowed for small shifts in her emotional awareness. This imagery enabled her to imaginatively, under her own control, enter a space of feeling and then cognize her psychosomatic immobility while simultaneously discovering small movement possibilities within that confinement. Shirley began to take small progressive steps. Breaking out of the box and moving as she desired, she found a dance metaphor to conceptually identify herself anew in lyrical where she felt calm and content with herself. Shirley played out the part in flesh and bone of a woman breaking out of a confined space: breaking out and moving after being immobilized for a long time. She heard her own voice and remembered the joy and empowerment of consciously inhabiting her own body and feeling her own being. This reportedly marked the beginning of Shirley mobilizing away from her violent boyfriend. Gray (2015) ascertained that working with the body with victims of emotional, physical and sexual violence becomes especially important because it allows for a remembrance and recovery of essential sequential developmental movements that may become interrupted or broken in the process of and result of traumatic events. This interruption severely impacts an individual's capacity to feel, especially positive affect. The imaginary box recovered for Shirley sequenced movement that eventually led to freeing herself from the torment of her abuser: first, in her imagination through the box dance and then in her real life by mustering the courage to separate from him years later. I asked Shirley if our dance work helped her cope with the abuse. She first said she was so unaware of what was happening that it could not have. She then stated:

Now that I have given it some thought it actually did help me. Those exercises were something that was so focused on the individual and it was something that you really had to create on your own and I really enjoyed that individuality of creating and acting completely on my own during a time when I was feeling like I was not an individual, instead I belonged to and was a part of my boyfriend. It was like a release from my other half, something that was completely me and no one else. Everything else in my life was related to my boyfriend but for those few minutes of personal movement I did not have to think about him or how my actions related to or affected him or how he would interpret it. It was a very personal few minutes of just me and not me in relation to him, actually me, my true self, someone who I was otherwise so out of touch with at the time. Once those sessions were over I would return to my life with him but in those classes and during the dances there was only me. So for the two and a half years that I was in that relationship I was more my individual self during those few times dancing than any other. (Letter from Shirley ~3 years after our workshop)

Shirley revealed that a clearly defined boundary of self was re-established within her somatic-psychic structure in the process of “creating and acting...[her] true self” because she was not entangled in her partner’s needs and desires (albeit for her physical, mental, and emotional survival). She was not choosing and adapting under the control and fear of his response (as she reportedly did outside the dance work) but out of her own sensations, volition, desires, and feelings.

The creative process and body-centered practice of inner-directed dance is an extremely useful therapeutic intervention to facilitate the restorative process for multiple reasons. Through the principle of active imagination (Jung, 1968) in motion the deep body-psyche connection causes feelings to ooze out before the conscious mind can censor feeling expressions (Whitehouse, 1999). Creative dance guides and gives form to ineffable and intangible feelings. This articulation of the bodyself facilitates important shifts for young women who have experienced trauma. When a girl realizes an unused, new quality of movement, she experiences a new feeling to parallel the new posture (Margolin, 2014). Not only did the imagery and visceral experience of the box and breaking out of it provide a metaphor for Shirley but our dance work also gave her “...an opportunity to shape positive experiences using her body...” (Gray, 2015, p. 81), which facilitated restoration of her emotional integrity.

Exploring use of space can challenge psychosocial distortions and provides a bridge to confront reality where necessary (Chang & Leventhal, 2008). Shirley’s break out of the box and subsequent expansive large movement across the room, acted as a movement metaphor, which led Shirley to cognitively expand and completely eradicate her abuser’s internalized voice that dominated her thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. She supplanted her oppressor’s voice with her own for the first time in a year. Schmais (1974) highlighted that, “changes often occur in movement before they occur in other areas” (p. 11). This provided a first step to Shirley reclaiming agency and personal power through “the one area over which a battered woman does have total control...her body,” (Walker, 1979, pp. 238–239).

A young woman living in abuse lives in terror but cannot express it. Giving form to her feelings and desires without words, in a creative therapeutic context, allows for safe expression. It is a step toward honouring her bodyself. This movement experience of listening to the bodyself offered Shirley the physical and emotional space to feel grounded, secure and worthy and provided a sense of cultural, social and developmental resilience (Southwick, et al., 2014). The simple rhythmically attuned movements fostered a re-emergence of Shirley's social engagement system after shutting down during traumatic exposure and her capacity to safely mirror and be mirrored by others was reactivated (Van der Kolk, 2014). With this, neuroception, that is the ability to evaluate relative danger and safety in the environment, returned (Porges, 2008). Shirley reportedly experienced emotional security through the profound relationships she developed with female peers in the dance work and myself (Margolin, 2013), which strengthened a growing capacity within her for adaptation. Having a social ecology of resilience (Southwick, et al. 2014), with its reciprocity of being truly seen and heard, is the most powerful protection against becoming overwhelmed by stress and trauma. Healing and mentoring relationships often provide trauma victims a first place to begin to heal (Gray, 2015). I noticed Shirley mentor a younger group member, who successfully turned her life around (alongside the duration of our group). I observed Shirley deeply care when she praised her for her resolve to change and imagine this encouraged Shirley to look at her own circumstance. The relational and dance components of this group turned out to be significant resources and blanketed Shirley enough to begin to mobilize out of social isolation, experience positive affect and self-esteem, reintegrate her body-psyche, and shift her self-concept as a powerless victim unable to mitigate the violence forced upon her to a person with the power to act upon and alter her world.

When I reconnected with Shirley 3 years after the study, I wondered aloud with her if I should have done more directly to assist her. I asked her if she thought providing her with more resource support or knowledge would have made a difference to her at the time. She stated, "No, I really do not think so, I knew you were there as a support but I really was not ready to hear anything about support or leaving the relationship." I believed she was not attempting to appease or care for me with her response. She retaught me the importance of upholding the social work value of client self-determination.

Violence works to control, isolate, and make young women feel unworthy of respect, care, and love (Howard & Wang, 2003). Due to this intense conditioning and breaking of their bodyself awareness and spirit, girls often take five to seven attempts to leave before they can permanently separate from their abusive partners (Sanders, 2003). Shirley's torment was virtually invisible to me during our dance work together. However, this is not surprising as compartmentalization is a common protective factor for victims enduring relational trauma. I now understand why it meant so much to her to have a space to be supported and nurtured in relationship—a space to be free of psychological and emotional degradation, domination, and betrayal by one who was supposed to love and care for her. This group was her one strong foundation (Southwick, et al., 2014) to usher realignment between her body, mind, and imagination. A seed was planted. Shirley wanted me

to know that it was because of what she received in our dance work that she first attempted to break free from the violence and abuse. One and a half years and several attempts after our dance work, she moved in with a supportive friend and within 7 days, once she knew she was safe, she mustered the courage to break up and break out of her abusive partner's hold over her.

It has been a year and a half since I got out.
I still feel ashamed and afraid he will find me.
I still have nightmares and insomnia. But,
I feel like I can move again. (poetic transcription, Glesne, 1999).

Years later, Shirley now works in a woman serving organization to support women dealing with violence in intimate relationships.

Conclusion

Physical, sexual, and psychological trauma deeply imprint on a person's somatic-psychic organization (Gray, 2001). This experience of violation remains until the repressed emotional content can be expressed (directly or indirectly through creative process), made meaning of and integrated into a person's Self narrative. This paper highlighted an example of how creative dance can provide a body-based anchor for adolescent women to return to and reclaim a sense of relative safety in their own bodies while enduring DVAAW. Findings showed that inner-directed dance can facilitate restoration after trauma by recovering the social engagement system and decision-making capacity, reducing social isolation, and increasing bodyself awareness, and self-esteem. Creative movement activities promote a reconnection with physical, mental, and emotional experiences that was severed during traumatic exposure. This restoration of neural pathways to the brain region that signals sensations and emotions not only enables re-access to positive affect but movement, such as the box exercise, that incorporate active imagination in motion, yield and push, mirroring and reflection assist greatly with reestablishing healthy relationship boundaries. Here a young woman can clearly sense, feel, and think; clearly distinguish between her own and other's needs; accurately recognize danger in relationships; and allow herself to be positively influenced by peers and mentors. Without this bodyself attentiveness, prevention programs remain insufficient as a long term strategy to support young women's relational development. I call for the inclusion of creative movement in existing high school prevention programs. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed," (King, 1963).

Acknowledgements I would like to thank the Vancouver Foundation for its grant support in this work. I would especially thank my participant, Shirley (pseudonym), for sharing her story so bravely and allowing me to write about it so others may be inspired and healed by it. I would also like to thank Dr. Jacqueline Holler for her editing assistance and my mentor, Mr. Tulshi Sen for his ceaseless inspiration in my academic success.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The Author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Research Involving Human Subjects This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

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Indrani Margolin is Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Northern British Columbia in Vancouver at Langara College. In 2014 she led the launch of the Vancouver-based UNBC Bachelor of Social Work program. Indrani serves on the Leadership Team of Northern FIRE: Feminist Institute for Research & Evaluation/Women North Network. Her research & teaching interests include: Girls' and Women's Wellness, Therapeutic Practice, Arts-Based Research, Social Work Field Education, Student and Social Worker Wellness, and Creative Consciousness. She received an award for her doctoral dissertation, *Beyond Words: Girls' Bodyselves*, with the Canadian Association for the Study of Women and Education, a larger study upon which the current case study was based. Recent projects include: dating violent against adolescent women (DVAAW) and inner-directed dance; women's narratives in precarious employment and mental health; self-care, reflection and resiliency in social work education with Mahavakyam Meditation (MM); and self-re/discovery, MM, authentic goal setting and post-traumatic growth. Of note, she teaches one of the only social work undergraduate courses in Canada entirely dedicated to spirituality in social work.