

13. Sing your way home: Designing a creative group intervention in the women's prison as a Dance Movement Therapist in Singapore.

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Abstract

This chapter introduces to the reader the role of a group facilitator in using creative techniques adapted from Dance Movement Therapy and Playback Theatre with female prisoners in South-East Asia. The author takes on a reflective stance starting with her personal stories and widening the conversation of working with women before their release from prison. The chapter discusses the following question in practice- how does the group facilitator support women to feel safe, to attune to their body and to express themselves in a time limited therapeutic group? Descriptions of group activities, facilitator's observations and reflections are included in the chapter to expound on the themes of loss, belonging and hope arise from this creative project.

The song we sang

Before I speak about the work, I want to tell you a personal story to highlight my motivation in writing this chapter. I come from a working-class family of Chinese and Malay ethnic origins in Singapore. Both of my grandmothers were born in China and Malaysia respectively. As young girls, one was subjected to feet binding practice and the other was sold as a child slave. They were displaced from their families at a young age due to war. They experienced immense hardships from poverty to family violence. One developed mental health difficulties in her adulthood that resulted in her having to spend a long period of time away from her own children.

I was close to my paternal grandmother who was very prudent with her money. She knew the importance of education for girls as she was not given one. She was adamant that her granddaughter should have an education and she paid for my school fees. She nicknamed me the 'female scholar' as I was the first female in my family to graduate with a degree and I know that she was proud of me. There is a Chinese saying 饮水思源 (yin shui si yuan), which literally translated it means 'when one drinks

water not to forget the source'. In other words, to urge younger generations to remember the labour of our ancestors. Because of the lived experience of my grandmothers, I felt strongly about providing a space for women's voices to be heard and to be empowered in my work.

My paternal grandmother sadly passed away in September 2020. Because of the travel restrictions due to the pandemic, I could not be by her side before she died. My memory goes back to when I was very young, when my grandmother would sing me a lullaby and rock me to sleep in a home-made hammock that hangs down from the ceiling. I was tucked safely in this hammock made out of a large coloured fabric joined by two safety pins and a metal spring together. This lullaby was the only song my grandmother had sung to me. I wondered if her own mother had sung the same song to her when she was young. Although I am not able to see my grandmother again, she has given me a song to remember her.

Sharing a song is a powerful gift you can give to someone when they are separate from their families and friends. This song, called *Sing Your Way Home*, became a popular song I have taught the women in the prison. To my knowledge, this is a children's song familiar to many who learnt it at school. Although I shared other songs with the women, this particular song stood out. Perhaps the lyrics of this song resonated with the women as they were missing their families. This song represents the unspoken wish the women had for one another as they anticipated their release from prison.

*Sing your way home at the close of the day.
Sing your way home; drive the shadows away.
Smile every mile, for wherever you roam
It will brighten your road, it will lighten your load
If you sing your way home.*

(Verses from Sing your way home)

Introducing the creative project

The year after my graduation from Goldsmiths, University of London, I was working at a family centre in Singapore offering Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) in the community. When the invitation came to provide a bespoke programme for the women's prison, I agreed readily as I wanted to know how the knowledge I acquired in the United Kingdom could be adapted to a women's prison in Asia. In this project, other than DMT, I included additional creative resources in the group work, that lean on my skills as a playback theatre practitioner.

The main features of the group work were dance, experiential and dramatising personal stories with the aims of building self-confidence and supporting the women's transition back to the community. Communications took place between colleagues from the family centre and the prison management to organise the logistics of the groupwork. With the help of two colleagues from the family centre, I facilitated several groups of pre-release women who received a total of twelve hours of psychological intervention over a four-week cycle. All names in this chapter have been changed to protect individual identities and consent for writing about this work has been given by the relevant authority. For this creative project, I incorporated two creative disciplines in the group work which I am qualified to work in namely, DMT and Playback Theatre. DMT uses dance and movement to support the integration of body and mind within a psychological framework. Playback theatre is a non-scripted and improvised drama based on the personal stories of participants. In this chapter, I will discuss the question in practice; that is, how does the group facilitator support women to feel safe, to attune to their body and to express themselves in a time limited therapeutic group? I will use observations, reflections and a description of the group process to illustrate the themes of the work.

Prior to designing the group work, I was given basic information about the women; name, age, index offence and release date. They were of different ethnic backgrounds and their ages ranged from late teens to late fifties. Most of them were in prison for drug related offences and a few had offended previously. The women were selected by the prison management and grouped according to their release dates. Unlike other work I had carried out in a family centre, this was a unique experience stepping into

the women's prison and offering a psychological intervention rooted in arts, therapy and theatrical expression. After communications with the prison management, I brought in my own props for the group work which consisted of cloths, music and art materials. I imagined feeling lost without my props as these were 'barang saya' (from Malay language translate 'my things') which formed part of my professional identity. I can see now that my 'barang' provided an ice breaker in my initial encounters with the women.

Establishing a sense of safety and self-care in the group context

I began the group with some apprehension as to how much I could offer with such a time limited intervention. Safety came to mind and I adapted my understanding of group therapy by introducing the therapeutic principles of boundaries and consistency in the sessions. I demarcated the beginning and the ending of the session with a predictable structure. I was given only basic information about the women and no way to find out about their relationship with each other in the prison. In hindsight, an assessment with the women would have been useful to learn about their needs before matching them in their groups. As my contact with each group of women was limited, I had to find a therapeutic stance that I felt comfortable to take on, which included emotional holding and containment for the participants. Hence, I started with asking the women to share their hopes and fears they might have in attending such a group together.

I then introduced a group contract and discussed expectations and goal setting with the women. I explained to the group that being an external facilitator who only has access to the prison while running these sessions, I would like to hear how they were coping in the prison. I emphasised that the group space belonged to the group and it was designed to be a safe and confidential space. However, I added a safeguarding clause that I would pass on information to the management if they disclosed plans to hurt themselves or others. I explained that confidentiality meant our conversations would stay in the group space and urged them not to share with others when they

returned to their cells. I observed the responses of the women were rather quiet and they were probably unsure of how to use this group space at the beginning.

Part of the group work was about supporting the women to develop self-awareness and metaphorically to sing their way back to the source of their creativity. I wanted to introduce creativity and movement at the beginning. Psychoanalyst, Winnicott (1971) spoke about the importance of play and creativity which supports the understanding of self (63). I introduced games to get the women moving and build cooperation. These dramatic games such as Charlie's Angel, Zip Zap Zop and Earthquake (Fox 2010) served as ice-breakers for the group. The group's alliance began to form as we became immersed in the participation of these games. These energisers were fun and eased the women's anxieties of participation. Self-disclosure circle was a useful activity to build rapport as we began to find out about each other's likes and dislikes in the group.

Language was an important factor contributing to the safety of the group. Given the diversity of the participants, other than English, I included the use of the women's preferred languages (Mandarin Putonghua and Bahasa Malay) in the sessions. My two colleagues provided invaluable support in building the group's trust. I carried out the group facilitation in English and my colleagues provided the translation as and when required. Whenever possible, I would group the participants into their preferred language to have smaller group conversations facilitated by each of my colleagues. I watched the participants become animated in their bodies as they spoke in their native languages, which perhaps was a way of them connecting back to their own ancestral source. As each session progressed, I observed them gaining more confidence relating to us.

While I was carrying out this work, I sought supervision from an experienced DMT supervisor to reflect on my experiences as a group facilitator. Not wanting to infantilise the participants I needed to reflect on my unconscious bias. I held compassion for the women and at the same time, I worried about the challenges that awaited them in the society after their release. I reflected on the complexity of emotions and the transference I picked up from the therapeutic work. My colleagues and I were in touch

with feelings of sadness and anger in our debriefing. There seemed to be a parallel process that was happening as I was feeling disempowered in my professional work life; unbearable feelings were at play in the transference and countertransference. I was also carrying feelings of 'impotence' in my role and oscillating between 'feeling stuck' and 'feeling mobilised'. In hindsight, I recognised these were countertransference responses we picked up from the therapeutic work and I now wish there was adequate supervision offered to us while we were working on this project. In the absence of group supervision, it was important our team was able to find other ways of self-care and support through spirituality, meditations and shared values in order not to lose sight of our collective vision to support these women.

Building connections through dance and movements

Prior to working in the prison, I did not know how the participants of Asian backgrounds would respond to dance experiential work. The word 'dance' brought up some confusion for them. I observed their initial reactions as if I could read their minds 'are we allowed to dance in the prison?' or 'I am not a dancer' and 'I don't know how to move'. I adopted a Chacian structure (Levy 2015) for the dance experiential and I took the opportunity to address their reservations by reassuring them during the verbal check in. I stressed the dance experiential was not a performance and no one would be judged on their dance. As a DMT, I was constantly attuning to the many different cues from the women to get some feedback on the group process. Siegel (1984) spoke about observing the entire person including their posture, breathing, tone and the rhythm of their voice to give you an indication of their needs. She suggested that theme arises when one engages in the dance.

At the start of the dance experiential, I introduced breathing exercises to support their physical grounding. I used visualisation before warming up the body parts such as stretching arms and limbs outwardly in different directions. The facilitated warm up then developed into a mirroring activity of a movement and a gesture, rotating the leadership in the group where each participant took turn to lead in the dance improvisation. The warm up exercises and dance was accompanied by contemporary

acific music soundtrack (Vaka 1997). The musical choice was a deliberate one to support the women to freely associate their movements with the music unfamiliar to them. This type of percussion music provided the impetus in the group for the women to dance together. The role of mirroring supported the development of empathy and the sense of connection within the group. After the dance experiential, we sat down and reflected on our experience. The women generally enjoyed moving with one another. Some experienced an instant relief from the preoccupations they had arrived with, as they reported physical pains (headache or stomach pain) dissipating after the dance. I was convinced that the women found a physical release in their body from the dance experiential. Moving supported the regulation of their feelings and enhanced their somatic awareness. Below is a vignette to illustrate a group participant's experience.

As soon as the music began, the smiles appeared on their faces. Each participant took a turn to lead and follow one another. Their bodies began to soften as they moved into the space around the room. They were offering eye contact, offering open gestures and mirroring back to one another. They swayed to the rhythms and waved their hands holding bright and colourful fabrics, and some even dressed up in them. The atmosphere seemed light and joyful. Afterwards, Aysha shared this: 'In here, the officer calls me by the number 'on my attire, but after dancing, I remember who I am. My name is Aysha'. Aysha went on to say 'I feel free when I dance, I am relaxed and I do not have the headache anymore'.

During the dance experientials, props such as scarfs, cloths of different colours and textures were available to provide the group the opportunities to move with a prop and to form connections with others. The props seemed to be a favourite among the women as they found themselves dressing up with the cloths. After the dance, the women often spoke about the contrast of their dancing when they were moving with these coloured cloths having forgotten momentarily that they were wearing prison attire. Using scarves or coloured cloths gave the women permission to show off their personality in the dance. The women explored different ways to dress themselves up; wearing a headscarf or as a skirt or dancing along with the cloth. They were twirling, flicking, folding or following their body impulses spontaneously dancing with others.

I observed the marked difference in the women's bodies as they moved confidently along the sagittal plane, advancing and retreating within the group space, sometimes

as if we were on the runway show. Different people took 'the spotlight' to show off their new outfit and sashayed to the music while the rest of the group cheered on like supportive fans. It was moving to witness the women in this 'dress up dance'; and to see the exhilaration and the joy on their faces as they swayed along with the music. Now reflecting back, I connect to the theme of loss of personal identity these women experienced within the institution. Perhaps dancing with the colourful fabrics helped the women to reclaim their femininity.

For this creative programme, I wanted to encourage the use of spontaneity in their body in order to increase personal awareness. For instance, apart from the dance experientials, I facilitated structured activities to move in pairs, borrowing ideas from Anne Bogart's viewpoints and effort theories from Laban Movement Analysis. I demonstrated some of the movement postures, for instance, exploring how to move in relation to another person. We worked with still images or sculptures and we also moved our body in different directions and levels. I would get the women to move in pairs to show oppositional movement such as strong and light weight or free and bound flow from Laban's effort theory (Newlove & Dalby 2004). I sometimes added in the challenge of allowing the pairs to pick a few of their movement signatures and to perform in front of the group. Some spoke about developing confidence in sharing their movement and having fun in the process. Reflecting back, perhaps I could have provided more time to allow the quieter members of the group to speak in order to gauge how they were integrating their experiences in the group.

Deepening group awareness with personal stories told in action

One of the aims of the group was to support the women's transition as part of their release. I asked them to share their thoughts and feelings as they approached their release date. Some were open in their sharing and spoke about mixed feelings of excitement to see their children and families, but also of nervousness about securing work as an ex-offender. I could see they were troubled by this anticipated transition. With the earlier cohorts, I provided some skills training for the women such as setting goals before their release. On reflection, I felt there were stories waiting to be told based on the drawings the women created during our reflection time together. Hence,

I wanted to provide a space for deeper conversations to take place. I introduced a timeline activity to encourage the women to share significant events that happened in their lives. Some chose to speak about the offence and some went on to reminisce about their childhood.

Back to the mission of empowering the women to tell their stories, I introduced a drama element in the group work. I am a practitioner of Playback Theatre which is a form of improvised theatre based on personal stories. Playback Theatre is practised across the world and as a theatre form it has its own traces in education, community and commercial sectors. Rowe (2007) stated that Playback provides the opportunity for silent stories to be told and he argues for Playback Theatre to be seen as a social intervention. I believe in the power of Playback Theatre to provide the vehicle of transformation in my community. Jonathan Fox, the co-founder of Playback Theatre writes about the use of 'citizen actor' in Playback Theatre (Rowe 2007) that the people can perform as needed. For the women's group work, I acted as a Playback Theatre conductor inviting stories to be told and providing a framework that considers the relationship between art, social interaction and Playback rituals (Fox & Dauber 1999). Playback Theatre was a way of encouraging empathic connections between the group participants.

Unlike in a Playback Theatre performance where I would have an ensemble of trained Playback actors to act out the stories, I had to devise a way which would work in the context of the group. Working in small groups, after the timeline activity, I asked the women to choose one of the personal stories shared. Then they asked the teller permission to act out their story. They rehearsed the story and worked in partnership for the role play. They could use movement gestures, dialogue and props, such as cloths, to act out the rehearsed story in front of others. More commonly, the personal stories acted out were domestic in nature such as cooking, eating, talking and going out together. A few acted out the reasons that got them arrested; for instance, they were caught glue sniffing at a friend's place. It could be argued that the sharing of personal stories might be triggering for some. Therefore, the role of the facilitator is important as they play a vital role in observing and naming the emotional experiences that are unfolding in the group.

After the role playing, I introduced the Playback stage (Salas 2001) and invited my colleagues and the women to volunteer the acting for the whole group. I prepared the volunteer actors that there would be no discussion on how to act out the stories, as is the case with Playback Theatre performance where the aim is spontaneity in action. As a conductor, I asked the women to offer feelings associated with their group experience so far and these were enacted with sounds and movements by the volunteer actors. I proceeded by asking if any women wished to tell a personal story in the witness of the whole group. After each enactment, I acknowledged the teller and asked for their response in seeing their story being acted out. The cycle of eliciting stories in Playback (Chesner & Hanh 2002) creates a collage of themes present in the group. I was reminded of stories from childhood as themes of winning and losing and the hopes about the future were shared. After the Playback experience, I found that the women started to relate on the themes and their connections with one another went deeper.

From the group conversations with the women, we discovered that there were mothers missing their children who were being cared for by families. Although this was by no means a representation of this client population, some common themes seemed to emerge from their childhood stories such as deprivation and emotional neglect. After the Playback Theatre experience, I suggested that the women pen or draw their feelings or thoughts in their journal. Journaling became a way of containing their group experience. Sometimes, I chose a lyrical type of music to play in the background while the women were journaling. Towards the end of the year with the later cohorts of women, I noticed I became confident with less content in the group structure and allowing more supportive conversations to take place in the sessions.

The effect of telling one's stories on a Playback Theatre platform can be profound as the teller becomes their own catalyst of transformation. Although I was not able to check in with the tellers after the group had ended, I could only draw on my own experience of doing Playback Theatre that the experience of sharing one's story stays with the teller for a long time. The employment of active listening skills and empathy using Playback Theatre can bring about immense benefits for the women, one of

which being empowering these women to come forward to tell their stories and to reconnect with the source of their own historical waters. I feel strongly that this process of asking stories in Playback Theatre brings out a parallel dynamic that mirrors the group's lived experiences which relates to their sense of belonging, validation and self-worth.

Conclusion

This creative project is my attempt in using a transdisciplinary approach combining Dance Movement Therapy, Playback Theatre and singing to create a facilitating environment for these women in the prison. Clarity of the group structure and working with translations encouraged participation from the women at the outset. The facilitator referred to psychological theories, such as the psychodynamic model, to develop understanding of unconscious communications in the group dynamics. DMT group skills were used to support the emotional holding of the women in the group. The themes of loss, hope and belonging weaved through the sessions like a red thread from the beginning to the end of the groupwork.

The group facilitator's use of shared leadership and mirroring contained feelings of anxiety around participation. Learning through action opened a space for the women to find their own voice and to share their personal stories. Spontaneity was the key to creativity as the women immersed themselves in the play and enactment of stories afterwards. Dance and movement supported the women to release stress located in their body and free up thinking space to manage troubling thoughts. The experiential nature of the group activity promoted self-expression and increased self-awareness. Singing increased engagement in the women and at same time provided a space for group participants to find belonging. Porges (2011) stated the benefits of singing and vocalisation for our human body and emotional resilience. The activity of singing together increased the feeling of safety for the women, regulated their physiological responses and supported their participation in the group. The group's singing experience provided a contrast to the other group activities. Singing is inclusive, allowing all to participate at the same time and it bonds the group together.

In this chapter I have explored the weaving of different creative approaches adapted from Dance Movement Therapy and Playback Theatre for a group of female prisoners in South-East Asia. In recalling my work with this group of women I have considered how creating and telling our story, past, present and future, is a process of emancipation and growth.

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ⁱ The organisation is no longer using this practice (calling prisoners by their number).