

2 Check-in, please! Exploring movement check-ins as a tool for embodied psychotherapeutic practice

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Beginnings

A typical setting of Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) sessions initiates with a check-in, a space which allows participants to take conscience and share how they are feeling, both physically and emotionally (Curtis 2002; Mee-kums 2002; Panhofer & Rodríguez Cigaran 2005). The idea is, just like on a journey, to check-in one's baggage before getting on to a plane, to ensure maximum mobility and freedom for the traveller. But it also allows both the client and the therapist to learn more about the expectations and burdens for this common expedition.

Different approaches of how to conduct this initial check-in have been described, using art, movement or verbal sharing (e.g., Dietrich-Hartwell et al. 2020; Meekums 2002, 2008; Savidaki et al. 2020; Valdivia 2010). The therapist is supposed to take on the client's luggage or, viewed through psychoanalytic lenses, the client's projections in order to contain these and carry along a piece of the shared journey. A dance movement therapist also uses her/his/their skills of movement observation and analysis to become aware of any nonverbal cues that might help to understand the clients' inner world (Denham & Onwuegbuzie 2013; Moore & Yamamoto 2011; Payne 2017), in particular for those client groups who have a hard time connecting with their emotional or physical states. Verbalising what is happening in one's inner world is quite challenging for many (Panhofer 2011), and this can be even harder in middle- or large-sized groups¹ (Panhofer et al. 2014).

Given these circumstances, a specific movement check-in has been created at our training programme in DMT at the Autonomous University in Barcelona. Identifying with different shades of states, it facilitates participants to connect psychophysically with their emotional and physical states of being. Bridging the bodily and emotional experience, the nonverbal and verbal, the movement check-in proposes an active exploration and sharing in movement. Groups with a higher level of anxiety or dependence, such as at the beginning when members are not familiar yet with each other, the space and the activity, may need more direction: For example, participants may be asked directly to embody the amount of vitality they have right now, situating themselves anywhere between down

on the floor for tiredness and up high close to the ceiling for plenty of vitality. No matter how participants feel, they are invited to choose a certain level in the space, connect with their moving bodies and corporealise their personal energy state. However, the activity remains dynamic at all times, nobody is supposed to remain static on one level; sometimes, one and the same body perceives different states, for example, a tired back may curve downwards while sparkling eyes may explore higher spheres. Sometimes, movement changes one's initial state and after a few stretches close to the ground one's vitality increases, lifting the body to a medium level. Everybody is invited to play and connect with different places within the continuum:

Should the members of the group not know each other, direct questions that are of relevance for this group could be asked to promote familiarity. For example, for a newly composed group with many commuters or travellers, it could be suggested that all those who are at home nearby could locate themselves in the centre of the place. Others, who are commuting or who have just arrived, could move about or locate themselves at the edges of the space. How far am I from home?

Who else lives, just like me, in Barcelona? Who is taking a train, bus or plane, to arrive here for the weekend? Who has left his/her/their country and culture and moved here most recently? I watch students of the introductory course, who have met each other for the first time this morning, exchanging empathetic glances as they are invited to get a feeling of the large panorama of the group.

(From the field notes of the researcher)

After an initial time of connecting with one's own necessities, expressing one's personal states and playing with the opposites of the same continuum, the participants are invited to connect with other members and become aware of the larger picture of the group.

A pair in the corner discover that each has crossed the Atlantic Ocean to come here and study, getting a grip of each other's forearm. A little group of commuters gathers travelling from the centre to the edge of the space with an energetic step, engaging in a similar rhythm. Even though the journey has not been the same, the different experiences of the participants are somehow acknowledged, and first connections are made.

(From the field notes of the researcher)

Becoming aware of the rest of the group not only represents an important step of situating oneself within the group, but also offers a bridge from a more individual warm-up to an interactive phase of play and exchange.

I asked the students to become aware of their emotional states, in particular how anxious or serene they were feeling at this present moment. Those who rather connected with peace and calmness I invited to move less, tending towards stillness while I suggested representing a lot of anxiety with a lot of movement. Students

experimented with different parts of the body and incorporated different speeds in their movements. Soon it became apparent that a large majority engaged in sustained, almost Thai-Chi-like movements, whereas two participants gradually sped up. Both of the participants had mentioned preoccupations and doubts during the prior short verbal check-in and now started shaking different body parts and restlessly looking around. As their gazes met, they started running with each other, chasing around between a landscape of statue-like peers.

(From the field notes of the researcher)

No matter how directive, the movement check-in invites participants to learn to pay attention to themselves, become aware and express their different states, while experiencing the climate of the entire group. As the group advances, it needs less direction and develops its own language and dynamics of attuning with oneself and with others.

This chapter explores movement check-ins, intertwining open-ended questionnaires, a focus group (Bergold & Thomas 2012; Kitzinger 1995), the researcher's field notes, and the existing literature, to further the development of this technique, but also searching to enhance processes of beginnings in therapy.

The proceedings

As a first step, in order to learn more about the movement check-ins, it seemed inevitably to address those who had experienced the technique. An online inquiry with a total of 30 questions was thus created via the platform Survey Monkey Questionnaire, allowing students to evaluate on a Likert-scale their complete agreement or disagreement, but also inviting them to provide further comments and observations. The first ten questions looked at the general utility of the movement check-ins as such: in how far the activity had been helpful to connect with one's own physicality or emotional states, or to what extent it had aided to find one's place in the group, take conscience of the group's climate, to connect with others or to learn about their physical and emotional conditions. The second part of the questionnaire scrutinised the various possibilities of embodying the different states, for example, in how far it had been helpful to embody one's tiredness with movements on a low level in the space, one's anxiety with a lot of movement, or one's connectedness to the group right in the centre of the crowd, or one's well-being with an open body posture. This second part thus aimed to assess the different bodily representations that had been suggested by the facilitator, unexpectedly entering the field of movement observation and analysis. Evaluating bodily communication by an intercultural group stemming from several countries, cultures and continents, as is usual for our university training, seemed somehow a challenging task.

An invitation to participate in the online survey was sent to a total of 60 students from the masters and postgraduate training at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, 42 first- and 18 second-year students, excluding

the third-year cohort as their lived experience of the movement check-ins seemed more remote. Forty-five students aged between 24 and 49 and stemming from 14 different countries completed the survey. Seven confirmed their participation in an online focus group, once the results of the survey had been published, out of which six actually were able to attend the one-hour lasting online event.

The Focus Group, an organised discussion with a selected group of individuals to obtain information on the ideas, attitudes and viewpoints around a specific topic (Bergold & Thomas 2012; Kitzinger 1995), centred around three themes that had emerged from the questionnaires, i.e. the possibility to connect to oneself through the movement check-in, the possibility to connect to other members of the group, and the suitability of representing different states through movement. A last space was offered for general comments and suggestions, offering a space for all those comments that had not emerged via the survey and gathering thus a bank of qualitative data alongside the quantitative outcomes of the survey.

The findings I: May movement check-ins be useful?

The outcome of the Survey Monkey assessment showed an extremely high approval of the usefulness of the movement check-ins. Connecting with different associations and representing them physically was thought to be useful by 95% of the participants, in particular in order to recognise one's own physical (41% of the complete agreement, 43% agreement) and emotional states (39% complete agreement, 48% agreement). Participants mentioned that the movement check-in "allowed me to get in touch with improvisation and my corporality, exactly what I needed in that moment", and "I did not know how I felt that day and so I just tried both extremes and moved in between, listening to what felt better in that instant". "It helped me to connect with the present moment", and "I managed to unblock certain repressed sensations. I had been able to verbalise certain themes during the verbal check-in but the felt sensation in movement provided me with some more insight".

Learning more about the physical and emotional states of other group members captured a better picture of the climate of the group and situating oneself within the group received a lot of appraisals too, illustrated by participants' comments, such as: "Not everybody shares verbally. The movement has allowed me to understand the climate of the whole group", and "It's new for me and contradictory but it allows me to see more of the group and its climate". Members of the Focus Group added: "I don't think I have perceived the group as a space with different individuals, but rather I looked at the landscape or mood of the group as a whole", and "I have experienced some complete surprises".

Scores were slightly lower concerning the utility for connecting with others in the group: (36,4% complete agreement, 43,2% agreement, 13,6% neither agreeing or disagreeing, 4,6% disagreeing and 2,3% completely disagreeing).

One participant stated: “At one point there were only two of us in the same situation, all the other members represented different states. This seemed like an invitation for the two of us to get closer and move together”.

The field notes of the researcher depict this event as follows:

I had suggested to choose closeness to the floor for those who were tired and higher levels for those who felt very awake. Participants vacillated between the two poles, moving up and down, extending certain parts of their body towards the ceiling, while others would fall towards the ground. A little group laid with their faces downwards on the floor, making the most of the contact with the ground underneath them. When I asked them to largen their general kinesphere and become aware of others in the group, smiles of sympathy and sighs were exchanged.

(From the field notes of the researcher)

One participant shared: “Being centred in my role in the group, my sensation is that it is not so easy to communicate and connect with others. But when you see where others are, you can connect empathically with those who are at the same level, or just in the opposite.”

At the end of the first academic year students face the decision of either continuing with the entire master's training or continuing on with the postgraduate diploma, which is not a full training in DMT. Becoming a therapist or not may be a big decision for many, but also determining whether you continue the work with your group of peers or need to say good-bye. I suggested using one end of the studio for the masters' degree, and the other for the postgraduate degree and invited the students to place themselves between the two poles. Whereas certain students placed themselves clearly in one place, joining up with whom they found by their side while watching the rest of the group, others kept moving back and forth racing from one end to the other. At one stage somebody from the masters' end stretched out her hands and tried to keep back a peer who kept chasing about, and it seemed that with her intent to hug and hold back her friend she tried to show her affection and wish for the other to continue the training.

(From the field notes of the researcher)

A vivid discussion about how far the techniques could serve as a bridge between the verbal and nonverbal was sparked. Those who preferred sharing nonverbally mentioned, “I don't always like to share verbally”, and “I am not sure how I could ever go back to verbal therapy after having discovered my connection with the movement”. A member of the Focus Groups elaborated on this issue, saying

“I find it stressful to listen to a verbal check-in with many participants feeling low. When peers share in movement it gives me a chance to see where they are at, but not having to take in all their problems.”

However, the need for further explanation through verbalisation was mentioned, particularly with smaller and more advanced groups: “It has helped me to see the other person from a different place, promoting tolerance and respect, but requiring verbalisation in order to understand emotional states”. A member of the Focus Group concluded: “Sometimes it has been rather stressful witnessing somebody in a particular state but not knowing why this person felt that way”, and thus suggested altering verbal and nonverbal check-ins.

The second part of the questions connected more with issues of how to represent different physical and emotional states, touching on themes around movement observation and analysis.

The findings II: to what extent can different themes be represented through movement by an intercultural population?

The questions 11–30 of the questionnaire mainly dealt with the different proposals that had been suggested, for example, to represent happiness on a high level in space and sadness on a low level, anxiety with a lot of movement and physical well-being with open shapes, etc. The findings, thus, leave a trace of the lived experience of the 45 participants in terms of how to express certain inner states, given the variety of their personal body dimension and history, cultural, environment and geographical upbringing, as well as historic and socio-economic dimensions (Baruch et al, in revision). Participants were aged between 24 and 49 years and came from 14 different countries, including Catalonia and different parts of Spain, Portugal, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Greece, Israel, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Brazil and the USA.

Even though the responses from 45 participants do not allow for an accurate assessment in statistical terms, it still shows certain tendencies of how emotions are understood and expressed across cultures, extensively studied by movement therapists (for example Bartenieff & Lewis 1980; Chang 2006, 2009; De Tord & Bräuninger 2015; Kestenberg et al. 1999; Laban 1987; Panhofer et al. 2016) and neurolinguists (for example, Gibbs et al. 2004; Kövecses 2003; Lakoff 1987; Lakoff & Turner 1989).

Representing happiness on high levels in the space seemed to receive high accordance, just as is anchored in many languages, happy is up, like jumping for joy, feeling high, feeling in heaven or floating in the air. Upper levels in space were also associated with feeling awake or full of energy, linguistically connected to expressions like feeling lifted up, above the average or boosted up. On the contrary, low levels in the space were associated strongly with tired or sadness, confirming neurolinguistic concepts of a certain universality of the human body (Kövecses 2003). A great variety of human bodies seem to react to certain emotions with similar physical reactions, for example, to anger with a higher blood pressure, an accelerated heartbeat and a tenser muscle tone, or to sadness with a concave body torso, a lower glance and hanging

shoulders. These concepts are anchored in our language with expressions such as feeling down, plunging deep, being on a low, downhearted, declining or dumping.

This rather universalist view of human bodies brings to mind Oliviero Toscani's controversial 1996 Benetton publicity, showing three hearts with the description white – black – yellow. It incentivises that no matter what colour we are, our most essential physicality is very similar. Albeit this historically essential contribution of outlining humankind's common features, DMT does not primarily deal with humans as *Körper* (corpus in Latin, the biological, the corpse), as one would expect from a physiotherapist or surgeon. More so, it addresses the lived body, in German the *Leib*, valuing its personal history and experience as an individual. Interestingly enough, the numbers of the survey support this deviation from a collective, unanimous explanation of movement. For example, the "happy is up" interpretation meets 7% disagreement and 5% neutral response, signalling the diversity of the group.

Theories of movement observation and analysis have been progressing from the universality to the particularity of movement meaning. Birdwhistle (1970) already pointed out the importance of context and social meaning of movement, distinguishing thus the isolated kinesic behaviour from its inevitable environment and underlying relationships. The survey has most certainly left a trace of this struggle: A large majority of the participants agreed with Bartenieff & Lewis' (1980) affirmation that a large personal kinesphere may be related to feeling secure, at ease or in control, embodying happiness and physical well-being through open body shapes. However, 5% disagreed and 9% neither agreed nor disagreed. Happiness is a very ambiguous word for me", one participant shared, probably hinting at the difficulty connecting with and sharing this feeling in the context of a university environment, in front of a lecturer within a particular group, etc. Many participants associated closed body shapes to insecurity, as described with the pin-like body shape (Bartenieff & Lewis 1980; Laban 1987). Thirty-one percent completely agreed and 43% agreed to associate closed body shapes to physical suffering (similar to the twisting shape) or unhappiness; however, 19% were neutral and 7% disagreed. One participant pointed out the particularity of the moment, saying, "Today, I did not perceive it that way".

How to express anxiety met even more varied responses. A lot of agitation and movement seemed to be quite appropriate for only half of the participants, whereas the other half did not seem to know or could not agree. "I perceive anxiety with a lot of movement, for me it's not about sitting still and nibbling my nails", a member of the Focus Group described. Lesser agreement was also found when associating higher levels in space to more mental states and lower levels in space to more physical states. One member of the Focus Groups reflected that she had enjoyed representing more physical states on a low level and more mental states on a high level, commenting, "I like the floor and have enjoyed becoming aware of this interpretation".

This brief exploration in the field of movement observation and analysis, thus, confirms that DMT moves beyond a universalist understanding of humans but rather adapts a socially and culturally inclusive way of working, considering differences such as race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, gender and sexual identity (Caldwell 2013). For the movement check-ins, it seems to be important to use simple binaries as a starting point from which to explore the particularities and uniqueness of each group and to plunge into the richness of its vocabulary as the group progresses. “Embodying different themes through movement” conceptualises the categories and exact numbers (Figure 2.1).

Discussing the findings with the focus group

The findings of the online survey were contrasted by an online Focus Group, consisting of six students who gathered for an hour to look at inherent group dynamics of the activity and reflect on further recommendations for the movement check-ins. It became evident that seeing others and being seen seemed an important theme. “I enjoyed being seen, not just feeling happy but also being able to share my happiness” is how one member of the group shared her need to be witnessed while expressing herself. Another member shared, “I felt more integrated in the group when I perceived others on the same level”. However, sometimes participants felt awkward when representing certain states next to somebody in a very different mood, illustrated by the participant who said, “It was hard for me to embody happiness having somebody sad just next to me, it felt strange”.

The fact of influencing each other was brought up as well, for example, one member of the focus group commented, “Sometimes I found it hard as I felt that my body wanted to be in two poles at the same time. I felt empathy with different people I watched, and torn apart between distinct shades”. The idea of undertaking the activity with closed eyes, in order to get in touch

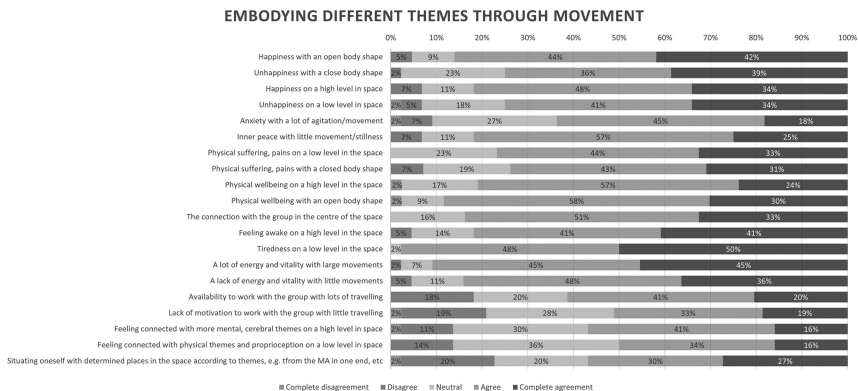


Figure 2.1 Embodying different themes through movement.

with one's inner states, emerged, similar to Authentic Movement, an improvisational movement practice that works with free association and closed eyes. The phantasy of not being influenced by others seemed tempting, but members soon agreed that the outcome would be certainly affected by group dynamics and the fact of being witnessed, just like in Authentic Movement (Payne 2017).

Another main subject that emerged through the Focus Group was the possibility of not sharing anything at all, for example, one participant said, "There is no possibility of not sharing, only being physically present is a statement". Others pointed out that even in verbal groups, silent members embodied their states of being through their physical presence and their silence. It was, thus, proposed to allow for a neutral position that expressed the need of not wishing to share, as one participant articulated, "For me, allowing for a neutral point is very important".

The limitations of the activity were also discussed, and a mixture of movement and verbal check-ins were recommended for smaller groups, the members of which had actually more intimacy and lesser need for such a directive activity. Limitations for certain populations were considered, for example, for those who suffer from a severe body-mind split, profound disability or autism. However, participants of the Focus Group had applied the movement check-in with mental health patients and clients with learning disabilities, where the clear suggestions and timing of the activity had worked really well. It was further suggested to integrate objects that could help to sign certain body parts that may be aching or aid all sorts of expression. However, all participants agreed that they saw no use in learning a kind of nonverbal code prior to being able to participate in the activity, as this is sometimes proposed for patients who might not respond to traditional methods. More so, emerging group dynamics should be observed cautiously, in order to develop a group's own culture and language and learn how to move beyond binaries.

Conclusions

This chapter has aimed at presenting and revising the technique of checking in using bodily movement. Inspired by the Post-Cartesian notion to unite bodies and minds, the verbal and the nonverbal, this approach had been developed at the Autonomous University of Barcelona for medium- and large-sized groups. Forty-five students from two different promotions and a small follow-up Focus Group evaluated and shared their experience of the movement check-ins. At first sight, the numbers of the Survey Monkey Questionnaire seemed too generic, unanimously praising the exit of the technique, and thus a bit one dimensional. The field notes of the researcher, the comments and discussion with the students helped to bring the numbers alive, drawing attention to additional vital aspects of the technique, and furthering its educational and therapeutic implications.

The movement check-ins were shown to be useful, particularly in order to pay attention to one's own physical and emotional conditions, to learn about the group's different states and recognise common themes. However, processing these would require more time, experience and trust. The suggestions of how to embody certain themes in movement have been appreciated as rather useful, such as locating happiness up and sadness down, connecting open body shapes with physical well-being and closed body shapes with physical suffering, shyness or ill-being (Bartenieff & Lewis 1980; Laban 1987). However, both the numbers and the feedback clearly showed that the proposals need to develop from a binary orientation to a broader spectrum, integrating the particularity of the experience and valuing the individual beyond a generic, universalist view. Body language is tightly linked to one's personal history and body dimension; one's cultural, environmental and geographical upbringing, as well as historic and socio-economic dimensions (Baruch et al. in revision, Chang 2006, 2009). It needs to be considered within its context, albeit an academic setting, a therapy or peer group. Furthermore, it seemed important to mix verbal and nonverbal check-ins to attend a maximum of needs and variety: allowing for movement where words have fallen short and allowing for verbalisation where movement cannot be clear enough.

As Shalem-Zafari & Grosu (2016) confirm:

(...) DMT integrates insights from nonverbal experience, from verbal discussion, and from cognitive observation analysis. These all have their place in comprising this complex profession and contribute to a certain balance within the practice of DMT. This balance allows both for deep self-expression, rooted in the body and movement, and for the ability to understand this expression.

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Future research could aim at evaluating the technique with larger numbers of participants or applying it with different client groups such as learning disabilities, third age, mental health patients, children, or all kinds of populations where wording one's emotional and bodily experience seems to be challenging. It is hoped that the technique stimulates all kinds of psychotherapists to observe and enhance their client's movement expressions and integrate their nonverbal language, whenever words fall short.

Note

- 1 The middle-sized or median group (de Maré et al. 1991) with about 20–40 members bridges the small family-sized, tribal group with the large hunter-type or society-like group (Schulamit 2017). At the DMT training in Barcelona, groups may vary from 7 to 60 members, depending on the subject and methodology.

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