

Dance therapy and psychosocial treatment: An Internally Displaced Persons (IDPS) camp experimental study from Ichwa-Makurdi, Benue State of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: Dance therapy is a form of rehabilitation that uses physical movement to promote the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of people with special needs. Thus, this paper employs a pragmatic approach to generate its findings from the THA 451 (Theatre, Drama, and Dance Therapy) Workshop with the Ichwa Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) Camp in Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria, by the students of the Theatre Arts Department of the Benue State University, Makurdi. Using qualitative and participatory approaches, the workshop was able to get results from members of the IDP camp. The Forum Theatre approach was also used to induce personal experiences from the participants, which revealed the potency of dance as having healing powers, physically, socially, and psychologically. The paper thus recommends that government and humanitarian bodies should not only attend to the financial and material needs of the internally displaced persons, but also use dances as a form of psychosocial therapy.

Keywords: Dance, therapy, psychosocial, displaced persons.

INTRODUCTION

It has been observed that several problems and challenges associated with internally displaced persons who have been displaced by the Arms Herdsmen in Benue State are not far from hunger, epidemics, security concerns, sanitation, and accommodation confronts. In response to all these challenges of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Benue State, the State Government in her plans, involves International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix (IOM DTM) in partnership with United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Benue State Emergency Management Agency (BSEMA), Nigeria Red Cross Society (NRCS), National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI), National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), Community Links and the Foundation for Justice Development and Peace (FJDP), have all tried in separate and collaborative ways to help solve certain pertinent and immediate challenges of

persons displaced by natural and man-made disasters. However, in most cases, not all the immediate needs of internally displaced persons are met. This, according to Balogun *et al.* (2020), is because "agents responsible for the social survival of IDPs seeking refuge only concentrate on the facilitation of return, provision of food, shelter, and clothes (basic material needs of life)." The implication is that during the period of displacement, support agents are usually preoccupied with the provision of tangible resources, neglecting the intangible, which could predispose IDPs to social isolation and exclusion, mostly arising from sociological and psychological distress. This invariably denies the displaced populations some essential social opportunities. Social opportunities do not only imply tangible resources (including material and financial assistance); they also encompass intangible resources such as nourishment, information, and companionship. One valuable tool that provides psychosomatic support to people in distress is dance. The history of global commu-

nities has identified dancing as not only meant for entertainment but as a therapeutic instrument for improvement of health and life of individuals. This is because:

given the evident relationship between movement and life, dance and health have a well-established connection through much of history and in many locations. Dance, as a vessel of culture that transmits the values and behaviours of particular groups and ways of living, can both remind us of meaning and restore our sense of purpose where it has been lost (Barnstaple, 2016).

Rebecca's assertion is a gentle reminder that the therapeutic nature of dance is emotional, physical, and spiritual. This is because in dance, the body and soul are connected for emotional stability, which also provides psychosomatic healing, particularly to the brokenhearted. Whereas, to be healthy is not only the non-existence of sickness but a state of complete physical, emotional, and social well-being. This has led to an increasing awareness of the role that dance plays as a potential means to restore individual well-being and health (Quiroga Murcia *et al.*, 2010). This is also ratified by Leseho and Maxwell (2010) and Jacques (2014) that many people who use movement approaches for an amalgamated experience of mental, emotional, physical health, and personal growth use the interrelationship between body and mind as a recognised principle. This is because somatic psychology subscribes to the pragmatic understanding that the body reflects the mind, and the body and mind are expected to coordinate for mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being. Moreover, Africans believe that health is directly correlated to peace and balance within the spirit. This harmonising perspective recognises distinct differences in the mind and body but honours, integrates, and appreciates the holistic nature of the individual (Ashley, 2019). When this harmonisation is achieved, depressed and traumatised individual minds receive mental repairs, emotional healing, transformation, and self-awareness. Hence, the positive effects of dance therapy on the physical and mental health of individuals and groups make it a relevant psychotherapeutic tool, especially for the management of people with associated psychological distress. All these forms the motivation for this project. Hence, the THA 451 (Theatre, Drama, and Dance Therapy) class of the Theatre Arts students of Benue State University took bold steps to experiment with the efficacy of Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) on the physical, psychological, and social health of displaced persons.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Many scholars have written extensively on Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) using divergent positions and

phenomenological insinuations that are closely connected to this study. For example, Kieft (2013), "Dance, empowerment, and spirituality: An ethnography of movement medicine," a thesis submitted to the Department of Dance, University of Roehampton, provides a description and analysis of the practice and a reflection of the depth and width of its possibilities as experienced by participants, including areas of the body, emotions, mind, and spirituality, and highlights themes such as embodiment, connection, empowerment, healing, and transformation. The thesis sees dancing as a tool for emotional and mental wellbeing and personal growth, which is an anthropological research on "the five rhythms". In the same disposition, Michelle (2020) article, "Use of dance movement therapy to uncover dissociation in sexual abuse survivors," also adds more insight to this paper. In his conclusion, Michelle (2020) posits that:

the process of imaginative thoughts and scenarios that arise during the dance movement therapy sessions builds new confidence. The individual is slowly able to make improvements. The process of DMT significantly gives the woman a newfound way to love herself and her body. Evidently, self-recovery brings acceptance for new relationships and intimate connections that previously would have been dismissed. As a result of DMT, embodiment and intimate connections evoke creativity through body movements that is effective for sexual abuse survivors in the process of healing.

The above assertion, to some extent, aligns with the thesis of this paper because of the Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) intervention for the psychosocial healing of the sexually abused women. What also makes Michelle's persuasion bear on this paper is its focus on the socially and psychologically traumatised groups—the women in Michelle's article, while women and children are the target of this paper. DMT, like Authentic Movement (AM), is a universal, cross-cultural practice that can be suitable for those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, history of abuse, medical recovery, and for those who generally want or need support with their mental health but do not respond well to traditional therapies (Stromsted, 2019 cited in Ece, 2020). Expounding on the issue of the cross-cultural practice of DMT, Monteiro and Wall (2011) submit that:

traditional African dance is connected to ritualistic and spiritual healing practices and addresses a range of ailments. The underlying belief is that in the community, mind and body must be incorporated into ritual systems in order to facilitate healing, as well as transform and empower the individual and the group. Ultimately, given their holistic

structure, society benefits from the dance in many layers. It plays an integral role in socialisation, expression, and communication; helps to build and maintain a healthy sense of self-system; and also offers an alternative cathartic experience for not only individuals but for the community as a whole. In particular, rituals involving dance play an essential role in relieving and treating symptoms of psychological distress, as well as neutralising and lessening the impact of psychological trauma. In many societies, these noted benefits of dance, as well as the impact of related cultural processes, operate without an awareness of their mechanics, but have been observed and researched as valuable therapeutic byproducts in themselves.

The above long quotation is deliberate because it treats the subject matter of this paper in the sense that it deals with the "living dead," whose hopes are in despondency. Its perception of dance as a ritual practice that brings individual and community healing, self-esteem, self-discovery, and awareness provides the basis for the investigative trajectory of this paper. This is because engaging cultural resources, including those associated with creative artistic expressions, has been shown to enhance communities' resilience in the face of terror and deprivation and to cultivate children's capacities in particular (Richman, 1993; Miller and Billings, 1994; Boothby, 1996). Moreover, on the cultural materials, Harris (2007) says:

dancing is one such expressive activity, the collective performance of which delivers strong potential for sublimating inter-group tensions while increasing interpersonal connection and strengthening solidarity. Although rarely utilised as modes of psychosocial intervention, dance/movement programs, if appropriately designed to maximise cultural relevance, may prove an effective means of fostering resilience after massive violence.

Harris further asserts that

dance/movement therapy interventions designed to foster resilience or recovery among African adolescent survivors of torture, and like wartime exposures, may maximize the healing capacity of widely available cultural resources. Drawing on dance's rich potential for heightening communal solidarity, along with the sense of wholeness and well-being animated through

purposeful engagement in bodily expression, DMT is flexible enough to be adapted for application in various contexts. The DIER program in the Philadelphia area used dance to reinforce traditional coping mechanisms among a particularly resilient population of recently resettled Dinka refugee minors. The program's reconstitution of a ceremonial Sudanese dancing circle allowed its participants to revisit their culture of origin and deliberately hold onto its ancestral strengths while adapting to new challenges in a very foreign host culture.

This shows that dance/movement therapy, which focuses on the body and movement, can help refugees to reconnect to themselves, their experiences, the therapist, and their communities. By facilitating movement interventions, the dance/movement therapist can help the refugee establish body awareness, boundaries, and relationships.

The role of the dance/movement therapist is to respond with kinesthetic empathy and attunement and to guide the refugee gradually and comfortably. By exploring one's body and experiences with the therapist, trust and relationship can develop, contributing to the therapeutic relationship. When trust and relationships are present, feelings of safety can be experienced, leading to the experience of humanity. By utilising dance/movement therapy, a refugee can experience safety (Arroyo, 2018).

In another dimension, Fletcher and Gerschwitz (2019) conclude that

research evidence shows that DMT is useful for treating depressed people, with the most dramatic results in people diagnosed with clinical depression. Group dance/movement therapy is beneficial partly due to its potential for social rehabilitation. Beside the need for better quality research in terms of larger sample sizes, inclusion of a control group, and specified styles of DMT used, it would also be helpful to establish whether DMT is effective when used alone, in conjunction with talk therapy, and/or in an expressive therapy framework, specifically the identification of any DMT techniques that could be incorporated into the therapy room without the counselor undergoing significant additional training.

This could be that the potential healing benefits of DMT for

people with depression may have been somewhat overlooked within the therapy professions due to the lack of consistent, clearly defined, and agreed-upon methods and measurements. Furthermore, an Intervention for Women in the Shatila Refugee Camp, Lebanon, by Sakhi *et al.* (2022) submits that:

throughout the program, movement and exercise were heavily used as an essential part of the sessions, such as the use of dancing, stretching, and walking. Many of the participants would later credit this as a definitive advantage in helping them feel more active and, in some cases, in helping them deal with chronic pain.

Evidently, research substantiations have shown that victims of traumatic experiences are prone to psycho-emotional problems such as anxiety and depressive symptoms, and dance has been an effective therapeutic tool in ameliorating the associated psychological trauma of displaced populations globally.

ICHWA IDPS CAMP

The first phase of the encounter

The fieldwork was conducted on the 22nd of July, 2024, at the IDP Camp Federal Housing in North Bank Makurdi by Theatre Arts students at Benue State University, Makurdi. This fieldwork was carried out as part of the requirements for THA 451: Theatre, Drama, and Dance Therapy. This course delves into the use of drama, dance, mime, and music as therapeutic tools to aid individuals in coping with various challenges in their lives. These art forms have the power to uplift spirits, provide a sense of community, and offer a means of expression for individuals who may be struggling with difficult circumstances. In the context of the fieldwork at the IDP Camp, the goal was to use dance as a means to help the internally displaced persons momentarily escape from their hardships and experience moments of joy and happiness (Plate 1).

Before arrival at the IDP camp, students were drumming and singing. On arriving at the camp proper, students were advised to stop drumming and singing so that they might not distract the attention from what was already going on, because the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and other NGOs were sharing some relief material with the displaced persons at the camp. It was a surprise to hear from women and children that the drumming and singing should continue so that they would dance. In their native language, *kuha nen kwagh, se vine amar i saan se iyol* (keep on drumming so that we can dance and be pleased). This first experience gave us a full understanding, as put by Tomaszewski *et al.* (2022), that dance therapy can help people suffering from psycholo-

gical traumas to reconnect with their body, express their emotions, improve the management of the psychopathological symptoms, and sometimes even reduce them. This was so pathetic; however, as an organised group, we never drummed again until the sharing of the relief materials was completely done. After these activities were concluded, the Camp Coordinator introduced class to the internally displaced persons who were mostly women and children, suffering from several psychological traumas: women who lost their husbands and children, women who went through horrible experiences of watching how their children and husbands were murdered by the armed herdsman, and children who also experienced horrifying situations of watching how their fathers, mothers, and siblings were killed. What we could see on their faces were hunger, agony, depression, disillusionment, hopelessness, and the like.

The second phase of the experience

As we arranged ourselves to move to the camp, we took local drums and one musical amplifier. However, one fundamental thing to note was the starting point of the proper workshop. The students at the beginning began playing and dancing to hip-hop music, which never made any sense to members of the camp. This was simply an experiment to see their reaction to the music and dance that were not part of their cultural orientation. Using only contemporary dance was going to be a total failure. This was because they needed to feel their lost cultural practice, which they were forcefully cut off from by the invaders. The most successful aspect of the workshop was the introduction of popular traditional music and dance. To our delight, the camp residents actively participated in the dance performances, showcasing their enthusiasm and joy (Plate 2).

In the words of Michelle (2020), the symbolism in their gestures and body movements indicates the underlying feelings that occur in the individual's mind. The creative mirroring of oneself within the "play space" allows for imagination to flow through the form of body language. In other words, the movements flowed freely because the individual could mimic the suppressed emotions and come to terms with the underlying memories. This process of mirroring during DMT acts as the leading step to regaining self-control (Plate 3).

Indeed, once the drumming turned to popular traditional melody (Plate 4), the dancing arena quickly became filled up with women and children dancing in a manner that we could no longer control. They began to raise popular songs and took over the dancing arena while dominating the students, most of whom could match the IDPs in the dance. As a way of tradition and show of goodwill, a few students sprayed money on the internally displaced persons who had taken over the dancing, further enhancing the atmosphere of happiness and camaraderie.



Plate 1. Arrival of student participants at Ichwa IDPs Camp North Bank, Makurdi, Benue State.



Plate 2. Women (IDPs) enthusiastically jumped out of their tents, dancing towards the direction of the music.

During the fieldwork, the students engaged the IDPs in dance performances, which elicited a positive response from the audience. The residents not only enjoyed the performances but also actively participated in the dancing, showcasing the transformative power of dance in bringing people together and fostering a sense of unity. In addition to the monetary gifts, we also contributed bags of sachet water and biscuits to the camp leader for distribution among the internally displaced persons. This act of generosity was met with gratitude and appreciation from the camp residents, who expressed their happiness and contentment. They further demonstrated their commitment to making a positive impact through their art. Post-

production discussions were engaged with the IDPs to evaluate their feelings about the dance, in which they were active participants. Responses from those who watched or participated in the impromptu dance acknowledged the power of dance in providing relief from social and psychological stress. Some of the women who responded asserted that given the excruciating experiences they have had, they are perpetually filled with images of manslaughter, destruction of properties, diseases, and hunger, to which their present reality has subjected them. This makes them lose their sense of humanity and social belonging. But activities such as dance are capable of transporting them (even though temporarily) away from



Plate 3. IDPs actively engaged in the ecstatic dance with students and lead facilitators.



Plate 4. The drummers during the workshop.

their agonies. They encouraged routine visits of groups like ours to provide that sense of belonging and self-worth. Indeed, depression arises from sadness, disruptive patterns of sleep, poor appetite, depressed mood, loss of pleasure or interest, and low self-worth or feelings of guilt, which result in impaired functioning or psychological distress. Others acknowledged that such activities are capable of keeping busy and creating a forum of social interaction within the camp, suggesting the formation of dance groups that can compete with each other from time to time. Reflecting on the success of using theatre to bring happiness to the camp residents, it is evident that the power of dance transcends boundaries and uplifts spirits. By engaging the internally displaced persons in creative and expressive activities, we were able to momentarily

alleviate their psychological anguish and provide a sense of joy and unity within the camp.

The theatre workshop and field work at the Ichwa IDPs Camp, North Bank Makurdi, served as a meaningful and impactful experience for both the students and the displaced persons. Through the medium of theatre, we were able to spread happiness and positivity, demonstrating the transformative potential of the arts, particularly dance, in uplifting communities in need. The fieldwork at the IDPs Camp exemplified the potential of drama, dance, and theatre therapy to bring about positive change and uplift the spirits of individuals facing challenging circumstances. Through this experience, the students were able to witness firsthand the transformative power of art and its ability to bring joy and hope to those in need.

CONCLUSION

This paper investigated the positive effects of dance therapy on the psychological and social health of traumatised groups with internally displaced persons at Ichwa IDPs Camp, North Bank, Makurdi. The findings of this study reveal that dance therapy is an effective tool for reducing emotional stress and depressive symptoms in devastated groups, especially people displaced by natural and man-made disasters. Evidence from the study showed that the music component can adjust emotional states and promote mind-body interactions and is widely accepted for promoting social and emotional wellbeing, particularly among people in distress. The dance performances brought smiles to their faces and momentarily lifted their burdens. We loved seeing them participate in the performances and forget their problems for a moment. The joy and happiness that radiated from them were truly rewarding and reinforced the belief in the power of theatre to bring about positive change. Our ability to achieve the goal of the course, which is to use drama, dance, and music to help psychologically and socially traumatised individuals cope with their emotions and daily struggles, was evident in the reactions of the internally displaced persons at the Ichwa Camp. The simple act of entertaining them and providing a moment of joy in their lives was a small but significant step towards improving their well-being.

Generally, the fieldwork experience at the IDPs Camp was a valuable lesson in the importance of using theatre as a means of uplifting the spirits of those facing adversity. It highlighted the transformative power of the arts in bringing about positive change and fostering a sense of community and connection. As future theatre practitioners, we are inspired to continue using our skills to make a difference in the lives of others and spread joy and hope through the medium of dance.

Thus, this paper recommends the conspicuous use of dance therapy not only for social rehabilitation of internally displaced persons but also as a tool for social mobilisation, interaction, reconnection, societal healing and psychosocial therapy for all kinds of depressions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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