

# The Moving and Movement Identities of Adolescents: Lessons from Dance Movement Psychotherapy in Mainstream Schools

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## Introduction

Adolescence is a stage in one's development where everything appears to be in flux. Changes in one's physical self from being a child to becoming an adult is inevitably linked with changes in the way young people experience themselves and the way others perceive them. As a consequence, the identity of adolescents can be seen as 'moving' in a number of ways in the form of regressing to earlier times and to unresolved traumas, trying out new roles and new relationships, fluctuating between diffusion, confusion and/or successful identity formation.

In this chapter we will argue that shifts and changes in identity are closely linked with shifts and changes in externalized movement. We will refer to external, physical manifestations of movement associated with self-definition as 'movement identities'. We will argue that movement identities are very similar with musical identities and draw parallels between these two concepts. Furthermore, we will argue that in order to achieve a movement forward and towards adulthood, adolescents often need to revisit the past and to re-organise inner perceptions. This can be done within the context of a movement-based therapeutic intervention such as dance movement psychotherapy, where changes and shifts in movement and their connections with self-definition are often focused upon as a way of enabling the adolescent transition to adulthood (Karkou and Sanderson 2006; Karkou et al. 2010). Drawing from a project in dance movement psychotherapy we will present and discuss ways in which dance-based interventions can 'speak' to adolescent needs, to their fluid and thus moving identities, and how they can support young people to revisit their past, explore old and experiment with new identities, and thus enable an easier transition to adulthood.

## Adolescent needs

Adolescence is a time in one's development of substantial change and transition that have impact on a number of different areas. Adolescents need to cope with complex and paradoxical physical, cognitive, moral, emotional and social changes.

Physically they have to deal with accelerated physical growth in terms of height and weight and associated issues relating to body image and sexuality (Coleman 2011). The skeletal and muscular development requires adolescents to readjust how they move, how they navigate or transition through their physical environment and how they hold themselves as physical beings in that space. A study of adolescent movement patterns (McCoy and Van Sant 1993) seems to confirm that adolescents have a wide range of movements available to them for every action/task they undertake and that their patterns change during the adolescent period in frequency and range. A greater availability of movement patterns was observed, especially amongst the 11 year olds. According to Coleman (2011) this can be further complicated by physical growth being in spurts rather than following a constant growth pattern, gross and fine motor skills altering, hormonal changes linking to the physical development.

Such changes are not always in accordance to cultural perceptions of what is a beautiful body affecting body image, creating fluctuations in self-esteem and heightening the potential for self-consciousness. In movement terms they can be manifested as shyness where the adolescent tries to hide their new shape, with rounded shoulders, dropped head or stooped appearance (Joseph 2011). In externalized movement, often there seems to be a lack of integration, or a separateness of parts, with adolescents often seeming uncoordinated or clumsy. According to

Otis (2014), becoming comfortable and competent within this new physique can take time.

While physically adolescents are growing and changing, cognitively they are also in the process of growing. In particular, during this stage of development, adolescents develop abstract thinking. This is what Piaget referred to as the formal operational stage (Piaget 1950; Inhelder & Piaget 1958). According to Piaget's cognitive development model, high-order reasoning and skills in combining and classifying begins at around 11 years of age. Even if people like Byrnes (2003) argue that this is due to particular types of exposure rather than an innate skill, adolescents often develop the capacity to understand ideas without having to rely on concrete references. A shift from concrete to abstract is therefore often taking place during this stage. So is creative thinking and imagining potential outcomes from actions.

Ward and Overton (1990) argue that there is a difference between competence and performance. Some young people may be competent but less able to demonstrate this through performance, especially if they are not interested in the task. It is therefore apparent that ways in which changes affect adolescents emotionally have an important role to play.

Psychotherapeutic literature suggests that, similar to physical and cognitive domains, the identity of the adolescent is in constant flux, full of internal movement. Anna Freud (1958) for example, suggests that radical changes in body image give rise to feelings of depression. She also talks about this period as a movement back to older, unresolved issues. Similarly, Winnicott (1965) describes adolescence as a cry for help involving an unconscious movement towards old traumas. Blos (1962) discusses this as a time when internal perceptions are

reorganized into new ways that allow for autonomy and independence. Erikson (1968) discusses this period as dealing with 'ego-identity' versus 'role confusion' and the time when one shifts from being a child to exploring new ways of being an adult. 'Identity crisis' can be part of one's experience, again suggesting shifts and changes that can be closely linked with one's changing body and manifested in their actual physical movement. A synthesis of earlier stages of development is asked for, while one negotiates what they are to be and what society expects them to become. Because of these, often conflicting demands, 'identity confusion' is part of adolescent experience, closely linked with a period of exploration and experimentation.

Marcia (1966) has expanded Erikson's ideas around this stage and describes four types of adolescent identity:

- Identity diffusion: the adolescent does not feel he/she had choices and thus does not appear willing to make a commitment to any one particular identity
- Identity foreclosure: the young person commits early, before an identity crisis has been experienced and before sufficient exploration has taken place. It is often others (ie parents or another significant adult/s) who make a decision for him/her
- Identity moratorium: this is a state in which there are a number of different options available, the adolescent is willing and able to explore these choices but he/she has not made a commitment to this as yet.
- Identity achievement: the state in which the adolescent, having gone through a crisis and through exploration, he/she makes a commitment to a sense of identity.

All of these types of identity can be closely linked with movement and moving identities expanding on arguments put forward by people like Damasio (1994), Panksepp (1998) and Schore (1994) that there is a direct connection between the body and emotions. With regard to identity in particular, Malloch and Trevarthen (2009) discuss links to Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development and argue that vitality is a concept closely connected with adolescent preferences in music and dance.

If there is a link between emotions on the one hand and music and dance on the other, it is reasonable to expect connections between Marcia's (1966) four types of identity and their manifestations in the adolescent movement and body. It is possible for example, to observe some adolescents being hooked in an undefined movement presentation if diffusion is the primary identity. Alternatively, if identity foreclosure is the main experience, they may appear prematurely old, 'wearing' the movement of another, often an adult.. They may change types of movement presentation regularly when identity moratorium is their main state, moving from presenting with a particular movement repertoire one day and with another the next. When this type of identity takes over, there is curiosity, experimentation and risk taking; adolescents try out new ways of being while looking for a fit. Finally, they may present clarity and commitment to a particular way of moving if identity achievement is reached. In this case, unlike identity foreclosure, their commitment appears as coming from the inside out rather than as something artificially adopted from the environment.

At the same time they are developing their own moral framework and social capacity for empathy. Associations with peers groups and peer relationships become extremely important, especially as they separate from their familiar family ties (Wilson 1991). Social identity theory discusses the importance of groups for

adolescents, group identity and the interpersonal benefits that may arise from a shared world view (Tajfer 1978). This becomes particularly relevant amongst adolescents when they are experiencing major transitions and when they feel vulnerable in terms of their identity. The status of their group is important in terms of defending them from perceived threats from other groups or adults and they will often denigrate other groups to help enhance their own status. Groups are also an ideal place to guide adolescents through the transition phase and to safely practise for democratic adult life, offering a space for experimentation (Malekoff 2004; Linesh1988). Group work can therefore, be an important tool for therapeutic work with adolescents. Another benefit of groups rather than individual work is that they help to combat the adolescent fear of being excluded and guard against self-consciousness (Payne 1992a). Therefore, group work within dance movement psychotherapy with this client group is common.

In summary, with so much change to manage, adolescence is a complex phase even for those young people with healthy internal resources and sufficient support in their environments. For those with significant unresolved past issues, attachment issues or environmental adversity, it can become a time of real vulnerability which threatens or prevents any healthy transitioning into adulthood. Either way, movement back and forth appears to be a characteristic of adolescent identity, while the adolescent prepares for a new future (adult) identity. The fluidity and thus movement of identity from the past to the present and future appears to be particularly relevant in this life stage.

## 2. Music and Movement Identities

When it comes to musical identities, Hargreaves et al (2002) define them as ways in which medium and longer-term taste patterns in music become part of the personal identity of the individual. Similar definition can be considered for a much less

developed concept: 'movement identities'. These can be seen as ways in which patterns of moving associated with different contextual situations including dance genres, become part of the identity of the individual.

However as with musical identities (Hargreaves et al 2002), movement identities can be seen as being in a constant state of flux, subjected and shaped by ongoing interactions with others, new dance and other movement stimuli and different movement expectations as determined by the contexts of operation. This is even truer for adolescents whose identity is a moving one as they let go of their childhood, negotiate a new adult self and experience what Marcia (1966) calls 'identity moratorium'.

The changes in musical identities as children transition from middle childhood through adolescence are discussed by Lamont (2002). Where in middle childhood the focus is on peer group comparisons, in adolescence there is a shift towards a musical identity that is closely linked with feelings and attitudes. Within the context of defined musical styles, movement identities can be seen as becoming equally important. This is particularly apparent in the stereotyped movement of the 'hip hoper', where particular gestural movements are preferred (e.g. in 'krumping') alongside bent knees, and forward hip movement (e.g. in 'breaking'), fluid movements with sudden muscle tensions and stops giving the illusion of travelling in space (e.g. in 'popping' and 'locking'), the 'rocker', who may present him/herself with loose arms and concaved torso and explosive, full-body, changes.

Multiple definitions of self are not only the result of growth. Context can also play a significant role. Referring to musical identities in particular, Lamont and Tarrant (2001) concluded that the school environment has a clear influence on children's self-descriptors as musicians and whether they self-report they are

non-musicians, playing musicians or trained musicians. Similarly, the relationship with (and availability of) existing dance classes within the school may define the type of dance identity or identities one may hold. The way dance identities are defined in the body allows for a lot of variation across contexts. An adolescent sitting in a classroom will be expected to behave and hold themselves in a very different way than when the same adolescent 'hangs out' in the school yard or when they attend a club. Different movement expectations in each of these places may be competing in shaping movement patterns that are longer lasting and deeper engrained.

The peer group adolescents may belong to will also influence their movement identity, especially when they feel under threat in this period of transitioning. As Tajfel (1978) argues, there are major interpersonal benefits for adolescents who have a shared world view. Tarrant et al (2001a) discusses the links to music preferences in helping create positive social identity and self-esteem. They argue that successful identity development is associated with positive peer relationships. Furthermore, adolescents use musical behaviours as a means of demonstrating this identity and their associated relationships (Parthurst & Asher, 1992).

However, instead of seeing the individual and the adolescent in particular as a passive recipient of external stimuli, similar to musical identities, we see movement identities as entering a 'reciprocal feedback relationship' (Hargreaves et al 2002: 12). During these significant interactions and exposures to particular movement styles may be negotiated and renegotiated in such a way that they enter longer term taste patterns. Active engagement on the part of the adolescent is a key feature to this. Unlike simply being exposed to movement interactions and/or dance/movement styles, long term taste patterns are created

when adolescents choose (and practise) a particular genre, adopt a particular dress code and listen to a particular type of music. Often active engagement also involves adopting a particular movement repertoire that is in accordance with the particular subculture chosen.

At times and when this is done in a stereotyped manner, adopting a particular musical/movement identity may function as a protection against the fear of exploration and change. In this state, the peculiarities and uniqueness of the individual can be sacrificed for a particular movement style as it offers an easy solution to an otherwise scary and uncharted future. Similar to Marcia's (1966) description of 'identity foreclosure', it offers the promise for acceptance from others, and often, in the case of fully adopting the style of a musical or movement subculture, it offers the promise of being accepted by peers. This is supported by the study completed by Brown and O'Leary (1971) who have found that adolescents used knowledge of music they liked and disliked to ensure acceptance of peers. Interestingly, the ratings they gave fluctuated depending on whether they were given in private or company of peers. It is possible that being 'cool' and thus, accepted, may also have a very particular movement manifestation that is adopted when with peers as different from when one is in the privacy of their own space.

Furthermore, given the regressive nature of adolescent identity, movement identity does not only consist of adopting a particular movement/dance style but often visiting and revisiting older developmental movement patterns. Assuming there is a direct link between motion and emotion, returning and renegotiating early object relations and developmental needs, as argued by psychotherapists such as Anna Freud (1958) and Winnicott (1965) referred to before, has a direct implication on the preferred movement patterns of the adolescent. Similarly, music

has been identified as being appealing to adolescents in addressing developmental issues (Larson and Kubey, 1983).

The style of dance adolescents are drawn to can support revisiting earlier developmental movement patterns (Dell 1977; Sherborne 1990; Amighi et al 1999). For example the “downrock” movement in break dance involves the feet and hands on the ground where the dancer demonstrates speed, coordination and importantly transitions into more athletic moves. According to Petracovschi et al (2011), push, pull and reach elements are very present in this movement. Links can be drawn between this movement and what in Kestenberg Movement Profile (Amighi et al 1999) is termed the body-based rhythm of ‘strain/release’, where assertiveness, strong will and stubbornness are developed. It is possible that practising the ‘downrock’ movement supports one’s exploration of these psychological traits, while others may find other types of movement more fitting to their developmental needs. Movement-based explorations that highlight the psychological aspects of one’s movement choices constitute the main content of dance movement psychotherapy sessions.

### 3. Dance Movement Psychotherapy for adolescents

Dance movement psychotherapy<sup>1</sup> is one of the arts therapies that uses movement and dance as a form of psychotherapy. When used with adolescents in schools, referrals to the discipline may be triggered from disruptions in class, unruly or withdrawn behaviour or concerns around the risk of developing or worsening existing mental health problems (Karkou et al 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> The discipline is also known as dance therapy, dance movement therapy, dance/movement therapy, dance-movement therapy, movement therapy and movement psychotherapy.

A couple of meta-analyses that are looking at the effectiveness of dance movement psychotherapy with adolescents have concluded that adolescents do benefit from this type of intervention (Ritter and Low 1996; Koch et al 2014). However the literature also recognizes the impact on findings of the limited number and low quality of quantitative studies, as did a study by Meekums, Karkou and Nelson (2015).

Clinical papers in the wider arts therapies literature with adolescents (e.g., Emunah 1995; Linesch 1988; Riley 1999) discuss the need to offer space for role experimentation, a key need for this client population raised in psychotherapeutic literature (e.g. Marcia 1966, Erikson 1968).

Van der Merwe (2010) discusses the use of dance movement psychotherapy for identity exploration and expression and suggests it does have a role to play in identity formation. However to date, there is no systematic analysis of the impact of this work on adolescents identity. Furthermore, adolescent movement patterns and their links to development, dance/movement preferences and identity formation amongst adolescents remain areas that are insufficiently explored in the existing literature. Equally unexplored remains our understanding of the most popular (let alone the best) way of working with this client population. Karkou and Sandeson (2006) argue that psychoanalytic/psychodynamic thinking becomes particularly relevant to practitioners who find the work with certain client populations difficult. Working with adolescents can be notoriously difficult for a number of reasons, if not because being an adolescent can be an exceptionally difficult period in one's life.

An example of how dance movement psychotherapy can be used with this client population within a mainstream school follows. Particular references will be made to ways in which therapeutic action allowed for an exploration of

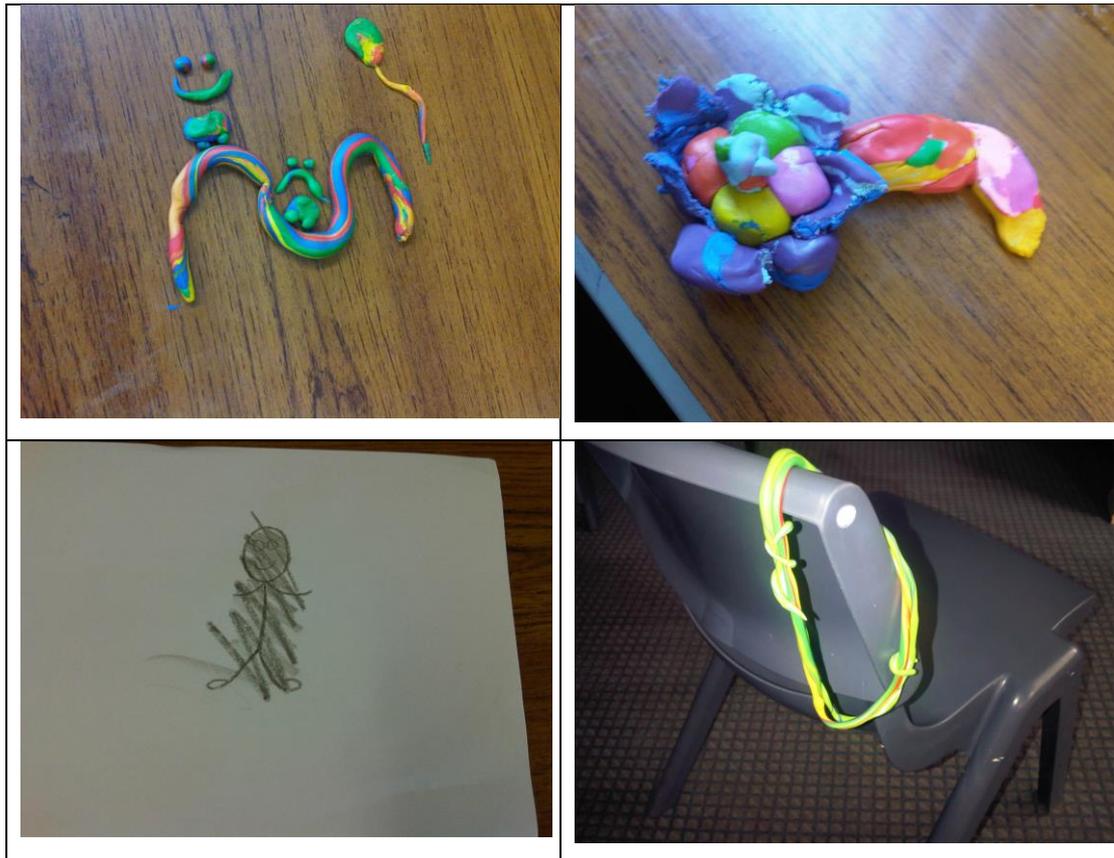
movement preferences and enabled adolescents to shape and reshape these preferences into more adaptive movement identities.

#### Case study: Working with adolescents in dance movement psychotherapy

This example is taken from a project completed by Joseph (2011) that explored the use of movement in creating opportunities for the development of self and identity. The project involved a group of seven adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 16 years. They were referred by teachers who identified issues around poor school attendance, anti-social behavior and academic under-achievement. They agreed to participate because the group was the only available support and it did not involve the usual school professionals. The students themselves identified that they would work on self-esteem, confidence and socializing skills. It seemed important to them that the group was kept confidential and out with the normal school monitoring processes.

Each session followed a similar routine. It began with a verbal check-in in a circle then a movement activity, creative reflection and closed with a verbal check-out back in the circle. In order to evaluate the work, data was generated from the art work produced by the group participants (see examples in Table 1). The verbal group discussion in the end of each session also formed part of the data collection. The therapist kept records of each session in the form of reflective notes and responded to the work through her own movement that was video-recorded. Using principles from artistic inquiry (Wadsworth-Hervey 2000), the last type of data was synthesized in a final movement piece that contributed to the creative evaluation of this work (Joseph 2011 a.).

Table 1: Images created by adolescents in dance movement psychotherapy sessions



From the beginning of the group it was apparent that the adolescent fear of being 'seen' that Payne (1992a) talked about, hindered their willingness to overtly move. The most effective method appeared to be to introduce movement through play and music, where they could be less self-conscious.

The group began with clear sub-groups. One sub-group (sub-group A) tended to present themselves with an upright, confident manner, louder voices, larger kinesphere, bigger, more directional moves and gestures. They preferred rock music to pop music and chose to interrupt the flow of the sessions by distracting or cutting across others.

Sub-group B were more ball-like (ie their torso was shaped concavely, rounded shoulders, dipped head) with small gestures and movements, appearing much more vulnerable. They did not offer any music preferences but when encouraged would acknowledge they preferred pop music; particularly popular boy bands. When they moved, their movement appeared influenced by hip-hop and pop movements; they would try to move like robots

or create the illusion of moving through space whilst actually hardly traveling. They did a lot of hip thrusting, and leg crossing and locking.

Finally, there were a couple of girls who moved between the two groups. They took on the identity of whichever group they were aligning themselves with and mirrored their movements, gestures and behaviors. When with sub-group A they 'acted out' when with sub-group B they became more gentle, considerate and conciliatory. The notes from the reflective journal of the therapist stated:

"two groups, then three, no defined circle..... doing their own thing, laughing, making fun of me." (notes from reflective journal, session 4)

Being in a group, and a sub-group in particular, appeared to be very important for this group of teenagers, supporting relevant references to this in the literature (Tajfel 1978). It enabled them to deal with their identity crisis (Erikson 1968) since, given that sufficient space was offered, it allowed for them to explore different identities. It is common for such groups to be linked with a particular music/movement preference, which as Hargreaves et al (2002) argue, if it is medium to long-lasting can become part of one's identity. If however, prematurely and rigidly identified with the one musical/movement style, they were in danger of engaging in what Marcia (1966) referred to as 'identity foreclosure'. Nevertheless, at this stage and for this group, particular music preferences, and their associated movement patterns, enabled some participants to feel connected with others in the group. Interestingly, the two girls who did not seem to be clearly affiliated with one group, appeared to explore what Marcia (1966) called 'identity moratorium', ie explore different identities, without as yet committing to one.

However over the weeks and for particular periods of time, gradually participants began to function as one group within the session, creating a new, context specific, culture. This tended to be when they all together were testing the therapist or when they felt particularly vulnerable (especially in the first five sessions); but also when the structure/activity engaged them.

With most of the girls clear movement patterns existed and some of the dominant features involved twisting of the upper torso towards the therapist when communicating with her. 'Twisting' and its associated coyness is described by Kestenberg (Amighi et al 1999) as an early developmental pattern that adolescents may have to revisit. At the same time, through twisting, participants were keeping as much of their body as possible away or shielded from sight, which is consistent with Payne's (1992a) description of adolescent fear of being 'seen'. The therapist's overwhelming sense was of awkwardness and discomfort. It was possible that while participants were revisiting earlier developmental patterns they were also faced with an 'identity crisis' (Erikson 1968), that generated awkwardness and discomfort in the way they held their bodies and moved in space. The therapist, responding to the sessions through somatic countertransference (Dosamantes-Beaudry 2007), could feel these same feelings in her own body.

During session five, participants were still requiring that the therapist took responsibility for the group. They were working and moving as one group and as sub-groups, self-conscious, reluctant to stand out or to separate from the others. They required music to be on in the room, not to move to but to fill the space. All movement tended to be with props and accompanied by music. The music was often selected by the therapist to help support the activity but the group would also request a particular music style which they used in order to support themselves into movement.

When they arrived for session five they had very little energy, they sat sunk down in their chairs, bodies defended and there was a distinct lack of sound or movement in the room. The therapist felt a rising anxiety, tension and a sense of uncertainty. In her reflective journal she notes:

"No energy, no sound, no movement. Building anxiety, still in chairs, sunk down" (notes from reflective journal, session 5).

Her sense was to try and support them relax and become more centered. For this she suggested that they blew bubbles as an opportunity for them to focus on their breath, connect with an early developmental stage (resembling the

'oral' stage in Kestenberg terms) and explore shifting from breath and 'oral rhythms' to different, more adult, rhythms. It also created an opportunity to play, which was important to them.

The immediate response was almost transformational. They began rhythmically blowing bubbles and the room had a calmness that had never been experienced before. Initially the group shared a common rhythm but as time passed they started to become more intently focused on their own process of blowing bubbles and were observed beginning to separate from each other and the group. They turned their bodies away from the group, the focus on breath seemed to have created a moment for them to arrive in their bodies, to become more centered, settled, emotionally available and independent of others. For the first time they seem prepared to be seen as individuals. Hartley (2004) suggests that we create our sense of identity by awareness of what is self and not self through drawing of boundaries; the primary boundary being skin. By using breath the girls have arrived in their bodies perhaps become more aware of their physical boundaries, ribs, chest cavity, skin, with their perception extending to understanding physical boundaries between self and other.

It seemed as if they had moved some of the ambivalence and anxiety of the identity moratorium phase (Marcia 1966); becoming inwardly focused and boundaried helped this. The need for subgroups became less important as they formed one single group.

Furthermore, in sharing one rhythm (in this case an 'oral rhythm' in Kestenberg terms), enabled them to join together as one group with a clear sense of physical separateness, finding their own identity as individuals but still within the one group. It gradually started shaping into a much more mature and age-appropriate rhythm for them (i.e. a 'swaying' rhythm in Kestenberg terms - Amighi et al 1999). From then onwards and through several dyadic and group connections, more mature rhythms seemed to be commonly presented by the group members, especially fluctuating between an indulgent (swaying) and a fighting (surging/birthing) rhythm in particular, a rhythmical exploration that

was highly relevant to this group of young women as it is seen as linked with the psychosexual development of inner genitals. The fact that this rhythm persisted, a rhythm that was coming from the inside out, indicated that a degree of what Marcia (1966) called 'identity achievement' was reached, one that was to be further explored and consolidated long after the end of the particular group.

## Conclusions

It appears that since adolescence is largely an exploration of identity, a movement-based intervention such as dance movement psychotherapy allows space and encourages explorations that may be particularly beneficial in terms of forming new identities. However, it seems that the work on movement identities, an extension and link from the literature in music identities has only recently begun. As such this area of work is still highly underdeveloped within dance movement psychotherapy and related literature. However, it is an area that has a lot to offer to different client populations and certainly, as a movement-based intervention, has a lot to offer to the particular client population.

Further research in this area that explores the formation of adolescent identity would be of particular interest. The use of multiple types of data collected specifically on identity formation would allow for deeper and more solid understanding of how movement identity can be achieved, and adolescents struggling to grow into adulthood, with or without mental health problems, can be best supported.

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