

Forming therapeutic relationships in Dance Movement Psychotherapy: The Role of Mirroring

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Dance Movement Psychotherapy values the formation of therapeutic relationships as important for therapeutic change. This is a view supported by research studies (Frank and Frank 1991) and relevant theoretical papers (Clarkson 1994) for all types of psychotherapy. However, in Dance Movement Psychotherapy the presence of movement/dance creates a slightly different type of relationship than this present in verbal psychotherapies. We call it the 'triangular relationship' (Karkou and Sanderson 2006) in which the client, the therapist and the dance can be seen as represented in each one of the three corners of this triangle. The triangular relationship can take the form of a number of different interactions: (i) active interaction, (ii) projected, (iii) interaction in which the client is the artist, (iv) interaction with the therapist is the artist. When an 'active' interaction is in operation, 'mirroring' (otherwise known as 'empathetic reflection' or 'kinaesthetic empathy') plays a central role.

Mirroring, in the way it is often practised in Dance Movement Psychotherapy, has originated as a therapeutic technique from Marian Chace (Chaiklin and Schmais 1986) in the 30s and 40s and has been extensively used with clients who were largely difficult to engage through verbal means such as children with autism (Kalish 1968) and adults with schizophrenia (Sandel and Johnson 1983). Since then it has developed into a central technique in Dance Movement Psychotherapy practice with a wide range of different client groups (Berrol 2006; Wengrower 2010) that reflects the important role of empathy within this practice and its strong influences from humanistic psychotherapy (Karkou 1998; Karkou and Sanderson 2006). Currently, mirroring receives renewed attention from dance movement psychotherapists, other professionals and researchers due to discoveries in neuroscience regarding mirror neurons in particular (Rizzolatti et al 1996). The function of mirror neurons offers a more comprehensive picture of some physiological reasons of why mirroring can be an effective way of engaging clients in the therapeutic process. However studies in the connection between the actual Dance Movement Psychotherapy practice and brain activity (Margariti 2009) and observation studies on differences between watching and embodying emotions in clinical situations (Winters 2008) are still in their early days.

In this paper, the concept and practice of mirroring within Dance Movement Psychotherapy is discussed and its value, uses and limitations are explored through an extensive review of recent research literature. Links with Stern's (1985) concept of 'affect attunement' and Trevarthen's (1979) 'intersubjectivity' are drawn, while areas for future research are identified.

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