Women in Motion:

Experiences with Contact & Movement Improvisation

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Abstract

This research uses a grounded theory approach to examine women's experiences in contact and movement improvisation communities. Eight women ages 26 to 54 were interviewed regarding their initial experiences with contact improvisation, their current experiences, and their motivations for participation. The four main themes from these interviews are Motivation, Physiology and Psychology, Safety, and Community and Society. Based on the responses it seems that contact and movement improvisation provides a space for participants that may temporarily lessen the pressures they feel from patriarchal society. However, contact and movement improvisation does not exist in a vacuum and societal norms still permeate these communities.

Keywords: Contact Improvisation, Movement Improvisation, Women, Society, Community, Motivation, Mind Body Connection, Freedom, Gender

Introduction

Contact improvisation is a form of dance or movement improvisation. In contact improvisation, physical points of contact between two dancers serve as the motivator for exploration and movement. Unlike other dance forms, contact improvisation is not focused on the experience of the audience but rather the experience of those involved in the process of exploring movement, space, gravity, and orientation together.

This paper will review a qualitative study that I conducted to better understand the impact of contact and movement improvisation on participants. Contact and movement improvisation has been a part of my life for the past 7 years and in that time it has had a profound impact on me. The connection between mind and body is frequently referenced and discussed but has rarely been looked at in this way, specifically with research into contact improvisation. I will present relevant literature about contact improvisation. I will also outline the methods and procedure for this qualitative study. The themes that were discovered as part of the study will be presented. Additionally, I will discuss the importance and implications of these themes.

Literature Review

Contact improvisation began in New York City in 1972 with dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton. Paxton has a background in various movement forms including martial arts and tumbling. He began challenging the assumptions about how dance is defined and what movement could be considered dance (Contact Quarterly). In 1972 he invited students and colleagues, many of whom were from Oberlin College, to join him in a two-week project that was the first exploration into what is now considered contact improvisation. Today contact improvisation is practiced worldwide by a variety of movers including professionally trained dancers, artists, musicians, elderly, and those with different physical ability levels.

Contact improvisation is a type of movement improvisation. Improvisers gather together for what is usually referred to as a

'jam'. Jams usually begin with of some sort of independent warm up time, which frequently consists of improvisers doing stretches, yoga, or meditation. The contact improvisation portion frequently begins with a prompt for improvisers. This prompt can be something like "Find a partner and connect your shoulder with theirs. Now explore all of the ways you can move through space without breaking at least one point of contact between the two of you. Try moving with high energy and low energy. Try to both lead and follow. Try to have neither of you lead, neither of you follow." Prompts such as this can serve as an ice breaker and allow improvisers to get used to moving differently than they do in their every day lives. Eventually the movement in the room starts deviating from the initial prompt and improvisers begin moving based on what feels 'right' for them in that moment. They may chose not to use contact with another person as a motivator for movement but instead they use points of contact with the floor and walls as a starting point for their motion through the space. The goals of participating in contact and movement improvisation are different for every improviser. Some who are professional dancers and choreographers use contact improvisation to help inform their professional lives. Others may view contact and movement improvisation similar to yoga in their goals for participation. When contact improvisation first emerged one of the primary goals was to challenge what is considered dance, while taking the emphasis away from the experience of the audience and focusing on the experience of the dancer.

Given contact improvisation's relatively young age and the fact that it is mainly viewed as solely a dance form, there is little psychological research surrounding contact and movement improvisation and its impact. Very little research has been published on contact and movement improvisation. Sarah Houston (2009) conducted research surrounding the experiences of male prisoners who participated in contact improvisation while inmates at an English maximum-security prison. Houston focused on the taboo surrounding touch, specifically in an

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all male maximum-security prison environment. Houston also examined the value of touch that is non-confrontational and non-sexual on inmates.

Houston notes inmates are part of a unique population because “prisoners also suffer from the deprivation of autonomy and security” (Houston, 2009, 98). She asserts that because of this, personal space becomes highly valued and touch may break down the set of defenses that prisoners have built up in order to not be vulnerable to their lack of autonomy. Houston argues that the taboo against touch is not necessarily linked to concerns surrounding personal safety but more connected to societal codes of behavior. She further emphasizes this, by pointing out that the taboo surrounding touch in prisons reinforces the societal idea that inmates are untouchable outcasts (Houston, 2009). Houston notes that the prisoners involved in the contact improvisation workshop expressed benefits surrounding being able to ‘let go’ and the egalitarian nature of the form. Leaders of these workshops were not positioned as having control or authority over the inmates, thus creating a space for everyone to come together as equals.

Houston discusses community as a main benefit of contact improvisation in this prison population stating, “In creating a dancing community, and attempting to create a community within the general prison population, the inmates had ceased to be untouchables, or isolated individuals. Despite an inherent unpredictability within the movement form, the certainty lay in the shared experience and the trust that it engendered.” (Houston, 2009, 111). While very informative, the Houston (2009) study focuses on a very specific population. It is unclear if these or similar experiences and benefits would be found in another population.

Rationale

Due to the lack of research on the topic, I was curious regarding the experiences of women with contact and movement improvisation. Specifically, I wanted to explore women’s motivations for participating in these communities and what benefits they gained from participation. Through this study I hoped to gain

a better understanding of the realities of women who participate in this movement form.

Methods

This study aimed to use the grounded theory approach in order to gather qualitative information regarding women’s experiences with contact improvisation. Women were recruited to participate in this study from the Chicago Contact Improvisation Community at the weekly jam. During the closing circle, those present were told about the nature of this research and given the opportunity to talk with me and ask questions about this project after the jam formally concluded. Additionally, participants were recruited using the Chicago Contact Improvisation Facebook page. Women who were interested were encouraged to contact me via email or Facebook message.

Each interview lasted an average of 30 to 60 minutes. Participants were asked questions surrounding their motivations, processes, and experiences related to contact and movement improvisation. Participants were also asked about the role contact and movement improvisation plays in their lives. All participants reviewed and signed a completed consent form. All methods and procedures for this study were reviewed and approved by the Roosevelt University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Social/Personal Location

I first discovered contact and movement improvisation at the beginning of my undergraduate career at Knox College in Galesburg Illinois. It was from my experiences in that movement improvisation course, and the subsequent community that formed, that my ideas regarding how the body impacts psychology were shaped. As a queer woman contact and movement improvisation was an integral part of how I coped with my depression and my identity as a survivor of rape. Years later, when I returned to Chicago, I became a part of the Chicago Contact Improvisation Community. My personal exploration into my motivations and experiences with this form inspired me to do this research.

Participants

A total of eight improvisers were interviewed for this study with ages ranging from 26 to 54 years old. Six of the participants self identified as female while the other two identified as gender-fluid or gender-queer. The Chicago Contact Improvisation Weekly Jam is a drop in gathering and no commitment is required of participants. The eight improvisers interviewed had all been participating in contact and movement improvisation for different lengths of time, from 5 years to over 20 years. Those who were interviewed also had varying frequencies that they came to the jam with some coming almost weekly and others attending a jam once every two months. Each participant was given a pseudonym, which will be used when referencing them throughout this research (Amy, Brooke, Cindy, Daisy, Emma, Faith, Gwen, and Hannah).

Results

My analysis of participant responses revealed four major themes in how participants described their experiences with contact and movement improvisation.

Motivation

Challenge. Many participants brought up how the challenging aspects of contact improvisation served as a motivator for continued participation in contact improvisation communities. Most participants first began their involvement with contact improvisation while they were participating in other more technical dance training, either in high school or college. Among participants, it seemed common that part of the initial motivations for continuing contact improvisation was the challenge of gaining new technical movement skills that could then be transferred to other dance forms.

Emma has been a member of the contact improvisation community for many years. She organizes and leads contact improvisation jams and even travels internationally to work at contact improvisation conferences. Emma talked about challenge and contact improvisation in this way,

I feel like [...] these past couple years have been [...] a little turning point in my experience with contact improv. I deeply value it and I'm in a place where I'm not feeling very challenged by my particular dance community, right now, physically challenged and artistically challenged, and that's hard and frustrating for me. And I know that the form itself is always there to meet me and for me to meet it as a form.

For Emma, the challenging aspects of contact improvisation were important to her experience as well as a part of her motivation for participation.

Freedom. Every participant discussed freedom in some way as being an important part of their motivations for participating.

Throughout her interview, Amy shared a lot about her experience with depression and how contact improvisation helped her in many ways. Freedom is one way that Amy expressed contact improvisation helped her process and cope with her depression.

...it was a place that I could go and I could dance exactly how I wanted to. Without having

to, if I was upset I could dance that out- if I was happy I could find that release. [...] It was like, this is a group of people that I can relate to and I just want to play around. And I could just I have the freedom to be wherever I was at that moment. I could just be upset or happy. I could just be myself in that moment and no matter what happened to me, there were people around me that I could dance with. Like that was the freedom of being able to actually express myself.

For Amy, contact improvisation provided a space for her to explore a wide range of emotions while also being free from the judgment of others. Brooke talked about the freedom she feels in contact and movement improvisation in relation to gender roles.

I feel like there's never an expectation, nobody is forcing you to do something

and you're never [...] (experiencing) unequal gender dynamics. I think that people's ways of relating to each other, in the sort of movement that is associated with the person's gender identity, is much more free.

Physiology & Psychology

Physical Contact. Four of the participants expressed that making physical contact with others during contact improvisation was a beneficial and important part of their experience. Amy discussed her experience of craving physical contact with other people because of her small social circles. Amy said, "having physical contact with people in a creative environment was very powerful for me." Gwen, shared a similar perspective stating, "I like the physical contact with people. [...] I'm single and there are times when it's nice to just be able to be physical with people". With Amy, Gwen, and the other participants there seemed to be an acknowledgement that the non-verbal, physical interactions with others was an important part of their experience. Hannah explains that for her the benefits of physical contact with others connects to her emotional and psychological health. Hannah explains one of the important needs that the contact improvisation jam community fulfills for her, "I need human touch, it is super important to my health and happiness and well-being and sense of self in connection with other." Both Amy and Hannah use powerful language to describe the importance of physical contact with others saying it was a craving or a need.

Mind-Body Connection. Other participants like Daisy placed less value on the actual physical contact with other people and expressed that there are other physical benefits to participating in contact and movement improvisation. Daisy suggested:

But the philosophy of it is so solid and so helpful and healing too. I think [...] it's always possible to find a way to engage in it in a way that feels comfortable for you. Even if that means dancing near other people and not actually making physical contact. I don't

think you have to make a lot of contact, physical contact, in order to benefit from contact improvisation I feel like just being around it is already beneficial.

Like Daisy, Faith also expressed that for her it is not the physical contact with others that is essential to her experience but how the physical aspects of contact and movement improvisation shape the way she views the connection between her mind and body.

I think that the physiological and psychological are really intertwined and often mirror each other in a way that we don't allow for in our regular everyday thinking. Like the way that I feel about myself impacts the way that I hold my body. The way that I feel about other people impacts the way that I move around them. So I think that there's a lot of ways that I've been surprised sometimes. [...] I think I had some inclination around that on an intellectual level like 'the body is an integral part of the self'. Then in contact it's been a space where in going and practicing and playing and moving that is felt. It is like something I notice on an emotional level but I experience as a physical reality.

Gwen, who acknowledged the importance of physical contact, also brought up the connection or disconnection that can be felt between mind and body saying that she goes to contact improvisation to "get me back in my body." For her it seems that contact improvisation helps to reestablish the connection between cognitive and physiological; joining them together into a more unified sense of self. For Hannah the connection between mind and body seemed to go much deeper.

I grew up looking outside myself for right and wrong and that is important as a child. And I, if I have children would like to teach what right and wrong feels like your body because there is that response too. I believe that with the right influence that we can understand what right and wrong is and we actually deep down have that. It is just about

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how much film and how much other messaging has been taint(ing) of that core understanding of that, of right and wrong. And I believe that, I feel that in my body when my body is expansive to a yes and contractive to a no.

For Hannah the connection between mind and body that contact and movement improvisation reaffirms is not just about being present in one's body but about listening to one's body for better personal understanding.

Safety

Because of the intimate and vulnerable nature of contact and movement improvisation safety was a theme that was brought up throughout the interviews. Most participants described the contact improvisation jams as a safe place to freely explore their movement impulses. Four of the women brought up shortcomings to the safety that contact improvisation jams provide.

For Daisy, safety involves feeling a sense of "self empowerment or agency". Daisy described autonomy as being a major component of how safe she feels in contact improvisation environments. For Hannah, safety seems to come from approaching contact with strangers in a mindful way. Hannah explained how when dancing with strangers for the first time the parts of her body that are available for physical contact are usually limited to hands, arms and upper back. As she gets more comfortable and feels safer with the other dancers possibilities begin to open up.

Cindy shared in her interview about two different contact improvisation dances with two different men. When Cindy first started participating in contact improvisation she had a sexually charged dance with another improver. She described feeling uncertain about the sexual energy that was part of that interaction. Cindy then went on to share an interaction with a different dancer:

And then there was this one person who just gave me really weird vibes. [...] With the first guy I just kind of felt like it just happened which seems more acceptable to me. But this other guy was

an older man and I felt like he was specifically looking for that and he was always dancing with the younger girls who were new. And I guess, yeah, that felt a little violating being like 'Oh what if he's just some creep and he's not really interested in dance or these values that I have and he was just here to be titillated in a particular way'. That's very exploitative and feels like what happens to young women in the world all the time.

Gwen shared a similar experience to Cindy's. While at one of the weekly contact improvisation jams, Gwen was dancing with a man who began moving in a sexually inappropriate way. She felt uncomfortable with the dance that was occurring and was eventually able to exit the dance. Afterwards, she discussed her experience with the jam leader that day, who is also male. Gwen explained to me that initial response from the jam leader was that she should not attend the jam for a couple weeks in order to give the jam leader time to talk to the dancer who moved in a way that made Gwen feel violated. Following this event there were many email threads, phone calls, and eventually an in person meeting (which I was a part of) in an attempt to look at creating a space where something like this will not happen again. The in person meeting consisted of two jam organizers or leaders and about 4 jam participants most of whom identified as women. One of the things that was looked at during the in person meeting was the current guidelines or rules for the weekly contact and improvisation jam. Gwen along with other women in the community offered suggestions regarding how the guidelines could better support people on the receiving end of inappropriate touch in the weekly jam. Ultimately, no guidelines were ever changed and the organizational structure of the jam remained the same. During my interview with Gwen she reflected on how she thinks about safety in the contact improvisation community now that this has occurred.

There [is] the focus on risk reduction rather than prevention and they keep

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going back to risk reduction - 'it's your responsibility'. Which to me it's interesting that it's the default. And that is so ingrained in our society, apparently, that even within the contact community, which naïvely thought it would be much more progressive and understanding about it, it isn't. [...] Yeah you know, I mean he is gone and it wasn't, I wasn't traumatized by it- it wasn't that horrific at all. It wasn't that bad. It could've got to that point but I exited before [...] It's just kind of ironic because part of me feels like I could just go now [...] I mean it's the same rules and I was fine with it. But now that it's happened and this issue got brought up and it hasn't been dealt with- I don't feel comfortable dancing in that environment. I don't feel comfortable. I feel like people haven't been supportive of me, that I've kind of been ostracized, the onus has been put on me to handle it. I don't feel welcome because contact is this... I mean if contact was something like ice skating [...] but you gotta touch people.

Gwen's experiences emphasize how critical feeling safe in contact and movement improvisation settings are to having a beneficial experience.

Community & Society

Community. Many of the participants brought up as sense of community as being a beneficial aspect of contact improvisation. For Amy, the sense of community that contact improvisation provided was a major component to how she coped with her depression.

I was very much needing those elements because I was still dealing with depression, still dealing with very alone feelings and those were all addressed in [...] the contact improvisation community.

Critiques of Community & Society.

Almost all of the participants talked about while contact improvisation offers a space that allows for freedom from many societal pressures and

codes of behavior, contact improvisation is not separate from society. Social roles, beliefs, and ideals are all at least a subtle part of contact improvisation communities.

Brooke explains her view of contact improvisation and movement in general within larger society.

I think that contact offers a sort of almost utopian vision of that. And this sort of space

where we can re imagine the ways that our bodies work together and the power that we have over bodies and interactions between people. And explore that and with people who are both curious about it and feel similarly- feel like they want to kind of go to that way of being. So yes, I think there is definitely a lot of, obviously there's tons of gender inequality and I think that there is [this] every day sort of subtle misogyny and patriarchy that goes into all of our movements.

Cindy shared how her view of contact improvisation and the connection to larger society has changed.

I guess at first I just felt like [...] I was just so naïve for thinking that it's some kind of isolated dance or art world where we can put aside all the crap of the world, all these values that I don't believe in. Then we will enter the space into a continuum of shifting identities and no hierarchy. And I feel like, no everything that happens in the world happens in the jam and in every dance studio. It's not like you check the racial-political-sexual thing as soon as you enter the door.

Emma also discussed her realizations regarding how societal values and ideals have influenced contact improvisation.

I feel like, in this point, I see the power structures of how contact has happened. And I feel more both engaged and critical of it but also I'm experiencing a little bit of disengagement and I think

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this just happens over the long-term with any art form. I watch the dynamics of who gets paid and who doesn't. Art and labor as part of the economy and my experience with that, of traveling and teaching and getting paid or not getting paid and having all of these very interesting underlying ideas come to the surface. [...] It's a very white dance form, it's very middle-class, it's become a lot more straight than its origins.

Faith shared her view on contact improvisation and how it is situated within society.

I'm really happy I have access to it. I think another part to me since we're talking about gender and whatever else, in terms of contact, that I think is really essential to my understanding of why I feel comfortable and how I've come upon it. I came upon it because I went to a predominantly white liberal arts private school. Those aspects around class and race are also a big part of what- I am one of the only people of color who shows up regularly to the jam. And also around class and ways that feels accessible to me. And how I was raised. [...] It originated as a white liberal arts thing in the 60s so I think historically it's been [...] that way. It also has the problem that a lot of predominately white upper-class things have. Where it's hard for it to not perpetuate that, especially when you show up to a place and don't see people like yourself. Especially with something like this where you are asked to be in intimate contact with other people. So as a baseline you have to be comfortable being touched by other people who are already there. So it is kind of a thing in and of itself.

My interview with Gwen prompted her to connect her experience to society in a way she had not previously conceptualized. Gwen connected her experience surrounding inappropriate touch and the response of

leadership and the jam community with similar issues she has witnessed in society as a whole.

I do feel it's really about privilege and patriarchy. It's funny because before all this happened, if you had interviewed me about this, I would've been thinking more in terms of being a woman [in] contact, because I know that is your basic topic, just how men might want to lift you. And whether I lift a man and that kind of issue. [...] The wider society is reflected with like rape culture, is reflected in the contact world [...] I haven't thought of it this way until talking to you right now in these gender, sexist issues because it is a gender-neutral form but now I'm just realizing it has [this] pervasive community structure over it.

Discussion

Motivations

Freedom was the most common theme among those interviewed with every interviewee referencing it in some way. There are many restrictions placed on movement especially in the public sphere. The range of acceptable movements is limited and frequently coded based on gender. For many it was the freedom that the space of the jam provided that played a role in motivating them to continue participation in the jam and community. The jam and movement improvisation as a whole provides space for participants to explore what movements feel fulfilling in the moment. Contact and movement improvisation gives participants freedom to listen and connect with their bodies without fear of judgment. It allows for participants to explore a whole range of movements; ones coded masculine, feminine, or that fall somewhere outside that binary.

Contact and movement improvisation also comes with a unique set of physical and psychological challenges. The physical challenge comes from exploring new or unusual ways of moving that are not normally encountered in daily life. In contact improvisation, physical challenges can also arise

from discovering how to safely support someone else's weight or figuring out how to move and fall in ways that help prevent injury. The psychological challenges come from listening and being in tune with the physical self. In contact improvisation, this also involves listening and reading other people's body language. Similarly to meditation, improvisation involves being fully present and physically aware in the moment- not thinking about the next move or the one previous but moving in the moment without judgment or censorship.

Physiology and Psychology

Physical contact stood out as an important component of contact improvisation because it is not something that most people get regularly in their day-to-day interactions unless they are living with family or loved ones. For Amy, Gwen, and Hannah contact improvisation was fulfilling their need for physical contact because that need was not getting met in their daily lives. There are many social scripts guiding norms surrounding physical contact with others. This limits the ways in which people express themselves. Hannah's experience with needing physical contact in order to thrive is one that many can relate to. Physical contact with another can serve to break down feelings of isolation, reaffirm the bonds of community, and help foster a stronger identity with self.

The connection between mind and body is an important one. Often times in Western society, people are conditioned to move only in ways that are socially acceptable. This often starts at a young age when children are told to sit still and ignore their body's impulse to move and explore. This conditioning continues into adulthood and the acceptable range of movements gets smaller and is different based on gender. This limiting of acceptable movements further conditions people not to listen to their natural impulses surrounding movement. This breaks down the ability for people to genuinely connect and listen to themselves on a physical level. As a result, people can have a difficult time being in tune or present in their body. In Western society this connection is frequently overlooked. This can be

seen in many areas of Western culture, one example would be the Western medical institutions. Rarely are patients treated holistically. Instead there are separated doctors and specialists for each area of the body and for psychological issues. These two groups rarely work together to treat patients in a unified manner. It is very common for Western society to view mind and body as complete opposites competing for control but in reality both mind and body come together to make a whole. For Daisy, Faith, Gwen, and Hannah, contact and movement improvisation provided a space for them to explore being present both physically and emotionally. Having time and space to be connected and present both physiologically and psychologically is a noteworthy benefit of contact and movement improvisation because it can help participants feel a more unified, cohesive sense of self and gain a better understanding of their identities.

Safety

While the contact improvisation jam is a space where many participants feel a sense of freedom and a profound connection to their bodies, there needs to be feelings of safety in the space and with the community in order for this to occur. At the Chicago Contact Improvisation Jam and on their website there is a list of guidelines that cover physical safety, personal boundaries, communication, and sexual behavior. While these guidelines come from good intentions, Cindy and Gwen's experiences highlight the limitations of having safety reliant on a written document. Their experiences and concerns surrounding safety emphasize that safety is not just a set of rules but to be effective it is a culture that is shared and enforced by members of the community. If participants do not feel safe within the space and community they will likely not experience the other benefits that these women have discussed. For participants a sense of safety must come first.

Community and Society

A sense of community is something that is essential. The sense of freedom that many of the interviewees expressed was related to

contact improvisation being free from societal pressures and norms. Some participants did point out that while contact improvisation communities can seem like a utopian space, they are not free from issues related to the patriarchal society these communities are situated in. It is appealing and comforting to many to view contact improvisation as this completely separate space in the world where everyone can just be themselves and race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and ability are not seen and do not matter. Faith discussed how while contact improvisation can provide a space to explore movement in way that are freeing of social, political, gendered, and racial confines because of the origins of contact improvisation and the way that it is traditionally experienced access to contact improvisation by people of color is limited. In reality, contact improvisation communities may allow space for these identities to be less consuming than in everyday life, but contact and movement improvisation does not exist in a vacuum. While many feel like contact and movement improvisation is its own world, it is not. People enter the space with their own baggage from the outside world as a product of the society around them. Dynamics, movement patterns, and interactions with others are all influenced by the larger context that the improvisation is occurring within. Contact and movement improvisation does allow a certain freedom to explore and challenge the ideas of race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and ability while not being completely separate from them.

Implications

Future Research. Future research on the experiences of those who have left contact improvisation communities, the experiences of those with different physical ability levels, the benefits people feel immediately following participation, the experiences of men, and those in the queer community, in addition to further studies surrounding women's experiences, would greatly add to the limited body of knowledge and research on contact and movement improvisation.

Recommendations. Safety was a major theme that was noted by participants.

Ultimately, participants are responsible for their own safety and setting boundaries that feel appropriate for them; but, organizationally, there are things that can be changed in order to foster that sense of agency among participants. The following are my recommendations for creating a safer space for contact improvisation. Creating a sense of community, even in contact improvisation jam environments that are set up as 'drop ins' - where people come and go freely, is an essential first step. Fostering an environment where participants feel like they are a part of a collective community helps to nourish a sense of agency within participants, thus making it easier for people to share their experiences and concerns about safety. Additionally, developing a sense of community will also encourage a more collectivist ideology, which can reinforce the idea that if the jam is not safe for one person it is not safe for anyone.

It is also important to note that while contact improvisation jams can appear to be an egalitarian environment, separate from the rest of the world, these spaces do not exist separately but are part of the larger society and culture around it. Society permeates everything, so the same systems of power and privilege seen in the outside world can be found in different forms within contact improvisation communities. This means that, while some groups may feel like contact improvisation jams allow them space where they feel a great sense of agency to explore their needs or set up boundaries, other groups may feel unheard, voiceless, or even unwelcome. Thus, it is important to nourish a space that allows for all participants to feel autonomous and empowered. Listening, not necessarily in the traditional sense, is a main component of contact and movement improvisation. When first learning either of these forms participants are reminded to listen to their bodies or the bodies of those they are in contact with. Listening to yourself or your movement partner is difficult but it allows for rich and fulfilling dances and experiences. Taking that same ability to listen and translating

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it back to the traditional auditory definition is critical to fostering a space where participants have agency. Organizers, leaders, and other community members need to be able to listen to the words of those who do not feel comfortable or safe within the community with the same intensity that they listen to one another's movements. While contact and movement improvisation has egalitarian ideals and all participants help shape the community, in order for a real shift in culture to occur it has to begin with the leaders and organizers. Leaders and organizers must model the cultural shift that is desired. This includes giving space to those whose voices might not be heard otherwise.

I believe that doing this will ultimately create a community that is fairly self-sufficient. Those participants with questionable intent will either conform to the community's cultural standard for behavior or be swiftly removed from the community by the community itself. It will build an environment that creates space for more dialogue to occur.

Conclusion

Ultimately, I believe that contact and movement improvisation is something that everyone can benefit from in some way, shape, or form. The experiences shared by the women in this research speak to the benefits of participation in contact or movement improvisation. The challenging and freeing qualities of contact improvisation motivated on going participation from those women interviewed. Contact and movement improvisation allows for the breaking of social taboos surrounding touch by providing a space for participants to be in physical contact with other people. It also provides a space for participants to explore and strengthen the connection between mind and body- allowing for a more unified sense of self. Safety is one of the most crucial elements of contact and movement improvisation; this not only includes physical safety but psychological safety as well. Participants need to feel safe and supported within the space and community in order to achieve the other benefits discussed. While the communities that are established via contact and

movement improvisation practices can be extremely beneficial and profoundly fulfilling for participants; it is important to remember that these communities do not exist separate from the rest of the world- racial, socio-political, and sexist ideology permeate Western society and thus seep into these communities as well. Acknowledgement of how patriarchal power systems are reflected in these spaces is the first step in creating contact and movement improvisation communities free of these structures of power and privilege.

Personal Reflection

I thought I knew what was next; I have realized I do not. Learning to embrace, live, and exist in that uncertainty has been profoundly liberating. Movement improvisation is not knowing what is next and living in that. It is entering a space and improvising your way through, without expectation, without dictation – with only your present reality, at that moment, and contact with a partner or with the floor guiding you through. Because of this, for me, contact and movement improvisation has become a metaphor for life.

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