

Healing Through Movement: The Benefits of Belly Dance for Gendered Victimization

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Abstract

Perceptions of “belly dance” are that it is degrading, exploitive, and incongruous to feminism. Curiously, however, the dance is incredibly popular in various parts of the world, including the United States, as a form of recreation and creative expression. This article examines the apparent disconnect between public perception and practitioner standpoint. Findings indicate a strong holistic healing component, particularly in terms of gendered interpersonal victimization, where belly dance seems to hold potential for self-exploration and discovery. Grounded historically, culturally, and empirically, these findings are discussed in terms of their application to social work practice, as it relates to alternative therapies.

Keywords

coping, empowerment, feminist theories and research, gender-based violence, health and well-being, research categories, social work/social welfare history and philosophy

Belly dance (also commonly known as Middle Eastern dance, Arabic dance, or oriental dance)¹ carries a negative connotation as something degrading, exploitive, and antifeminist. Such negative perceptions arise from a variety of sources related to colonial expansion, tourism, media, entertainment, and globalization. They have developed over the last several hundred years and cumulatively represent gendered commodification and objectification of female performers in the Middle East, North Africa, and greater Mediterranean region. For example, women portrayed in Orientalist writings and paintings were often depicted as voluptuous, seminude, and sexually inviting objects within harem or public settings, such as slave markets. Such images appeared throughout the global West’s Victorian era, providing provocative and controversial renderings about a foreign Other (Carlton, 1994; MacMaster & Lewis, 1998).

Greater credence was given to these misconceptions through various public spectacles in the late 1800s and early 1900s. For example, the Algerian, Moroccan, and Egyptian “dancing girls” who were brought to the 1893 World Columbian Exposition (Chicago World’s Fair) became notorious

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for their “hootchy kootchy” dance (Carlton, 1994). Oscar Wilde’s orientalist spin on the meaning of the dance was less than positive in the 1894 tragedy, *Salome* (Carlton, 1994; Deagon, 2005). The over 200 movies filmed on location in North Africa throughout the early and mid-1900s also promoted negative stereotypes (Dougherty, 2005; MacMaster & Lewis, 1998).

Contemporary interdisciplinary research indicates that belly dance is much more than these common perceptions suggest. Practitioners view the dance as a creative means of expression regardless of background, experience, skill level, or health status. The dance seems to allow space for women to use their bodies in self-defined ways that facilitate creative exploration. Based on 10 years of fieldwork which culminated in 67 semistructured interviews with American belly dancers, I assert that belly dance may serve as mode of movement-based therapy with relevance to feminist social work practice. In particular, I examine the facilitative function belly dance may hold for the holistic healing (interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit) related to gendered victimization (interpersonal harm that disproportionately occurs to and/or targets women).

Conceptual Framework

Belly dance represents a modern, and largely Westernized, adaptation of various dances that originated throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and Mediterranean region over the last several thousand years (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005). It is considered a derivative of the oldest documented dances, with archeological evidence dating to 3400 BCE (from ancient Egypt and the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea) suggesting it was an important part of ritual, celebration, and community activities within ancient societies (Baring & Cashford, 1993; Stewart, 2000). Specifically, dance in this region has been used in rituals for spirits and various gods or goddesses, as a means of ensuring a strong harvest, and warding off disease. It has also been used within holiday celebrations, courtship practices, marriage ceremonies, and funeral rites, and may have been used as a form of sex education, pregnancy preparation, and birthing support for young women (Dinicu, 2000; Mourat, 2000; Stewart, 2000).

Given its eclectic lineage, belly dance remains largely uncodified in terms of set movements and structure. In its contemporary use, belly dance is a highly individualized, expressive, and often improvised form of movement. Its technique and stylization is in constant evolution, which makes it ideal for personalization (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005). It has become popular among non-Middle Eastern women in recent years, particularly in the United States. However, research has just begun to examine its holistic benefits. Within the guise that most women practice it (leisure, exercise, and recreation; Moe, 2012), belly dance has been correlated with greater confidence, body acceptance, self-esteem, and happiness (Paul, 2006). It has also been associated with reducing stress and encouraging physical fitness, personal growth, and spirituality (Bock & Borland, 2011; Downey, Reel, SooHoo, & Zerbib, 2010; Kraus, 2010; Moe, 2011; Paul, 2006). Moreover, belly dance is often seen as an outlet for social support and community building (Moe, 2012, in press; Paul, 2006). Underscoring the relevance of individualized creativity and stylization, these benefits have been associated directly to the level of freedom and autonomy allowed through belly dancing (Bock & Borland, 2011). However, direct substantive connections between belly dance and holistic healing are lacking.

Holistic health refers to a distinct paradigm for how and why people become ill (illness is conceptualized broadly to include all forms of physical, emotional, and mental debilitations) and what is necessary for healing. This paradigm is premised on a complete notion of being, such that disease is envisioned as encompassing the whole self, rather a particular body part (e.g., depression may be “felt” in achy joints or an upset stomach, as opposed to exclusively in one’s head). Similarly, physical manifestations of illness or injury are considered to have a connection to a person’s social relationships, emotional health, and spiritual identity. Thus, addressing anything that is

disruptive, upsetting, or debilitating to a person requires a full range of analysis of the body, mind, and spirit, as opposed to narrow treatment of the most obvious symptom (Robison & Carrier, 2004).

Since holistic health is premised on the interconnections of body, mind, and spirit, activities that simultaneously affect all three of these elements are deemed facilitative of healing (Halprin, 2000). As established within holistic movement modalities, physical activities that rely on self-experimentation, discovery, and personal liberation are central to long-term wellness (Halprin, 2000; Payne, 2006). Dance is well established as a holistic healing modality because of its ability to fuse body, mind, and spirit activity. In particular, forms of dance that are both individually and improvisationally based are most ideal because they provide for freedom of expression and creativity without regulation or judgment (Levy, 1988). Various movement modalities (e.g., authentic movement, creative movement, and interplay) have been used within therapeutic and social work settings in order to enhance individual coping mechanisms and healing. These include mental illness (Karkou, 2006; Levy, 1988; MacDonald, 2006), addiction (Murray-Lane, 1995), physical disability (Levy, 1988), disease (Bunce, 2006), pregnancy (Celebi, 2006), elder mobility and dementia (Levy, 1988; Sandel & Hollander, 1995), and sexual and physical abuse (Bernstein, 1995; Chang & Leventhal, 1995).

Methodology

This study was premised on feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1987), which necessitates epistemic privilege, or the honoring of the marginalized voices (of research participants) over other dominant-hegemonic discourses. In this setting, such a perspective was critical since public conceptions about belly dance are not always positive. Focusing on the emic (personal experience) as opposed to the etic (external social observation), standpoint theory allowed a framework for gathering and analyzing data inductively, with methodological flexibility regarding the views, feelings, and experiences of the participants.

Data were gathered via qualitative, semistructured interviews in 2009 and 2010, which focused on contemporary American women's experiences with belly dance. The interviews were conducted using snowball and convenience sampling, as I began by interviewing informants known to me through my own belly dance participation (I am a 40-year-old white woman, mother of two, who has belly danced both recreationally and semiprofessionally since 2003). As recognized within field research (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006), using one's insider status to recruit, build rapport and account for the broader contexts, as well as subtle nuances, of particular groups and subcultures can be advantageous. To that end, I advertised the project through various belly dance teachers, studio owners, and troupe leaders throughout the Midwestern United States (where I am located) and beyond. Recruitment was also aided by electronic postings over belly dance Listservs, Facebook pages, and websites.

I conducted 67 interviews, 18 of which occurred face-to-face and 49 by phone, depending upon the preferences and location of participants. The interviews lasted an average of 49 minutes. No direct compensation was offered to the women; however, I used my university's long-distance phone plan to limit expenses related to the phone interviews, and either brought or paid for refreshments (with subsequent reimbursement from my university) at each of the face-to-face interviews. I followed each interview with a written thank you and remained in touch with all who expressed interest in seeing the results of my work. All research procedures were approved by my university's human subject institutional review board.

As these were semistructured interviews, the exact wording and sequencing of questions varied between interviews. Most assumed a conversational tone, with both the interviewee and myself sharing experiences and discussing various topics. That said, the general questions asked (or otherwise addressed) during the interviews included:

1. What words, phrases, or images come to mind when you hear the words “belly dance”?
2. How, when, and why did you become involved with belly dance?
3. How does belly dancing make you feel? Think? Act?
4. Do you feel as if you’ve benefited from belly dancing? How? When did you begin to notice these benefits? Have they affected other aspects of your life?
5. Specifically, have you noticed changes: (a) physically; (b) mentally; (c) emotionally; (d) spiritually? Do you see these as connected in any way?
6. Have you noticed any changes in other women? Do you think your experience is common to others?
7. Is belly dance different in this way (facilitating change) than other dance forms?
8. Do you associate belly dance with healing? Has it helped you deal with anything that has happened in your life? Describe this healing?
9. What does “holistic health” or “holism” mean to you? Is belly dancing holistic?
10. What are two of the largest misconceptions about belly dance? How has your experience countered them?
11. What would you like the public to know about belly dance?

The interviews were transcribed verbatim with the assistance of four graduate students (with identifiers removed or replaced with pseudonyms). Analysis involved open coding, followed by conceptual mapping/data condensing as a way of developing larger thematic categories. I relied on phenomenological notions of embodied meaning, the analytical focus being on the “what” and “how” (Moustakas, 1994)—what did the women experience in belly dance and how did they describe experiencing it? Women come to and experience belly dance for a variety of reasons, many of which relate to enjoyment, building social ties, and exercise. However, there are additional benefits that are not always obvious, expected, or discussed publicly. Healing from interpersonal harm emerged as one of these. This interpersonal harm was quite specific; women did not discuss belly dancing as a way of recovering from an auto theft, for example. Rather, a significant portion of the sample (30%, 20 of 67) disclosed victimization and specifically commented on how belly dance helped them cope, heal, and/or overcome instances of interpersonal harm that disproportionately occur to women and girls. These 20 transcripts were separated from the others (who did not discuss gendered victimization) and coded again for the findings presented here. (To be clear, none of the participants were enduring such victimization at the time of their interviews; had they been so, appropriate measures would have been taken to ensure safety, resource referral, and reporting to appropriate entities per applicable state law.)

These 20 women ranged in dance experience from 8 months to 35 years (average of 11.5 years). Of which, 9 (45%) considered themselves hobbyists and 11 (55%) were semiprofessionals or professionals (received payment for performing or teaching). Their ages ranged from 22 to 68 (average of 44). Most identified as white (14, 70%); however, two (10%) identified as Asian, two (10%) as Latina, one (6%) as black, and one (6%) as Native American. Four (20%) claimed Middle Eastern or Mediterranean heritage. Ten (50%) were partnered or married and 10 (50%) were single (including divorced). All but one (95%) identified as heterosexual. They were fairly accomplished in terms of education and vocation: 13 (65%) had gone to community college or university and were employed within retail, education, health care, administrative, manufacturing, and automotive industries. Seven (35%) had graduate degrees with careers in health care, business, education, and the law. These demographics roughly mirror the larger sample as well as the general belly dance community in the United States, given previous research (Kraus, 2010; MacMaster & Lewis, 1998; Moe, 2012, in press).

In terms of victimization, the most common was intimate partner violence (IPV). Among the 20 interviews, 13 (65% of subsample; 19% of full sample) reported IPV at some point in their lives. Six (30% of subsample; 9% of full sample) acknowledged sexual assault. Nine women (45% of

subsample; 13% of full sample) experienced some form of child maltreatment. Finally, four reported having been bullied as youth (20% of subsample; 6% of full sample). Twelve (60% of subsample; 18% of full sample) experienced more than one of these forms of victimization. The interview excerpts provided below reflect the depth and breadth of this subsample. All identifiers have been removed or edited, and most pseudonyms were selected by the participants themselves.

Findings

Abusive Relationships

IPV is well documented as gendered in nature (Black et al., 2011). Within feminist conceptualizations, it is seen as an overt form of power and control carried out through various tactics (e.g., physical assault, emotional degradation, social isolation, and financial control; Ferraro, 2006). The women who spoke of IPV during the interviews illustrated such a conceptualization. As an illustration, Casmir described the control tactics of her husband, which were aimed at objectifying and belittling her:

He made me feel like I was a piece of jewelry in a little velvet box and I was only to be brought out and put on display when I was on his arm. It was kind of hard to argue with someone who's a second degree black belt in Karate. Plus he was 6'4" to boot. He did his best to make me feel stupid, to put me down and keep me down.

Verbal and emotional abuse caused the women a great deal of harm, for which belly dance served an important reconciliatory purpose.

I dated a couple verbally abusive guys, and dance has helped me with self-esteem. Physical abuse, when you have that you have the physical things, and you can look at it and go "Well, that's not right." But verbal abuse, it's really hard to notice, cause you're like "Well, did I deserve that?" Dance made me realize I am good enough. I think the biggest part of that was the support. There have been a lot of times, where with dance, if I didn't feel like I was up to par or that I was doing what I should be doing that voice would come back in that "You're not good enough. You're fat, you're ugly, you don't fit in here." And it was more the support group that would say, "Don't listen to those voices. You're beautiful." Verbal abuse really does a number on your self-esteem. [Fiona]

As will be seen in several more excerpts, Fiona specifies the communal social support she found helpful within belly dancing classes. Because such classes are made up predominantly, if not exclusively, of women, such space seems especially facilitative of gendered healing (Moe, 2011). To this point, Sabrina spoke of geographic isolation and control within her marriage. For her, belly dancing provides a welcomed respite as well as an outlet for meeting others:

Life has not been very easy in the last few years. It's hard to explain how it [belly dance] makes me feel—a sense of release almost. Freedom. I was born and raised in England and came over here in the mid-80s, just after I got married. The only reason I came was because my ex-husband got a job here. We had three small children and after we got here he told me that he wanted out. I wasn't working. I didn't have any job skills. The divorce became really ugly and there was a huge custody battle. I didn't feel myself anymore. When you're battered about and you need confidence to build you back up, it makes you feel good about yourself.

The way Sabrina gave up her life in England for her husband resonated with others who also experienced a sense of isolation, not so much from moving long distances, but from giving up their interests and aspirations for their partners.

My whole life revolved around him and his family and his life goals. I became disconnected from my interests. When I was going through my divorce, which was around 2005–2006, I started taking classes. It was a way to escape what was going on in my life and also celebrate who I was. A chance to feel confident and reconnect with my interests. [Alisha]

Not surprisingly, women who belly danced during abusive relationships found that their partners were not supportive of them. As Khaza mentioned, “My ex-husband was very controlling and I found out during the divorce that he didn’t like watching dance. He cut me off from everything that I enjoyed.”

Further, belly dance, because it accommodates a variety of body types and skill levels, is seen as unique. As Alisha noted:

With ballet I found that there was such a focus on perfection and being judged by others . . . that’s similar with jazz too. Middle Eastern dance seemed to be something that anyone could do at any time. Anybody could just jump in and start and there’s a lot of acceptance.

Indeed, it was the release of judgment and rigid control, in both her personal and recreative lives, that helped the women like Alisha transcend their negative relationships. Moreover, to the point regarding the holistic and therapeutic benefits of belly dance, she noted:

I had a counselor when I was going through my divorce who strongly encouraged me as soon as I said something. She noted that dance helps us connect spiritually and I think I still have a long way to go in understanding that, but I think it’s somehow the human experience that I get out of dance that that helps with that and helping with feeling connected with myself and others.

Otter commented similarly as she discussed the healing process after several bad relationships:

I can honestly say that when I made the decision to return to belly dance after having had all the different things happen to me, I was very, very happy. I felt this great sense of relief, that I was gonna get to go back to something I loved. I had no idea how much I had missed it. There really was this, “I’m home.” Part of what appeals to me is that there’s a culture behind it. You’re not just learning “Ok, move this hip here and move your legs this way” . . . There’s so much behind it that that it just spoke to me.

While the women shared their personal experiences with abusive relationships, some also commented on those of other women with whom they had contact through belly dancing. Otter noted, “I can honestly say that I’ve never seen belly dance have a negative effect on a woman. I definitely see it as therapeutic.” Aziza, a belly dance instructor, also reflected:

Almost anything that needs to be worked out elsewhere can be worked out in a microcosm of a dance. I don’t know how to explain it, but the emotion, the backed up emotion, just becomes fuel for the performance. It gives you safety to be in that zone without risking things which are more important. I’ve had a couple come through pretty abusive situations and this has sort of been their lifeline. It’s where they can make themselves feel comfortable, where they can reassure themselves that they can make good choices and find some social support and not necessarily have to talk about the circumstance itself. They’re in the company of other people who are supportive.

Sexual Assault

Sexual assault is also a disproportionately gendered experience, with women largely being the victims and men largely being the perpetrators (Black et al., 2011). While stranger-initiated rapes are

the least common context for sexual assault (whether an intimate partner or not, women are more likely to know their assailants in some way), Jherico described such an instance: "A man broke into my house with a knife and he held to my throat and he wanted oral sex. I screamed and he broke out and ran away. They did catch him. He had murdered another woman the year previous with that same knife." Jherico experienced a number of abusive circumstances in her life. She had much to say about the benefits of belly dancing:

I think a number of women have come to belly dance as a result of having their bodies objectified in that way. I think through the passage of time they overcome that because of the deeper aspect of belly dancing . . . celebrating your breasts as beautiful parts of a woman's body, celebrating the hour-glass figure, or the balloon shaped figure or whatever figure it is, however old it is. Just enjoying it.

Within our arguably rape-conducive culture, self-blame among assault survivors is common (DeKeseredy, 2012). Without legitimization of their experience and adequate social support, sexual assault survivors may dissociate from their physicality, seeing their bodies narrowly and negatively as objects used against them.

I was raped by a really close friend of mine. He was the closest thing I had to a father and a big brother at that time. He was the man of my life. I had just turned fifteen. His reasoning behind it was that he was trying to save me [from acting tom-boyish]. I went through a time where I shut down completely. I wouldn't look in the mirror. I wasn't happy with myself physically, or emotionally, or anything. [Emma]

Emma went on to explain how dance facilitated her healing process:

My aunt told me that I needed to dance. If I wouldn't write, if I wouldn't talk, if I wouldn't paint, if I wouldn't think, she told me that I needed to dance because I had to re-learn myself physically. It helped me get back to knowing who I am as an individual, as a woman, as a physical entity. That was one of the biggest steps in belly dancing, having to actually look at myself because it made me see that I was still alive. I really just went into class one day, and it just came on for me. I felt beautiful and whole and worthwhile.

It's the most expressive for me, the most accepting. Belly dancing is very size positive. It's very empowering, and it allows you to be creative. With belly dancing, the majority of it comes from existing. Everyone can exist in that moment and express themselves to this music without fear.

In the above excerpt, Emma also underscores the uniqueness of belly dancing, as a genre that accommodates the individual regardless of size, experience, or body image. She also hints at the importance of communal support within the genre.

Professional belly dancers commented on their experiences with students' healing as well, which corroborated their personal experiences regarding the effects of sexual victimization as well as the dance's healing benefits: "I'm a counselor, and especially for the clients that I work with, belly dance offers a way to get in touch with their body in a non-threatening manner. I think it's distinct in that it's a movement that a women's body is meant to do." [Reba]

Child Maltreatment

Child abuse and neglect is an epidemic social problem that affects boys and girls in much more proportionate fashion as compared to IPV and sexual assault (Crossen-Tower, 2010). However, gendered qualities emerged within the narratives that referenced child maltreatment. Take, for example, Emma's description of being dismissed by her mother because of her resemblance to her

father who had abandoned the family. Recall from the previous section that she had been sexually assaulted by the male who had become a stand-in father/brother figure after her parents' divorce:

It was really hard for me growing up because my mother and my father were divorced and I looked just like him. She resented me because whenever she looked at me she saw him. It really messed with me. My father, after the divorce, wasn't around. I resented him. It seemed like he was trying to deny me. I always had this self-loathing.

Khaza also suffered maltreatment at the hands of her dysfunctional parents. The gendered nature of her neglect became obvious as she elaborated:

I came to exist because my parents, my dad, expected to have a son to carry on the family name. Once I was born, my mom refused to have any other kids. She really didn't want kids. All I ever learned from them was that family was a burden. I was so incredibly solitary. A counselor diagnosed me with attachment disorder. My parents never hugged me when I was growing up. I've never really felt connected to anything. With dance that lack of connection is gone. It's hard to describe. I just feel so good when I dance. It's like being home in my body, being home in my soul.

One form of childhood victimization, sexual abuse, is clearly disproportionately targeted at girls (Crossen-Tower, 2010). This was the most common form of child maltreatment identified within the sample. Similar to adult sexual abuse, a mental-emotional dissociation from the physical body was noted.

I was severely sexually abused as a child. When a survivor is assaulted they, we, disassociate, and that keeps your body rather numb. As a survivor grows up and matures, one finds it dirty or ugly, and also it incorporates the inability to know how the body moves in space. Belly dance kind of heals all of that. The movement, the gentle movement, in giving to your body, finding it, getting strength. The acceptance of your body as a beautiful thing that you can move around. It gets you in touch with being a woman, with what you were meant to be, how you were meant to move. It's your true self. You're being authentic.
[Reba]

It is important to note, as well, that child abuse and neglect does not often occur in a vacuum. If one form of maltreatment occurs, children are at greater risk for further forms of harm. Aziza elaborated:

I had an emotionally absent father, a too present mother . . . she was the person who was hurting me, and a brother who had no boundaries. He was fifteen when he tried the whole molestation thing. My mother is a multiple personality. I grew up in a household where nothing was the same minute to minute. By the time I was five I was pretty much raising my brothers and sisters. I was on my own at fifteen. It wasn't much longer after I moved out that I found belly dance and that gave me this confidence. It gave me the ability to hold my head up. It gave me the ability to stand up for myself, to say "I deserve to do this. I want to do this." It allowed me to push through, to take risks, to move forward in spite of all that emotion and fear. It gave me a sense of self. In terms of healing hurt, it gave me a family that I never had.

The social support available through the dance continues to be salient. Moreover, Aziza also commented on the uniqueness of belly dance within the healing process, as well as its complimentary nature to traditional therapy: "So many of the forms are standardized. This dance works the other way. At its best, is always the individual. Much of what I've worked out has been worked out in concert between therapy and dance."

The risks that Aziza assumed by running away from her home as a teenager were echoed by others, sometimes in a much more dangerous way. The effects of childhood abuse can be complicated and cumulative (Watson & Halford, 2010). As Sophia disclosed:

I shot my father when I was 16 because he was molesting me. Coming from a very “fundy” [religious fundamentalism] background and very authoritarian family, the father had extreme power over everybody. Lots of people didn’t believe me and then he threatened my mother and I shot him. I went through a lot of trauma with that. Belly dancing was a big therapy for me. I was 19 or 20 when I took a class at a junior college.

For some of the women, working through their own victimization, as well as the victimization of loved ones, occurred simultaneously.

I remember as a young girl, I was sexually abused I also went through a period of time where I was dealing with some molestation of one of my daughters. She needed to talk about it, she needed to process, and we were in counseling. I can’t even describe the relief it was to go to dance class and just take a break from everything that I had no control over. To have something that you have control over, something beautiful, and something that you can anticipate with joy. [Jherico]

Relying on belly dance as an adult, even several years after the childhood victimization, can be very beneficial. Casmir described extreme abuse that occurred when she was a very young child:

I suffer from posttraumatic stress, bipolar and obsessive compulsive disorder, and I try to get by on as little medication as possible. I use my belly dance to compensate for that. The posttraumatic stress disorder, and I suspect the bipolar, has been there since childhood. We had a pretty dysfunctional household. It was not just physical but mental abuse too. We just thought that’s what families were. My sister sent me an e-mail about remembering my mother changing my diaper and I was doing the squirm and kick thing. My sister said mom just lost it and beat the living hell out of me. I was just a matter of months old. She would snap and fly into rages.

She has no doubt about the benefits of belly dance today:

It makes me feel all kinds of better. I can tell on the off days. My entire mood goes down. The day after I have class I’m bright, chipper, happy. Belly dancing is just as much a medication as the other medications I take. It makes that big of a difference.

Bullying

As with child maltreatment, bullying happens to all demographics of youth; however, the context in which it occurs to girls illustrates its gendered nature (Klein, 2012). The women in this study recalled instances in which they were teased, degraded, and assaulted by their peers specifically because of the way they looked (or were expected to look) as girls.

I had body issues in high school because I was very large chested. I always felt like I looked heavier. It affected posture and the way I dressed. I used to get teased by boys and that sort of thing. Then going to college, I struggled a lot too. I was really uncomfortable for a long time. I didn’t get into the college life. I think dance was a part of that cause then I had close friends in the area. I had something to go do every week. [Xena]

When asked about the other benefits of belly dance, Xena indicated that it has become omnipresent. Like several of the others, she also defended the uniqueness of belly dance:

I think it transcended into other parts. It's always there. I've noticed holding myself differently, moving differently. It gets into your subconscious. I like the idea of working with your body and that you can be sensual and feminine and still strong and that there is a lot of room for self-expression. It's a safe environment to express that and work through it, and find a source of confidence whether it be emotional or physical.

While Xena was bullied because she was seen as overly developed as a young woman, Fiona was bullied because she was unable to present herself in a stereotypically feminine way:

I was made fun of all the way through middle school, high school, and early college. I went through several bouts of depression. I was also diagnosed with polycystic ovarian syndrome. Those hormone changes, weight gain, body hair . . . I had all of the symptoms with the exception of skin tags. I got made fun of for those things. I was being put on antidepressants like crazy because doctors kept diagnosing me with depression, then manic depression, then cyclothymia, then mild bipolar disorder. I've been on at least a dozen different antidepressants, mood stabilizers, antipsychotics. I grew up just being socially inept. I always had a hard time relating to people, carrying on conversations. I stayed away from people. My teenage years were a big mess. I was 20 years old when I started dancing.

Fiona elaborated on the changes that occurred after she started belly dancing. Her description echoes earlier sentiments regarding the omnipresent and communal benefits of belly dance, as well as their integrative nature:

Dance was one of few places I could go where people didn't treat me like a leper. This gave me something to help boost my self-esteem. It was something steady in my life, something I looked forward to. Just getting that exercise helps you to feel better. And the movements. I don't have to take Advil every time I have a period and I used to have to take Darvocet or things like that. I love dancing. I've grown a backbone over the years, and to an extent I've gotten used to people making fun of me. It's not just a hobby. It's not just something I do. It's a part of my life.

As was the case with the previous forms of victimization, professional belly dancers in the sample also shared experiences with their students. Carmela commented:

Being a teenage girl is a nightmare, especially if you don't have really good family support. Something like this where they can focus on themselves and realize their femininity and realize that everything is going to be okay, that it's not so overwhelming. You don't have to go along with the crowd. You can be your own person. It's so personal. Everybody is different and it takes that into consideration. For a younger person, a young girl, especially for somebody who's having problems, it's perfect.

Discussion and Conclusions

This analysis is based upon a study that examined the extent to which belly dance may be a means of holistic healing. Findings were derived from a larger set of data involving 67 qualitative, semistructured interviews with belly dancers throughout the United States. The present analysis focused on the 20 interview transcripts that specifically addressed gendered victimization. This analysis suggests that, when analyzed from the standpoint of contemporary practitioners, belly dance may be beneficial to women in terms of empowerment and overall health. Such findings are helpful in expanding notions of empowerment-based self-directed coping, as applicable to feminist social work practice.

Healing is a nuanced and complicated concept that allows for a variety of definitions. I have relied upon a holistic definition of healing which honors integration of body, mind, and spirit

(Robison & Carrier, 2004); activities that simultaneously affect all three are regarded as facilitative of healing (Halprin, 2000). Dance has long been deemed a holistic movement modality, especially styles that are premised on self-experimentation, improvisation, discovery, and empowerment (Halprin, 2000; Levy, 1988; Payne, 2006). The women in this study indicated many instances in which they found belly dance to facilitate healing, making links between the harm they had suffered and the consequential benefits of belly dance. Paramount among these was the physical reclamation, wherein they experienced positive appreciation for what their bodies could do. The women also described a sense of belonging and comfort within the social context of belly dancing. For many, such settings provided respite from the stresses of their lives. They found the individualized characteristic of belly dance to be helpful as well, allowing myriad uses of the dance without the burden of conforming to certain physical or skill expectations. While some were not able to articulate the exact feelings they had while belly dancing, their overall sense of it was one that encompassed joy, release, comfort, and empowerment. All of these sentiments are indicative of its holistic capacity.

In focusing on victimization, I addressed all of the forms of interpersonal harm within the larger data set. Tellingly, all of these were targeted at the women *as* women. They were beaten, physically and emotionally, within abusive relationships, a phenomenon largely associated with gender. They were sexually assaulted in various ways and at various stages of their lives, a form of victimization largely targeted as women. Many experienced other forms of child abuse and neglect that seemed connected to their gender, either by circumstance or consequence. Some experienced bullying during their youth that was aimed at their physical presentation as young women. The gendered characteristic of interpersonal victimization was quite obvious throughout the interviews, and so too were the specific benefits of belly dance related to gender. Given that belly dance is itself so overtly associated with women's bodies, negatively in some contexts and positively in others, this dance is worthy of attention within contemporary feminist scholarship.

The juxtaposition between the erotic nature of belly dance and women's embodied healing experiences is an interesting one to consider through the present analysis. Indeed, it is this juxtaposition that may help explain why belly dance, over other forms of dance, recreation, or exercise, benefits women. While belly dancing is often conceptualized as (inappropriately) erotic and seductive, according to the women here, it is much more complicated. Moreover, just because the dance is so often seen in this way, it need not be deemed antifeminist, and subsequently useless, on such grounds. When did exploring and expressing one's sensuality become problematic? Who or what entities defined it as such, and to what ends? The women spoke of what they saw as feminine aspects of the dance, whether this was interpreted through physical movements, history, and culture, or its individualized nature. So while the dance could be experienced in a more stereotypical way, its practitioners remained in control of how and when they did so.

This may be particularly helpful for women who have experienced a physical, mental, and spiritual disconnect from their bodies as a result of gendered victimization. Belly dancing, when done in a safe setting, allows women to explore, examine, and challenge the socially constructed boundaries between appropriate and seemingly inappropriate/oversexualized expression. In doing so, they may find that their bodies, minds, and spirits need not be bound by prior victimization. Among the therapeutic value belly dance may offer, such women may come to recognize that what has happened in the past does not define who they are today and what they are capable of in the future. Moreover, given the eclectic and autonomous nature of belly dance, women may opt to experience it in a completely different way, putting their own meanings on the activity and subverting more common interpretations. The narratives here show the capacity of women to refuse stereotypical views of the dance and instead see it as something uniquely related to self-exploration and discovery.

Future scholarship would be well served to consider the standpoints of women who define and cultivate their own paths toward holistic healing. The findings of this study are meant at defining a clearer framework for doing so and to inform current social work practice that is feminist driven and women centered. In this research, it was used during abusive relationships, or in the midst of other gendered victimizations, as well as after. For social workers working with women who are currently in unsafe situations, it would be critical to utilize strength- and empowerment-based methods of communication and safety planning. If such women are already engaged in belly dance, and feel safe doing so, it would behoove social workers to support and honor them. Caution would obviously be necessary before recommending a woman begin taking belly dance classes while in an unsafe relationship, in particular. Such caution would likely be no different than that expressed for any activity suggested of her. As with any therapeutic strategy, one size does not fit all. The point here is that belly dance is worth consideration.

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Note

1. Naming this dance is problematic, as there are several possibilities with varying levels of meanings and connotations. “Middle Eastern,” “Arabic,” and “Oriental” (arising from the juxtaposition between the global “East,” commonly referenced as the “Orient” and West) dance are popular because they may be more universally applied to the region of the world from which the dance originates. Others allow greater specificity which is also relevant, given that the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean region is expansive and diverse (e.g., Turkish Oriente, Andalusian [Moorish], Egyptian Raqs Sharqi; Osweiler, 2006; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005). As interest has spread, labels have evolved (e.g., belly dance, cabaret, and tribal; Osweiler, 2006). Despite the objectification and etymological inappropriateness of labeling the dance after a body part, “belly” dance (sometimes written as one word, “bellydance”) is most common in the United States. There actually seems to be some purposeful use of the term as a means reclaiming that which has been historically and culturally subjugated and/or avoiding cultural appropriation through more specific terminology that refers to regions and stylization for which they, as Americans, do not feel comfortable claiming. It is for these reasons, and out of respect of the epistemological philosophy guiding this research, that I primarily use “belly dance.”

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