

Peace moves: dance, identity and peacebuilding

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Abstract

Dance is a potential asset for peacebuilding, creating opportunities for nonverbal, embodied learning, exploring identity, and relationships. Peace scholars consider identity and relationships to the 'other' as key components in transforming conflict. Focusing on a case study in Mindanao, the Philippines, this paper explores the potential of dance in a peacebuilding context through embodied identity and relationships. In Mindanao, deep-seated cultural prejudices contribute to ongoing conflict entwined with identity. The permeable membrane (Cohen, Gutiérrez & Walker, 2011) is the organising framework describing the constant interaction between artists, facilitators, participants, and communities. It expands peace scholar John Paul Lederach's concept of the moral imagination, requiring the capacity to envisage one's self within a web of relationships. In this paper multiple methods of qualitative research including personal interviews are used to further the discussion regarding dance's potential to diversify the nonverbal tools available for peacebuilding.

Keywords: dance, empathy, identity, mirroring, peacebuilding

Prologue

Imagine a crowded university classroom in Mindanao, on the edge of the active conflict region in the Philippines. Filled with moving students focused on each other with heightened energy, the students are dancing as part of a peace education program and the room is alive with swirls of movement and music. Many students are meeting each other for the first time, in some cases coming from communities that are in conflict. In the centre of the room two people are moving in focused unison. Even though interacting for the first time, there is a close attentiveness and intent in their movements, accompanied by a slight sense of playfulness. Surrounding them are 35 other pairs of students all simultaneously dancing in similar partnerships, and despite the very close quarters they all manage to navigate the space. A glimpse of a dance and peace education program, this image brings to light the potential for connection and development of relationships, through an affective transmission or exchange of emotions.

Introduction

Through their use of multilayered communication and transformation, the performing arts answer peace scholar John Paul Lederach's (2005, p. 5) call for creative approaches in peacebuilding. The arts are gaining recognition within development and peace and conflict practices as strategies for building connections and creating spaces to imagine and enact different choices around deep-seated conflicts. Researchers such as Shank and Schirch highlight the ability of the arts to promote

dialogue and underscore essential components for peacebuilding (2008, p. 218). Sklar argues the arts create openings for creativity and new perspectives, resonating across cultures and worldviews (2001, p. 30). Further, as 'building peace requires stretching and transforming worldviews', the arts can use symbolic communication to change perspectives and address conflict (Schirch, 2005, p. 38), whilst providing a creative route to facilitating understanding, identity and relationship building between groups in conflict (Zelizer, 2003, p. 63). Simultaneously, there is growing interest in the role young people play in peacebuilding, given that the world population contains 1.8 billion young people who are between the ages of 15 to 25 (Kollodge, 2014; McEvoy-Levy, 2011; Pruitt 2013).

Despite evidence suggesting that verbal communication only conveys limited meaning, many peacebuilding approaches continue to rely primarily on spoken words (Schirch, 2005 p. 12). Movement is the first form of communication and is considered by some to be more convincing than verbal messages (Guerrero, De Vito & Hecht, 1999). Given that the majority of human communication is non-verbal (Knapp, 2006, p. 4; Mehrabian, 1981), as a non-verbal art form, the potential for dance in peacebuilding could be significant. However, although used widely at grassroots levels, dance generally remains outside of the standard catalogue of conflict resolution and peacebuilding practices (LeBaron, MacLeod & Acland, 2013).

Dance is a potential asset for the peacebuilding field, creating opportunities for nonverbal, embodied learning and relationships to the 'other'. As a symbolic language communicated through the body, dance is one tool to support peacebuilders and communities in conflict to develop the range of their communication and understanding. Though the potential of dance is encouraging, there is also a need for ongoing reflection regarding implementation, and possible misuse of the arts. As the performing arts become more acceptable in peacebuilding, the risks of co-optation or use to control identity should constantly be considered (Ayindo, 2008, p.192). The following case study explores the potential and risks of dance as entwined with identity within the context of a peace education program in Mindanao, the Philippines.

Case study: Mindanao

Exploratory research work into the connections between dance and peacebuilding was undertaken from December 2012 to March 2013 with Dance it Out (DIO) – Pilipinas¹ an international non-governmental organization using movement to transform violence, bullying, and teaching peace education (Jeffrey, personal communication, January, 2013). Using a movement based curriculum, the organisational vision is to use movement for social change. As an education program, DIO focuses on building social emotional skills rather than intervening directly in conflicts. Given the history of conflict in Mindanao, some DIO participants originate from conflict areas while others have experienced severe natural disasters such as typhoons or ongoing challenges of poverty.

The conflict in Mindanao is historically fuelled by different perceptions, goals and histories. Whilst a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief background description is useful for understanding the role of peacebuilding in Mindanao. Made up of over 7,100 islands, the Philippines has a population of over

95 million people (Crisotomo, 2013). Mindanao is the southern island, comprised of a wide variety of people, languages and religious groups often divided into three main groups Lumads², Moros (or Muslims), and Christians (settlers or migrants) (Montiel, Rodil & Guzman, 2012, p. 73). The history of Mindanao is complex and layered with the effects of Spanish and American colonialism and legacies of conflict. The most recent conflict has persisted for over 40 years and concepts of identity have become increasingly complicated due to the armed conflict (Adams, 2009, p. 37). The country experienced a loss of hope surrounding possible peace until recently when the Bangsamoro Framework Agreement was signed in 2012 (Orendain, 2012) and the historic Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) on March 27, 2014 (Aquino III, 2014).

Connecting dance and peacebuilding

Deeply rooted prejudices exist in Mindanao between Lumads, Muslims, and Christians. While the participants discussed here were not in active conflict, deep-seated issues of fear and distrust are alive in their communities and the transformation of these issues connects to concepts of local peacebuilding. For this paper peacebuilding is viewed as bottom-up approaches that seek 'to prevent, reduce, transform, and help people recover from violence in all forms', and to 'support the development of relationships at all levels of society' (Schirch, 2004, p. 8). At micro levels of peacebuilding, change starts with the shift of an individual's worldview and spaces to find new metaphors for understanding (Sampson, Abu-Nimer & Liebler, 2003, p. 339). Peacebuilding requires diverse tools to address complex relationships and relies on the ability to see new perspectives and build interactions. The performing arts are one aspect of a bottom-up peacebuilding approach that provides multiple ways of interaction (Ayindo, 2008, p. 185; Beausoleil & Le Baron, 2013; Shank & Schirch, 2008, p. 217).

In practice

Data collection included observation and participation, interviews and documentation through videos and photos during training workshops with over four hundred young people in school-based and university programs. Fourteen personal interviews were conducted including students and program facilitators. Gender was split evenly into seven males and seven females from the ages of 17 to 33. All who volunteered to participate were Christian and had at least a minimum high school education (Jeffrey, personal communication, March, 2013). Participants used a mixture of English and Bisayan, one of the main languages of Mindanao, and economic status ranged from low-income to middle-class. A specific limitation of this case study is that only Christian participants volunteered for and completed interviews. There were Muslim and Lumad participants in the workshops, however they did not volunteer for interviews. This could have been due to the perception of the researcher being an outsider, even though there was support from the local team. Observation and documentation of all participants' interactions and comments was possible during workshops but Muslim and Lumad voices are not represented in the interviews.

Mirroring: Identities of self and other

DIO workshops included a variety of activities, yet for the purposes of this paper the focus is on mirroring. Mirroring is a well-established creative dance activity with variations used across disciplines including creative movement, dance therapy, and theatre programs (Boal, 1979; McGarry & Russo, 2011, p. 178). There are different approaches, often increasing in complexity, use of music, and number of partners. The basic exercise as used by DIO consists of two people facing each other without touching. They are asked to imagine a mirror in-between them and as one starts to move, the partner follows as precisely as possible, then the leadership switches and the second person initiates the movement. In the DIO curriculum, there was an emphasis on eye contact and serious partnership with calm music played in the background and students repeatedly reminded of it as a non-verbal exercise.

In every interview or group forum, questions about mirroring elicited an immediate positive reaction, a smile, or confidence in responding (Jeffrey, personal communication, March, 2013). Participants described how it was challenging at first to interact and then how it progressed to become more fun and insightful. This was true even for participants who had never met before or came from different backgrounds. Franc states:

At first I feel like an awkward feeling but after some time, it feels just great to dance with somebody who is very different from you, and it will develop your attitude towards respecting that somebody's movement.

For the majority of participants interviewed, there was an emphasis on how moving together and paying attention to the details of the movement helped to build respect of another person as well as feeling respected personally. This mirroring of their own movements also helped to further instill confidence, a sense of self, and mutual respect. For example Angeli stated, '... in a way that this person also must accept me as me. It's like the Golden Rule' (Angeli, personal interview, March, 2013). There was also the opportunity to learn new movements different from one's regular movement choices. This is a kinesthetic way of experiencing diversity and difference.

Many of the participants felt like they learned something new about their partner through the non-verbal communication of the mirror exercise. They valued being able to connect in a deeper manner than conversation alone, especially when students were shy about speaking. For Art, it was about using new movements different from his. For Sabina, it created a way to get to know someone faster than talking:

If we were just talking we would feel awkward because we don't know each other. Unlike when we did the activity it was fun.

Mirabelle found that while she might not understand the movement she was able to gain an embodied insight:

I have a little glimpse about her by doing the movement that she does. I don't really have much knowledge about gestures of movements but then I can tell somehow who she is.

Dance served as a multilayered opportunity to develop the self and to gain an understanding of the other. Through dance, participants felt supported to take risks while getting to know another person through non-verbal communication. With mirroring, the kinesthetic connections to empathy began to be articulated as a physical way of 'stepping into someone else's movement' rather than just someone's shoes. One participant used the example of mirroring as the way she would express empathy. Her reflection connects to an interesting idea of self-other identity in relation to empathy, that in relationships this 'shared existence precedes the apprehension of the dichotomy between self and other' (Foster, 2005 p. 166). Bea describes:

Your facial and eye expression is like seeing yourself through the mirror. It is like reflecting to your own emotions and expressions. And empathy for me, understands the feeling of others. Not just talking but more of understanding his feelings. You should feel what he feels.

These responses are examples of embodied experiences demonstrating the concept of individuals enabled to see the 'other' as a person, which as Abu-Nimer states is valuable as 'practices for (re)humanizing and developing empathy for the other are central to peacebuilding' (2003, p. 19). The one-on-one interactions are important components of change and, as Halpern and Weinstein argue, '[t]o be effective, reconciliation must arguably begin at the level of the individual-neighbor to neighbor, then house to house, and finally community to community,' in essence building a web of relationships (2004, p. 567). Developing a deeper understanding of one's own identity as well as gaining understanding of others in interpersonal relationships connects to resolving deep-seated conflict in communities.

Conceptual understandings of the performing arts in peacebuilding

There is an inherent challenge in the transfer of knowledge and communication between practice and theory, dance and words. For this paper, the constant interactions between artists, peacebuilders, participants and communities are described by the framework of the permeable membrane (Cohen, Gutiérrez & Walker, 2011, p. 166-168). The permeable membrane expands Lederach's concept of the moral imagination, requiring the nurturing of human relations and the capacity to envisage one's self within a web of relationships, including with one's enemies (2005, p. 5). The permeable membrane allows for the simultaneous interaction of multiple world views, and through the arts ritualised meeting spaces are created allowing participants to experience new perspectives and ways of relating. Being able to see oneself and relate to the 'others' in conflict is an important part of healing and building lasting peace (Halpern & Weinstein, 2004, p. 567). The performing arts can hone in on certain aspects in a conflict while providing creative opportunities to 'reframe' familiar situations, encourage fresh thinking and new perspectives. Successful arts-based peace programs have been able to address deep-seated antagonisms while promoting dialogue and respect which are necessary for long-term, meaningful peace (Premaratna & Bleiker, 2010, p. 376).

The DIO participants described learning about one's self and others through an embodied, non-verbal activity within the context of the creation of a safe conceptual meeting place through the permeable membrane of dance. Through movement, the

participants challenged their perceptions and used embodied communication. The partnership of mirroring builds relationships, active listening, and other observation skills, which are established elements in peace education. Participants described a deeper understanding of themselves and others after dancing together.

Identity: Shifts made through dance

Over 90% of the interviewees expressed a change in their view of people different from themselves due to participating in DIO. Visible shifts are seen in how two participants regard Muslims. Bea's family had direct experience with previous violence and Bea described her father saying that Muslims are 'killers' and not to be trusted. Though the DIO program, Bea met and danced with people from different backgrounds, and began to change her perspective.

When I was not yet involved in DIO, I was afraid of Muslims because they might kidnap us. After DIO, I have learned that not all Muslims are bad. You just have to understand their culture and traditions and accept it. Just be friendly to them.

Franc also experienced a shift in his perception of Muslims:

When I was young when they talk about Moros or the Muslims, we were thinking that they are bad guys and if they know that I am Christian they would probably kill me or kick out my head and do something bad. But then when I joined DIO I got the chance to meet different people; Muslims, natives, some of them don't have religion ... but I had to respect them because that is their belief and that is their own culture.

Franc is describing the cultural prejudices he grew up with that persist and shape the way that people interact in Mindanao. He shows some changes in his perspective and also the challenges in shifting cultural prejudices. In trying to build relationships and empathy there can be many barriers: 'fear, mistrust stereotypes, feelings of betrayal, ethnic group pressure, ongoing ethnic discrimination and occasional violence' (Halpern & Weinstein, 2004, p. 570).

Throughout Mindanao there have been many long-term efforts to reduce and transform these deeply held beliefs. It is not possible from this case study alone to determine the value of dance in Mindanao. The arts can be effective in improving relations in identity conflicts (Zelizer, 2003, p. 68) and dance activities with individuals from different backgrounds appear to have been meaningful experiences for participants in how they see themselves and others.

Embodied peacebuilding

In moving together there is a shared energy, risk taking, reciprocity of action, and connection which promotes social bonding (Behrends, Müller & Dziobek, 2012, 107). As one young male participant said during a workshop, 'the more we sweat together in peace, the less we bleed together in war' (Jeffrey, personal communication, March, 2013). As seen in the participants' experiences, by becoming more in touch with their bodies, fears, and emotions they gained new perspectives. Key to being able to see and understand others is the ability to see and understand one's

self within a web of relationships (Lederach, 2005, 35). In conflict situations, the self-perception of identity shifts. 'In non-conflict situations, people seem to define themselves broadly ... according to many different identities. However, during conflict, people may come to see themselves through the lens of conflict' (Schrich, 2004, p. 49). This often means that identities become rigid. Aspects of identity may also be motivated for political purposes (Shay, 2002, p. 6, 2005, p.11). As seen in the experiences of Franc and Bea, one becomes identified by words of religion or ethnicity rather than being able to simultaneously hold multiple identities. For lasting change, individuals need opportunities for deep and often challenging self-reflection in relationship with the 'other'. Dance is one way in which to expand perceptions and build connections with others. As Foster argues, 'If, as mirror neuron studies have shown, empathy forms the basis upon which knowledge of self and other is generated, these dances enact the process through which that knowledge production takes place' (2005 p. 218).

Even small connections through new relationships can be valuable for peace with peacebuilders nurturing moments of connectedness to generate positive energy and momentum (Abu-Nimer, 2003, p. 18). Mirroring fosters interactions by inviting opportunities to experiment with leadership and embodied forms of active listening. Being vulnerable, stepping into the unknown and making new connections are aspects of building peace (Lederach, 2005, p. 173). For shy participants, being a leader through movement requires taking a risk and trying a new role, resulting in the development of more confidence. As new information enters through the permeable membrane of dance there is a transfer and a transformation, and embodied experiences can be taken back into different worldviews. In one workshop, a young Muslim woman placed value on her experience to befriend new people rather than keeping them as enemies and the embodied experience of building relationships through dance became a connector and a call to action and youth leadership in Mindanao (Jeffrey, personal communication, March, 2013).

In summary, all of the interviewees found dance useful for exchange of ideas and new interactions and were able to experience a positive playful connection with new people. For some such as Bea and Franc, there was a shift in how they see themselves in relation to Muslims in Mindanao. The dance mirroring activity created space for exploring identities in the context of conflict, as well as prompting further questions. Some participants stated that the necessity of food and shelter was a priority for parts of the population and that they were uncertain about broader interest in peacebuilding workshops such as DIO's.

Limitations of using dance in peacebuilding activities

While universal as a multi sensory expression, dance is not a universal language (Stock, 2001). Both dance scholars and peace practitioners are cautionary about variations in non-verbal communication between cultures, as a smile could mean happiness or anger, or looking directly at someone who is speaking could be considered respectful or an insult (Hanna, 1988, p. 116). Dance has the potential for symbolic transformation because it operates simultaneously on conceptual, social and artistic levels. Functioning on multiple levels makes it open for interpretation, and as such has been used and abused for political and ideological gains (Shay,

2002, p. 7). The same aspects of dance that touch us deeply have also been used to legitimise domination or identities of nationalism. In the Philippines there is a rich culture of dance stemming from Indigenous traditional practices as well as periods of Islamic, Spanish, and American colonialism leading Foreman to state 'in the Philippines dance and politics are inseparable' (2001, p. 388). Across the world, control of identity can be seen in how dances are appropriated and reinvented (Gonye, 2013; Rowe, 2011) which prompts a call for ongoing, rigorous reflection as the performing arts become more accepted in peacebuilding.

The joy created and witnessed when people dance together can be infectious. Yet, possible limits to consider include exclusion, loss of confidence, cultural missteps, and reinforcing stereotypes. When working in pairs participants may lose self-confidence rather than gain it through perceptions of what a 'good' dancer is. If one student is more focused than another, or students are working together from different backgrounds are not adequately supported, tensions may increase. Jesza describes the challenges she sees:

... it feels great to see that my partner can copy correctly my movements but it also feels awful if they cannot copy. I have a perception that if they cannot copy your movement there's must be something wrong or I can't be a good leader. For me, if I am the follower, I will try to imitate correctly because I don't want them to have thoughts about me of not being serious or interested in the activities.

Social constructs around dance, who can do it and who is 'good' at it may limit both the traction of a dance-based peace program as well a hindrance to the full comfort of the participants. Further, if mismanaged there is a danger of exclusion of those who have different abilities. Cultural understanding, such as eye contact, becomes critical when working with deeply rooted prejudices. None of the participants expressed cultural restrictions around eye contact in the observed workshops, although they did describe some previous instances where eye contact was confronting.

Understanding culturally appropriate eye contact is an important aspect of non-verbal communication and cross-cultural interaction. As Schirch states, 'nonverbal communication is equally diverse. Many Westerners prefer direct eye contact and interpret it as a symbol of honesty. Other cultures avoid eye contact to show respect' (2005, p. 37). Within cultures there are also differences in non-verbal communication and cautions around regarding gestures as universal symbols (Birdwhistell, 1970, p. 81). Eye contact needs to be investigated further in relation to dance and peace across different cultures, as it is often one of the first cultural sensitivities mentioned in peacebuilding literature.

Gender pairings are another aspect to consider, especially regarding appropriateness of different genders working together. Pairings or physical contact are potential limitations, especially in areas where individuals or communities may have a resistance to dance or where it may cause more conflict rather than be an agent for change. In order for dance to be effective for peace, eye contact and gender are important cultural sensitivities to plan for. Whilst it appears there is much

to be gained from utilising dance in peacebuilding, there are also challenges to consider.

Next steps

In conclusion, as part of dance and peacebuilding workshops in Mindanao, the mirroring activity created a space for young people to engage in non-verbal, embodied opportunities to explore identity and promote understanding of themselves and others in conflict. In the experience of these participants, specifically the Christian interviewees, using dance as a permeable membrane allowed for simultaneous interaction, input and opening of relational space between the temporal and the physical, the spoken and unspoken. It was an opportunity to invite communication and understanding of themselves and others through dance.

The arts are an important model of 'experimental spearheading' within peacebuilding (Premaratna & Bleiker, 2010, p. 390). Yet there are inherent challenges in working with dance. In addition to potentials, this study raises concerns of exclusion, cultural sensitivities and unintentional reinforcement of prejudices. It prompts the call for more extensive research and investigation. Further questions might include: How are young people prepared in an embodied way to take their own learning back to their communities and families? What are the aspects that transform empathy into action? This paper is part of a growing body of research on the value of arts approaches in peacebuilding and suggests that further investigation of dance-based programs is warranted.

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1. The organization and all quoted participants have been given pseudonyms.
 2. Spanish colonisers initial name for Muslims, adopted by Muslims in the 1970s (Montiel, Rodil & Guzman, 2012, p. 73).

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Personal Interviews (conducted by the author)

Franc, March 4, 2013, Mindanao, The Philippines
 Angeli, March 4, 2013, Mindanao, The Philippines
 Jesza, March 5, 2013, Mindanao, The Philippines
 Bea, March 5, 2013, Mindanao, The Philippines
 Art, February 24, 2013, Mindanao, The Philippines
 Mirabelle, February 24, 2013, Mindanao, The Philippines
 Sabina, February 25, 2013, Mindanao, The Philippines

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Biography

Erica Rose Jeffrey believes in the power of movement connected to positive social change. Involved in multiple communities, she has worked internationally as a performer, choreographer, educator, arts leader and facilitator. The first dancer to be selected as a Rotary World Peace Fellow, she completed a Masters in Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Queensland. Erica Rose continues to investigate the connections of dance, empathy and peace as a PhD candidate at Queensland University of Technology. She is also currently the Program Coordinator for Dance for Parkinson's Australia and was instrumental in bringing the program to Australia.

peacemoves.org danceforparkinsonsaustralia.org

