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# Examining the Impact of DMT with African American Families Affected by Trauma: A Literature Review

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Examining the Impact of DMT with African American Families Affected by Trauma: A

Literature Review

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Dance Movement Therapy

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### Abstract

Although there is limited research in the dance movement therapy community regarding this population, dance movement therapy is slowly finding itself to be an effective intervention to help African Americans heal from trauma. Through the research I was able to discover if dance movement therapy could have a positive healing impact on this specific population. Many studies looked at exploring dance movement therapy interventions with youth and families as well as the impact of facilitating dance movement therapy groups with youth, while incorporating DMT interventions to help heal trauma. Through all of these interventions these studies used dance movement therapy to evaluate trauma symptoms such as anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and anger. These DMT interventions were reported to be successful in the process of reducing stigma, reintegrating into the community and reducing these trauma symptoms. This shows that when these approaches are introduced in these communities, they are found to be impactful both psychologically and physically after a traumatic event. Dance as an intervention has been used for many years with the African American population and has helped them through traumas dating back in history to the times of slavery, and still through modern traumas today. This is valuable when looking at this community through the lens of dance movement therapy. This literature review helps in providing more research to the population of African Americans in this field where there is not much research.

*Keywords:* trauma, African American families, Dance Movement Therapy, intergenerational, communities

Examining the Impact of DMT with African American Families Affected by Trauma: A  
Literature Review

**Introduction**

This thesis will focus on Dance Movement Therapy and its impact on children and families in the African American community affected by trauma. Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) can be used as a tool to express oneself using movement. According to the ADTA, DMT is defined “as the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive and physical integration of the individual” (ADTA, n.d). DMT allows the mind and body to connect while supporting a different way of processing that is not focused on traditional talk therapy. This allows for internal embodiment for the clients, and allows for them to access whole body integration. This is especially important for those with trauma, as many of their symptoms are expressed in their body, not just their mind (van der Kolk, 2014). This is vital because many people find safety in using movement as a way to express themselves. When we begin to understand the work of trauma, and the many challenges regarding trauma, we begin to understand that these traumatic symptoms are internalized and held in the body, and can affect a person’s way of navigating the world (van der Kolk, 2014). Dance is an important aspect and consideration in the African American community, because it has been a means of healing and communication for many years (Monterio & Wall, 2011). This literature review will examine how DMT, including theorists such as Whitehouse and Shoop, used theoretical approaches, that would best match the needs and strengths of this community. For example, Whitehouse believed in kinesthetic awareness and “viewed the therapeutic use of dance as a process of delving unconsciously into the deeper layers of personality; the source of body movement” (Wallock, 1977; as cited by Levy, 1988, p. 53). She also believed in authentic movement and the power of

the therapeutic relationship/intuition; as well as Trudi Shoop who believed in the mind and body connection (Levy, 1988).

This literature review will also look at how trauma affects this community, how DMT can be a therapeutic approach and how trauma effects many generations and plays into the generational cycle. I will be looking at the impact of DMT on this community specifically and how knowing more about this therapy can have a positive effect on this population. This topic is relevant because many people in the African American community have experienced some form of life-altering trauma or traumatic event, (Washington & Mills, 2018) and it is important as therapist and a person of this community to evaluate these traumas in this community and look at other ways the trauma can be treated. Dance therapy is one of the many ways to approach individuals being treated for trauma that many members in the African American community have not considered. In this community there is often a stigma around alternative therapies and therapy as a whole for this community based on the history of where therapy comes from and who gets access. A key purpose of this research is to break the stigma that society has around African Americans receiving therapeutic services such as DMT, and breaking the pattern around DMT only being used for those who are not a minority (Levy, 1988).

Many members of the African American community hesitate to discuss issues regarding mental illness, trauma or around seeking therapy due to the stigmas in society. There is this community created idea around African Americans not wanting to receive services due to the long history of traumas that surround this community that is only perpetuated by society (Farr, 1997). This thesis will examine those attitudes and stigmas, as well as, observe how DMT could potentially bridge a gap between mental health and this community. As well as help gain insight to where those stigmas started and why they are there at all. Historically, dance has been a means

of survival for African American families for years, especially during the times of slavery, segregation and even still today where they use dance as a way to communicate and cope with their unbearable circumstances (Farr, 1997). “The significance of dance in African American culture throughout its history reflects an intrinsic cultural orientation toward physical expressiveness and creativity (Todson & Pasteur, 1976, 1982; as cited by Farr, p. 185).

In this thesis I will connect historical traumas and intergenerational trauma, which can be defined as “ a traumatic event that began years prior to the current generation and has impacted the ways in which individuals within a family, understand, cope with, and heal from trauma” (Hill, 2017). I will then connect these traumas to common mental illnesses and the symptoms that are caused from these traumas, seeing if dance movement therapy can be applied, and how there is already a culture tie to using dance towards expression. In response to a gap in DMT literature I will research connections between dance, these African American communities, trauma and how trauma affects the African American community at large. There appears to also be a related gap in the literature regarding the black body and how dance movement therapy can be utilized and applied as a way of therapy for black people because of the history of DMT. Given the gap in the DMT literature this literature review will contribute to further inclusion and research in the DMT field in regard to the African American population, seeing as the DMT literature lacks diversity and inclusion.

### **Literature Review**

Dance and movement are art forms that have been used among the African American community for many years as a ritual to cope with and heal from the extensive oppression that these communities have faced historically, long before dance movement therapy was developed (Ojelade et al., 2014). This literature review will discuss how these years of oppression have

effected and traumatized this community and how dance can be a different way for them to be able to express externally what is going on internally. This community is often not included in the conversation regarding dance therapy and trauma, and it is about time that they are part of the dialogue. This population has many reasons to be hesitant to receive therapy, as they were abused and taken advantage of by those in power and literally used as slaves. They have a learned fear around the “stigma” that has been created around them and their fears are deeply rooted. Monterio and Wall (2011) discuss the African worldview regarding dance and how it can be beneficial for both individual and community healing. Only recently are we beginning to link dance and its significance to healing from the impacts of trauma since it can be used to connect our thoughts and feelings at times more effectively than verbal language itself. One theorist described her work as “putting individuals in touch with their thoughts and feelings, thus making it possible for them to more fully respond to internal and external stimuli” (Levy, 1988, p.75). I believe this quote is one of the core concepts of DMT and is key in regard to helping begin to understand how to help a community at large, and process how to heal and understand years of trauma and how it effects their daily life.

### **Trauma**

Trauma in and of itself is a broad complex topic with many frameworks and lenses to look through. While there are many types of trauma, it can generally be understood to affect a person’s brain, mind and body in many ways that neurologically changes the wiring in the brain (van der Kolk, 2014). When a trauma occurs, it alters the way one responds, and they often resort to a fight, flight or freeze response. The African American population specifically has constantly been shaped by all forms of trauma through the generations, such as PTSD, neglect, childhood trauma and community violence, abuse (physical and emotional), historical trauma, and racism.

Though there are many traumas that impact this population I will be mainly focusing on historical trauma, intergenerational trauma, PTSD and aspects of childhood trauma. Trauma is defined by the oxford dictionary as, “a deeply distressing or disturbing experience” (Oxford Press, 2019) and most trauma affects one’s ability to cope and usually has an emotional response. Hunt et al., (2011) looked at how trauma exposure really increases the rate of PTSD in children and adolescents and showed a significant difference in the PTSD symptoms and how these clinical differences may cause a difference in response with these traumatized children. As an African American woman, I recognize that trauma is embedded in our roots, our history and can be a hard part of our history and culture. I also recognize that it is hard to look at, understand, and accept that we are still trying to heal. As a dance movement therapist it is important to bring awareness to alternative therapies within this community and allow access for them to receive these services, while allowing them to use what they already know to heal. It is also important that as a DMT, I add diversity and inclusion to the conversation, which often does not include this population in the field or in the DMT conversation (Levine & Land, n.d; as cited by Hunt, 2011).

### **Historical Trauma**

“Historical trauma is defined as the ‘cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over a lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group experiences’ (Brave Heart, 2003, p. 7)” (as cited in Washington and Millis, 2018). Washington and Millis (2018) wrote about how historical trauma is embedded in the African American community. Historical trauma is something that is real and painful in the African American community and has been for generations, even years after the historical trauma has happened (Washington & Mills, 2018). African Americans have endured so many race related events that have traumatically affected



them and caused many mental health issues within this community, that the community as a whole is often hesitant, scared and unable to access resources.

Race and racism play a huge factor in regard to the daily trauma this community experiences, and the constant discrimination is only re-traumatizing this population. For this population part of historical trauma is due to racism. “Race is the primary biological and / or genetic factor that contributes to historical trauma” (Washington & Mills, 2018, p. 249). Looking at this research, and trauma in general, it shows that these different traumas do have psychological affects on a community, and the constant racial ideal from society really alters this community at large. I believe it is hard for the African American community to accept how the years of trauma has affected their norms and sense of community in society. They are impacted on a larger scale, and socioeconomic status has played a role in the increase of these traumas being passed down from one generation to the next.

What happened as historical trauma still impacts this community today and it is crucial that as therapists, especially DMT, we take into account the historical aspect of trauma especially in regards to the African American families and think more about how the many traumas this community has endured plays a part in the way they feel about receiving services. Often this community does not recognize that historical trauma is a trauma they are still impacted by and something that we are still recovering from, and that still affects us today. The years of historical trauma is something that we still are learning to deconstruct and find peace with, and the community at large needs to take into consideration how it alters the lens of people who are a part of this community especially in regards to accessing therapy. The stigmas built around these traumas are plentiful but they are based on truth and real traumatic events, and this community has every right to be hesitant to believe in a western ideal that they feel was not made for them.

Historical trauma is “the collective spiritual, psychological, emotional and cognitive distress perpetuated intergenerationally deriving from multiple denigrating experience’s originating with slavery and continuing with pattern forms of racism and discrimination to the present day” (Hampton, Gullotta, & Crowel, 2010, p.32; as cited in Washington & Mills, 2018, p.247). This definition resonates with me, not only as a therapist, but as a woman of color too, because it takes into consideration all the factors that are not looked at enough by those who are not part of this community, and assists those who are trying to understand the complexity and importance of historical trauma and why it is such a big deal to this community. It allows someone who is not as educated on the topic a clear way to make sense of it and an open-minded approach to thinking about it.

When understanding how trauma breaks down communities there are many factors to be considered. “Evidence has shown that historical trauma results in a breakdown of community structures, connectedness, and cultural norms (Schultz et al., 2016; as cited by Washington & Mills, 2018, p.250). It is important that as a person of this community I am working to effect change within this community, change these systems at large and begin to cause less pain for this community and more understanding around the huge impact of historical trauma. It is a deep and broad topic but largely important to look at in regard to the therapeutic work. Dance is one way that has helped this community be resilient for years during the hardest of times, as well as process and express what this community has been through and still goes through on a daily basis. It is important that when looking at this community and working with this community and the many families, we account for these traumas and how they affect the community as a whole, and how trauma can be passed down from generation to generation. It affects not only the

children and their families but also the therapists who work with these populations in regards to how they are seen.

Dance has always been a form of resiliency during the time of historical trauma, when looking at the historical aspects of trauma and dance, we can go back to many moments in African American history where there were major traumas happening and where dance before dance therapy was known to this community, was being used as way to heal through the many challenges. We are able to look at slavery, hip hop culture and the Alvin Ailey Dance company as examples (DeFrantz, 2003) where dance was used during the hardest of the times for this population, and how people within this community took these unbearable circumstances and made them into art and found a positive way to cope and heal (DeFrantz, 2003). “The African American inclination toward a physical and aesthetic expression of feeling... provides an intrinsic cultural affinity with dance as a therapeutic vehicle” (Todson & Pasteur, 1976; as cited by Farr, 1997, p.187). This is important when looking at DMT and how it can be a therapeutic and transformative tool used in this culture. This culture has always danced, from the tribal days in Africa until now and dance holds much tradition for the community (DeFrantz, 2003). This goes to show that dance can be transformative for them and that DMT is a therapy that is more comfortable for them when it comes to expressing their feelings. I believe that is key to understand and know as an African American dance therapist because this is a population I want to work closely with in my future work, and often people assume that DMT would not work with this population, because of the foundation DMT is based on. This research supports the idea that it may actually have the opposite effect on this population, and though this population was not factored into the DMT ideal historically, it still can be used, allows for positive change and allows for these children and families to express themselves and be seen. It may indeed work

better when doing therapeutic work with them, if done right because it is so culturally familiar and embedded and allows them to do the work without verbal language (Farr, 1997; Harris, 2007).

There is a stigma and negative stereotype about African American children being loud and not in control of their bodies (Farr, 1997). Farr (1997) wrote about how DMT pairs well with how African American children often express themselves and powerful in allowing them to further convey their feelings in a physical way. “Given the physical expressiveness of African American youth, both in their non-verbal behavior and in their applied kinesthetic skills, dance/movement therapy provides a medium for the high energy and fast-paced movement styles of Black children often censored in traditional settings” (Farr, 1997, p.188).

Farr (1997) touches on how society sees African American children and their behaviors but does not take into consideration their behaviors as trauma symptoms. The behaviors are a direct correlation to the generational traumas they have encountered, so these children have reasons why they may be more energetic by nature. It is important that children in this community find a release in a healthy way. DMT is one therapy that could work well with this community of children, in regards to finding a positive outlet for their energy in a way that often is not allowed or provided for children in this community. Dance helps to continue providing ways to support regulation and physical expression in a way that is culturally connected. African American children are misunderstood when it comes to their behaviors and are often labeled in a way that is inaccurate and stigmatizing. Society really is not taking the time to understand these youth and how trauma really affects their behavioral expression, and how trauma affects the body. Farr (1977) allows for the space of inclusion with DMT and this population and “provides an intrinsic cultural affinity with dance as a therapeutic vehicle” (p.187). The inclusion of DMT

and this population allows for a beginning to bridging the gap between DMT and the African American culture (Farr, 1997).

### **Intergenerational Trauma & Ongoing Community Violence**

Intergenerational trauma is “the transmission of historical oppression and its negative consequences across generations” (Winter, 2012). The study entitled *Trauma Exposure, PTSD, and Parenting in a Community Sample of Low-Income, Predominantly African American Mothers and Children* (Cross, 2018) regards the systems that affect this community and their children, and how economic status plays a role in the ongoing violence within this community which perpetuates intergenerational trauma. African Americans specifically are known for being “low income” and therefore not being able to access the resources around them (Cross, 2018). The objective of this study was to closely examine maternal trauma and problematic parents to evaluate if these factors impacted their child’s mental health as well. The study involved 112 mostly African American mother and child pairs from low-income communities. One main focus of this study was to look at the PTSD symptoms in the mothers and the children, the connection between maternal PTSD and child abuse (self-reported), and lastly, the impact of potential maternal trauma/PTSD. The results and conclusion of this study indicated that there were high rates of trauma and PTSD in the mothers caused by both community and family violence. It was stated that, “Trauma and PTSD in parents may impact parental distress and child abuse potential, potentially increasing children’s risk for not only the experience of child abuse, but also PTSD” (Cross, 2018, p. 2).

This is extremely important because when we look at trauma, we also need to look at the symptoms that form in children when their parents have trauma exposure. These parents with trauma exposure often have increased vulnerability, and are confused emotionally and have a

variety of emotional responses that play out in a variety of ways (Urman, 2001). This article speaks to how children's response to trauma goes through stages that help them process the trauma, build a narrative and themes regarding the trauma and who they were before and after the trauma (Urman, 2001). Children are affected by this ongoing oppression more than we realize and it is valuable as therapists to understand how these symptoms play out in children and how children therefore understand and work through intergenerational trauma.

It is clear how much community violence and unsafe environments impacts this community and what the lack of safety does for both children and their families when they are exposed to these secondary traumas. Dulmus and Wodarski (2000) showed that when parents have experienced violence directly, their children suffer with increased mental health issues. This finding is helpful in seeing the direct correlation between children and trauma simply based on the community they live in and how that can directly affect their mental health. This is valuable when looking at the intergenerational aspect of trauma and how it can affect children even when we think it does not. It is important to look at this especially in regards to the environments these families choose to live in. Many African American families are in denial, and believe that the children are not aware of the impacts of ones caregiving and community environment, but that simply is not true. Children are affected more than we realize by the environments we choose to raise them in and as a community we must do a better job with being more conscious of their safety and living situations. While low-income communities may not have a choice in where they live, research shows that caregiving and community does impact the child greatly. Finally Dalmus & Wodarski (2000) shared:

The findings of the current study, however, converge with those of Bell and Jenkins (1993), who determined that adolescents were affected by non-witnessed incidents of

community violence, and that family victimization, whether or not witnessed by the adolescent, was as strongly correlated as personal victimization with psychological distress. The present results build on Bell and Jenkins' findings on adolescents by extending the subjects' age group to children as young as six years of age. (p. 275)

This finding is connected to the research that psychological distress is evident in adolescence even if they did not witness the violence first hand as a child, which speaks to the impact of ongoing community violence. Adolescents in low-income predominantly African American communities are deeply impacted by the acts of violence that happen in their neighborhoods whether or not they were direct victims of these events because the violent incidents are still highly impactful (Dalmus & Wodarski, 2000).

The Cross study (2017) is relevant to my thesis because it addresses the trauma experienced in African American families, and how this trauma not only impacts parents but also the children in these communities. It also looks at how trauma impacts the intergenerational aspects of these communities and families. When we look at trauma especially in the African American realm, PTSD is one of the main results of trauma in both African American families and children. Additionally, "This study highlights a need for families' access to relevant interventions" (Cross, 2017, p. 333). Cross reported that there is not only a need for interventions relevant to this population, but also a need for more resources and more access to such interventions in African American communities. "Improving access to integrated treatments in low-SES communities represents an opportunity to interrupt intergenerational trauma-related mental health risk" (Gresl, Fox, & Fleischmann, 2014; as cited by Cross, 2017 p. 333). By implementing key interventions in African American low-income communities, it is possible to decrease the intergenerational trauma symptoms that affect African American families.

The article *Trauma-Related Symptomatology Among Children of Parents Victimized by Urban Community Violence* looked at the symptomatology related to trauma. As indicated “the purpose of the current study was to expand the existing knowledge base by examining trauma-related symptomatology among children of parents victimized by urban community violence” (Dalmus & Wodarski, 2000, p. 273). The participants consisted of 60 African American children equally divided between males and females ages 6-12 years old. Children were questioned via questionnaire of 20 questions about violence they have experienced or seen. They were also asked about their symptoms where, “children listened to questions regarding distress symptoms (e.g., “How many times have you felt like not eating for a whole day?”), while they looked at corresponding cartoons on the interview pages” (Dalmus & Wodarski, 2000, p. 273). Parents of each child were also given a 20-question survey regarding their child’s behavior to assess if they exhibit distress symptoms. 60% of the children sampled came from single-family homes. Researchers studied the amount of community violence exposure reported by each child and found that exposure to violence did increase their symptoms (Dalmus & Wodarski, 2000). This is important to understanding community violence and the many impacts it can have emotionally and mentally for these children.

According to the text, “several studies... have reported that some children exposed to community violence-whether or not they themselves were victimized- experience distress symptoms, including depression, anxiety, sleep problems, and impulsivity” (Freeman, Mokros, & Poznanski, 1993; Osofky, et al., 1993; Richters & Martinez 1993; as cited by Dalmus & Wodarski, 2000, p. 272). This quote shows how living in violent neighborhoods can impact children’s mental health even if they have not been directly affected. Children may still experience mental health issues such as depression and anxiety simply from living in their



community and witnessing these events multiple times in their lives. Additionally, it stated, that “results showed that children of parents who had been victims of community violence experienced more distress symptoms than did children of parents who had not been victimized” (Dalmus & Wodarski, 2000, p. 275). This article truly represented the daily challenges and how traumatizing it is for children to live in environments with violence.

### **Dance and Community Rituals**

Dance has been a core resource for connecting for African Americans for a long time. Dancing can be traced back to slavery when African American slaves used dance as a means to cope with their conditions, to communicate, and celebrate.

Hanna also continues to point out the significance of dance in the biological and evolutionary development of the human species. Dance, especially as used in rituals, has also played a role in the spiritual and social development of many communities throughout the world, particularly in African cultures. (Monterio & Wall, 2011, p. 237) Monterio and Wall (2011) introduced the notion that dance has been used for social development in many different locations but especially in Africa. This provides a cultural tie into how DMT can be used with this population. DMT theorists often believe in the power of the body and movement and what it holds and allows us to access. Trudi Schoop believed that “who we are is reflected and manifested in our bodies” (Levy, 1988, p. 61) and while I find this to be true, I believe that the significance of movement in this community allows for that manifestation to shine through (Monterio & Wall, 2011).

Monterio & Wall (2011) helps to make the connections between dance therapy and dance in this community. It shows that dance has been around for years and has always been a way of physically communicating for the African American community. This connection looks at dance

through a therapeutic lens with the benefit that dance is something that this community is already implementing in their life. It shows how dance can bring a sense of socialization to a community and really engage people in an authentic way. It is always important to look at the history of how dance has already been so affective with this community and how much the community has gained from dance and all that it represents in their process of healing.

Lastly, “dance is a physical behavior that embodies many curative properties that are released through movement, rhythms, self-expression, communion, as well as the mechanisms of cathartic release” (Leseho & Maxwell, 2010; as cited by Monterio & Wall, 2011, p. 239). Dance permits individuals to express themselves and access their emotions. “Dance forms, permit individuals to experience chaos symbolically and without danger. Emotions such as anxiety, fear, love and aggression may be incorporated in song and dance, and symbolized through dance and other cultural traditions” (Monterio & Wall, 2011, p. 239). It is valuable the way this article described the impact of dance in this community and how much can be expressed through movement. It does allow people to heal and express in a way that cannot be done with words and I think that is the beauty of dance and using it specifically with this community. The community has been through many traumas that are difficult to talk about, allowing a space for movement is a step in making it easier. It also allows for therapist to access a different way in working with these clients, allows these clients to be seen and validated, and allows therapist to see the positive impact it can have on this community.

To conclude, Monterio and Wall (2011) stated that, “dance forms such as hip-hop, break dancing, pop locking and krumping have acted as vessels of inter-generational cultural transmission, as well as modes of community and individual healing” (p. 249). This quote indicates that dancing of all forms can be beneficial for the African American community in

terms of healing and that there is no one style that works when looking at how to access clients. The study also stated, “in addition, traditional African dance as taught and practiced in the west has also taken on a therapeutic function, e.g., women intentionally utilizing African dance for self-therapy and community building” (Monterio & Wall, 2011, p. 249). Dance therapy would be key for healing traumatic victims in the African American community because of its deep history in the African American community and how accessible it is and familiar to the community. If we go back and look at the roots of African dance, how therapeutic it was during the times of slavery and what it allowed for the people who were going through this unbearable circumstances, only then can we realize the impact it can still have today. While discrimination is very much well and alive in society, DMT allows for a safety in healing.

### **DMT as Intervention**

For further research regarding my thesis I analyzed the article *Mindfulness and Dance/movement therapy for Treating Trauma* to better understand how trauma is held in the body. The author, Jennifer Tantia shared her findings on how dance movement therapy can be beneficial for those who have experienced trauma. Tantia stated that through both mindfulness and dance movement therapy victims of trauma can begin to heal. “However, for clients who have experienced ongoing trauma throughout their lifetime, the body is perceived as unsafe, and requires a more subtle approach to healing” (Tantia, 2013, p. 96). Dance movement therapy can be used to help clients heal through addressing their body and how their body is the vessel where their trauma is held. Since trauma is held in the body many victims block out their memories or experiences as a means to cope. By identifying these blocked feelings clients can begin to heal from the traumas they have experienced. Tantia (2013) stated that many clients do not feel safe in their body since it is a place where traumatic experiences harbored. “Once safety is established

in the internal physical awareness, an exploration of connections between internal physical and internal emotional experience might be possible” (Tantia, 2013, p. 98). After clients feel safe within their body they can begin making improvements in their recovery. Tantia (2013) gave an example of a client who was able to successfully implement mindfulness and DMT to heal:

Finally, the spontaneous movement that emerged from within facilitated Hanna’s ability to express herself in a “safe” way, an expression that had previously been suppressed and met with abusive repercussions. With mindfulness, Hanna was able to define a secure inner sense of herself that eventually led to empowerment through her “stroke” of enlivened embodiment.” (p. 106)

Tantia concluded that if clients are able to integrate the different parts of themselves, they are able to create safety in the body and with expression, as well as feeling empowered and more embodied (2013).

I think this article is powerful and speaks to how trauma is held in our body that we are not aware of and how it triggers the body. In the book *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der kolk, (2014), shared about how hard it is on the body once it has gone through multiple traumas and how challenging it can be to embody that trauma when it lives in your body in that way. It can be so hard for people to access their body and heal if they simply do not feel safe in it. For many trauma survivors the therapeutic work is often focused on working with the body and helping the client learn to feel safe in it again despite the circumstances. Many people do find it challenging to be in their body, and DMT is not just about getting someone to move. Our bodies remember circumstances and situations our brains may not and can bring up deep and painful feelings. It is crucial that we are working with the client to help them reach a level of safety before really diving into the work regarding the body (van der Kolk, 2014 & Levy, 1988).

Harris (2007), in *Dance/movement therapy approaches to fostering resilience and recovery among African adolescent torture survivors*, examined how DMT is used in trauma patients and how to use DMT is beneficial for trauma victims through a safe approach. This study focused on African refugees from South Sudan who had been victims of torture, who are participating in traditional dance as a communal activity where DMT specialists worked with the refugees through structured dance therapy sessions. One of the most important results stated, “Dance/movement therapy is particularly well-equipped for overcoming cultural differences, while helping traumatized persons gain the skills they need both for grounding themselves ‘in their bodies,’ and for comprehending the relationship between bodily sensation and traumatic memory” (Harris, 2007, p. 137). This showed that essential for healing is ensuring the combination of bodily sensation, traumatic memory and grounding oneself in their body. Karen Callaghan, a therapist and expert on the topic of DMT and torture, frequently discussed the correlation between trauma and movement and was cited in Harris (2007) that , “memories live in the body... and are stimulated by one’s own or another’s movements” (p. 138). This article validated how DMT and trauma can work together to have a positive affect on a population.

Lastly, in order to heal oneself it is crucial to label ones triggers so that they can then be worked through and represented in a variety of ways.

Healing means altering that feedback loop, identifying the ‘triggers’ to such bodily responses and attaching words to these painful ‘somatic experiences’ [which] affords a potential to loosen terror’s grip. The task of therapy, observes van der Kolk, is both to create the capacity to be mindful of current experience, and to create symbolic representations of past traumatic experiences, with the goals of taming the associated terror and of desomatizing the memories. (as cited in Harris, 2007, p. 140)

Dance movement therapy is beneficial for those who have experienced trauma because it allows them to find peace within their body again while also understanding it and gaining control of their movement. Memories truly do live in our body and it is huge that research can show the positive affects dance can have with trauma survivors. There is a direct correlation between trauma and movement and we are just beginning to unravel all that movement can provide for this community and for those who have been traumatized (Harris, 2007).

### **The Black Body**

The black body is one that often is not talked about in regards to dance movement therapy, as DMT started as a western idea that did not include ideas of different communities, races, and the differences between the black body and the white body. Growing up as a dancer it often was hard to accept my body and I was often compared to those of my white peers and that is still found to be true today. Looking at dance and dance therapy and the history, it does not include the concept around accepting black dancers into their ideas of what dance should be like, which is ironic as dance has been around in African American communities for many years. Looking at the theme of black ballerinas for instance is a perfect example of how there were many challenges that affected the African American ballerinas and made it challenging for them to succeed in the world of ballet. That is to be compared to the field of dance therapy where it often feels like the ideas around black culture, black dancers and giving access to black families, are not inclusive and accepting to the ideas of what dance therapy should be like. It therefore makes it hard for black therapist to succeed and harder for African Americans who want to seek this therapy to believe it as something that can be applied and used with them when they have been left out of the conversation for so long. I believe my role, as an African American therapist

is valuable, in bringing awareness and breaking this idea created on both ends around what can be used with this population and how to include them in the conversation.

In *Dancing in the Margins: Experiences of African American Ballerinas*, Brown (2012) spoke to the many challenges African American ballerinas specially have faced historically in the world of ballet, which originally is a white dance form. It looked at the many ways African Americans have inserted them into a dance world that was not accepting of them at first, and during a time where they were told, “African Americans are not well suited to ballet” (Brown, 2012, p. 368). It is powerful to observe how they have broken the barriers since that time and showing that dance can indeed be done with this population despite them having different body types and skin color. Today still there are few African American ballet companies or companies in general that exist specifically for this population, such as the Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The interesting thing about the Dance Theatre of Harlem is that it was founded to help make a difference for the African American community and offer more possibilities to the African American people. The creation of the Alvin Ailey dance company was done in light of the civil rights movement that impacted many young African American people and created a space where dancers could build community and creative pieces that correlated with these racial struggles (Brown, 2012).

These Dance companies specifically founded to include African American dancers, speaks to the challenges of this community being seen and the lack of research and inclusion in the dance community dating back to a crucial time in our history. Still today many African American dancers and therapist do not feel seen in regards to their bodies, and are the only ones doing the work with this specific population. History informs why this gap is still the case today, and the many frustrations around trying to include cultural aspect in DMT, which is originally

from a western approach. It is interesting to look at what was happening historically during the times when many of these companies came to life and what message and mission they were trying to advocate for through movement. This links with a final point about the black body made in the research regarding issues about skin color which continues to be impactful within the African American community itself (Brown, 2012 & DeFrantz, 2003).

The African American community has experienced discrimination based on color with many sectors of society, beginning with the division of labor during slavery, continuing in theatre, and film and extending into academia with light skinned African Americans receiving more access to mainstream education, employment and social activities.

(Brown, p. 387)

## **Discussion**

### **Limitations**

Some of the limitations doing this literature review were in regards to not being able to talk about every aspect of trauma, because it is such a broad topic. This forced me to narrow down to only focus on some aspects of trauma that I felt were more common with the African American population. Another limitation of this research was that a lot of the studies done were self-reported in regards to how DMT worked, or what the trauma symptoms were, which should be taken into consideration. There were not many studies that were actually done with accurate qualitative and quantitative research that showed actual control groups being run with DMT. A big limitation was the gap in literature between DMT and the African American community. This did not allow for many concrete examples of how to use DMT with this population and mostly only talked about how dance is used with the community. This literature also did not take into account the lack of cultural consideration in the DMT research and how little there is on this



population and how to work with them in a way that is culturally appropriate, inclusive and not perpetuating a societal stigma and oppression.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review is valuable in regards to adding to the conversation, beginning to link DMT and historical trauma together, bridge the gaps, and discuss the related stigmas with this population. It is valuable to explore the many realms that are impacted by trauma and how dance and DMT can be valuable to the process of healing with this population. There is a rich history of dance in connection to this community that is special to healing these traumas. Traumatic events are often held in our body and as we begin to understand the psychological affects of trauma the more we understand how it affects the brain and body, and alters the connections from our mind to our body and the many systems trauma therefore impacts (van der Kolk, 2014). When looking at this topic as a whole it is also important to understand how trauma affects generations and families, resulting in an intergenerational cycle and historical knowing that still affects this community today. As a DMT intergenerational trauma is an important lens to look through with this population and helps to understand why they are hesitant to seek therapy. Though we as DMTs know the value of moving through the trauma, there is much to be learned about how to do that with minority groups, specifically the African American population. This project is valuable in addressing the gaps in the research regarding African Americans and brings up the question if there a lack of research because of the stigma around mental health and the fact that these communities do not want to seek help or because no one is looking at these populations in regards to these topics, and including them in the conversations?

There were many recommendations from the literature around how to continue to develop DMT with this population and what it allows the community to rebuild in regards to

trust, self-empowerment and safety, while helping them heal from the many trauma symptoms. One idea I would recommend for future research is to look at the gaps in the literature and how to bridge the gap between DMT and the African American population considering there is a lot of cultural connectedness.

As a DMT I would appreciate more research regarding examples of how to run DMT groups with this population while providing more inclusion and diversity that really includes this population in the therapeutic conversation. This thesis is just the beginning of the life card I have been dealt and the work I plan to do in helping this population find value in seeking services that are inclusive and understanding of their trauma and history. The literature was richer in ideas and insight than I thought it would be, and helped me see that the work around bridging this gap has started. I hope to continue to be a valuable advocate for this community all while changing the way DMT is used with this population, and discusses this population in regard to the therapeutic work. I hope this thesis provides more cultural awareness overall on the topic and sheds light on the value of trauma work. This population will always be included in my thoughts and as a DMT of color, I will continue to find ways to support and bring access and awareness about expressive therapies to this community. The African American community has a lot of healing to do from many traumas, and the DMT community has a lot of work to do around how to create a space for this community to be seen.

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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

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Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences  
Expressive Therapies Division  
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Dance/Movement Therapy, MA**

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**Type of Project: Thesis**

**Title:** \_\_\_\_ Examining the Impact of DMT with African American Families Affected by

Trauma: A Literature Review\_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Graduation:** \_\_\_\_\_May 18,  
2019\_\_\_\_\_

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor:** \_\_\_\_\_Michelle Napoli  
\_\_\_\_\_