

Empathy as a Catalyst for Movement Expression

A Senior Disciplinary Honors Project

Samantha Faye Wathen

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Empathy is generally a topic of psychological study. A colloquial way of describing empathy would be to feel for someone, to be able to put yourself in his or her shoes. There has been discussion among researchers and scholars on the subject, especially identifying a comprehensive definition for the hypothetical construct. My interests concern empathy and expression and how it relates to the dancer, particularly in developing a work. I have choreographed a piece based on a short story entitled “Paradise” working with five dancers. Each dancer assumes a character and uses movement to establish and express the relationships between them; this is built on explorations of emotion and empathetic experiences. We investigated these feelings of empathy through improvisational prompts and individual study of the written source material. I expected each dancer to respond similarly but uniquely to each prompt and as such I was able to glean the movement knowledge I needed to further direct and choreograph the piece.

The decision to focus on the use of empathy in my case study was to help my dancers fully embody their characters. Given the subject matter of the story, I did not anticipate the dancers being able to understand *exactly* how their character would feel at any given point. Even so, I wanted the dancers to find genuine emotional connections on their own in order to find a more authentic means of expression. Choreography in its most basic understanding is the structuring of movement and the body. It can be used in dance as a way of transcending intellectual expression and instead expressing a personal or universal concern (Foster, 2011). In this piece, I focus on the personal expression of the individual. I cannot realistically tell someone what sadness is *supposed* to feel like or look like in movement; it is different for each dancer. Thus I gave them the task of finding a way to empathize with their characters so they could perform not only the characters sentiments but also their own. Again, I wanted an element of

credibility to flow in the piece; I find staged emotion to be awkward and easily recognizable.

As we went through movement explorations together, I led small group discussions with the dancers. My reflections on the discussions contribute to my overall findings of this corporeal research. It is of utmost importance to me to have the dancers' input because ultimately they will be performing this piece. From previous experience, I believe that the best dances are those that the *performer* cares about and has a personal stake in; their attitude is conveyed to the audience and makes the performance all the more enjoyable to watch. My original plan was to present the work in the Prime Movers concert in November. Prime Movers is a student organization that hosts a completely student run concert comprised solely of student choreography to raise money to further work in the department. The auditions for this concert were held in mid-October, in which choreographers presented their works as completed but not necessarily polished. My piece was not accepted into the concert, so I will be presenting in a separate student showing held Sunday, November 16, 2014 in the UNCG Dance Theater.

My reason for doing this particular work is to integrate my interests over the course of my time here at UNCG. I am a double major with Dance and Psychology and through this project I am able to combine both of my disciplines into one creative composition. My cast of dancers was aware of this work being part of Disciplinary Honors and expressed their interest in exploring these topics openly so I may present a comprehensive reflection of this process. My goal was to choreograph something richly experiential with the help of my dancers and to find a clarity of expression augmented by their personal empathetic character development.

What is Empathy?

Empathy is a construct that can be understood in several different ways. On first glance, one might describe empathy as coming to feel as another person feels, imagining how one would

think and feel in the other's place, intuiting oneself into another's situation, or feeling for another person who is suffering (Batson, 2009). All of these descriptions are equally valid, yet they all have subtle distinctions that when expanded upon might lead to different conclusions entirely (Batson, 2009). I look to Amy Coplan's distinctions to clarify my work. As empathy requires perspective taking (given you are not the original experiencer) Coplan defines two types: self-oriented and other-oriented. Self-oriented perspective taking is the process of imagining what it would be like *for me* (self) to be in *your* situation (Coplan, 2011, emphasis original). For example, if my sister was feeling a lot of stress due to a midterm, I could engage in self-oriented perspective taking by imagining myself having to take a midterm. This perspective taking at first glance may seem as though it is effectively empathizing, however it does not always lead to the same conclusions. A key difference between my sister and I is our propensity for test anxiety: she gets very nervous and stressed before a big test, I rarely experience those feelings in that context. I can imagine myself about to take a midterm and what that is like for me, but it does not elicit the same reaction as it does in my sister. Therefore, I am not truly experiencing what she is, and thus not effectively empathizing with her.

Other-oriented perspective taking accounts for the other person's affects and avoids egocentric biases (Coplan, 2011). Not only does one imagine the situation, but also imagines how *the other* feels in that particular context. Other research refers to this phenomenon as decentering (Watson & Greenberg, 2009). A difference in processing happens when engaging in both of these perspective taking types. Self-oriented is more engaged in bottom-up processing, meaning we first imagine the stimulus then allow our emotions to react accordingly. It is automatic to imagine how we might feel if we simply let ourselves be affected by the situation, a "natural" reaction if you will. Other-oriented is more engaged in top-down processing, willful

control that must be initiated by the agent (Coplan, 2011). We start with the appropriate emotional responses and work our way down to the context. In regards to the previous example, I can imagine myself in the same emotional state as my sister, however, that response is often evoked by a different context like being responsible for young children. This distinction leads to Coplan's ideas of self-other differentiation. To successfully empathize, we must maintain a difference in our own experiences and those of the other we wish to empathize with. Without clear differentiation, one might introject the other's emotions and feelings as their own or let the self-perspective be the ultimate focus and consequently engage in a simulation that fails to replicate the other's experience (Coplan, 2011). The goal here is to share in another's experience "in a way that bridges but does not eliminate the gap between our experiences" (Coplan, 2011).

A combination of other-oriented perspective taking and self-other differentiation as well as successfully matching the affective states of the other cohesively allows one to empathize and as such, enjoy a process of experiential understanding.

Through empathy, we represent the other's experience by replicating that experience. Rather than attempt to apprehend the other's experience from an objective perspective, we attempt to share the other's perspective (Coplan, 2011).

Our empathetic experience is a representation of the other's experience for the observer without the cause and effect relationships present in the other's experience (Coplan, 2011). This understanding of empathy is the key in my choreographic process. My development of the piece as well as my rehearsal structure stems from these ideas of other-oriented perspective taking and experiential empathy, which I will speak more on later.

Empathy and Dance

"To 'choreograph empathy'... entails the construction and cultivation of a specific

physicality whose kinesthetic experience guides our perception of and connection to what another is feeling” (Foster, 2011). Structuring movement to change a sense of physicality influencing how one feels another’s feelings is a goal of my work (Foster, 2011). As quoted by Haworth and Haworth (1991), “Movement of the human body has always been a medium for expressing the emotions [for] the existence of an emotion is the external physical behaviour of the person who is feeling the emotion.” Through dance, realism of motion and emotion can be expressed; the body is the vehicle for these elements naturally. Empathy can be demonstrated through choreographed movements as evidenced by Pina Bausch’s work *Bluebeard*. The strong use of everyday gestures and exaggerating those gestures is meant to shock the audience into an emotional response. The visceral movement is intended to enhance the emotional content and its repetition to echo the pattern of emotions in life (Haworth & Haworth, 1991).

Another tool of creating dance work can also be quite useful to the performer in developing their experience: improvisation. Improvisation is often used “not only for the material content it produces but also as a method to enhance the emotional truth in performance” (Haworth & Haworth, 1991). Essentially, allowing artistic freedom of expression inhibits outside influences on movement, i.e. choreography. Instead, the process then becomes about arousing movement from within and maintaining it through an inner focus (Haworth & Haworth, 1991). A choreographer assumes the role of director, providing the dancers space to express their own experiences through movement. I find movement developed through improvisation to be authentic to the dancer, speaking to how their bodies enjoy moving and finding how they themselves interpret a theme.

There have been dancers and choreographers over time that are known for self-expression and communication through dance. Martha Graham, Pina Bausch, and George Balanchine are

known to have saturated their movement with imagery and emotional meaning. Natalia Makarova's dancing enables her to embody her inner world; her feelings are the source and strength of her movement (Buckroyd, 2000). Choreography can of course be used as a way of transcending intellectual expression and instead expressing a personal or universal concern (Foster, 2011). Julia Buckroyd (2000) describes the student who takes movement and makes it their own, who embodies creative imagination, is the student with the presence and power to project themselves regardless of technical ability. This student can use personal experience as the raw material for generating movement. Dance develops as a vehicle for expressing and coping with day-to-day life in a way that conversing with a friend or journaling may be to someone else (Buckroyd, 2000). If we consider movement to be the mode of expression, then we can also see the value in enhancing it with emotional experience. It is just as boring to listen to a lecture in monotone as it is to watch a dancer in a robotic "performance mode." My work is then to find out how to choreograph a dance that stays true to the original inspiration while allowing my dancers the freedom to find avenues to put their own emotional experiences in the piece. The next sections detail how I originally developed the ideas for the piece and my plans to structure rehearsal followed by descriptions of these plans in practice.

Origins and Intentions

I had several ideas to explore at the start of my choreographic process. I wanted to create an environment that my dancers could express themselves fully. I also wanted to employ the use of character work to provide a structure to which the dancers could construct their personal empathetic experiences. I like the unambiguity of character roles because it gives the performers something concrete to refer back to as well as ensuring a fairly consistent series of runs. Another level to this work is the interpersonal relationships of characters.

I used “Paradise”, a short story written by a friend, as the inspiration for this piece. The story is rich with emotional experience and depth of character while leaving much of background up to speculation. Also, not being a published work, neither the dancers nor the audience could bring previous conceptions about the work. The story follows Lindsay, a college aged girl who is trying to find a resting place for her mother’s ashes, the “paradise” her mother described when Lindsay was a little girl. On her journey, she meets a couple of helpful strangers with stories of their own. She hitchhikes with a truck driver, a middle aged man who lost his child several years ago, and receives assistance from a hiker, an experienced outdoors-woman who is compassionate towards Lindsay’s situation. Throughout the story, we experience flashbacks of Lindsay’s life. Her mother was a caring woman who looked out for her daughter, but she suffered from schizophrenia, a condition Lindsay did not understand until later in her life. Lindsay’s father is a sturdy man who tries to support his wife and daughter; however, the stress of daily life being married to someone with a mental illness takes its toll and he becomes a hard man to whom his daughter has difficulty relating too. The plot climaxes when Lindsay’s mother runs away and neither Lindsay nor her father can locate her before she tragically dies in a hit-and-run accident. The story does have a happy ending, with her finding the “paradise” her mother always spoke about, however there is a lot to speculate about the relationships between the characters thus far.

I decided to cast five dancers, one for each character. I wanted to first experiment with emotionally charged movement, going through some structure improvisation before assigning the roles. This process would give me the opportunity to match the character with the dancer’s personality but also their tendencies of movement quality. After each dancer received their character designation, I wanted them to read the story and find common ground with their position. I did not want them to simply *feel* for their character, but rather engage in other-

oriented empathy. I knew this would be a challenge as the dancers did not have any direct experience in common with any of the characters. However, I trusted that the ambiguity of experience would allow the dancers to find their *own* route to empathy. Again, I was looking for the most authentic connections possible and giving each dancer an emotional template was not my intention.

My subsequent plans were both based in choreography and improvisation. I wanted to teach a phrase to be used as the base movement theme for the piece, but I also wanted movement input from the dancers to make the work uniquely theirs. I planned to exercise them in structured improvisations that started with “getting into character.” I did not want them to assume a role so much as engage in their empathetic experiences and embody them through movement. The next steps of the process were to construct the piece, audition for the student run Prime Movers Concert, and, assuming we got in, continue with staging and lighting to polish the work. Throughout this entire process of rehearsal and performance, I planned to elicit the reactions, thoughts, feelings, musings, and criticisms the dancers had about their experiences in the work and its development. Much of their performance is extremely personalized and I wanted to research what it was like for them to be so invested in a dance. I speculated the more a performer was emotionally tied to a piece, the clearer the movement would be in expressing the themes and relationships of the work. Dance, especially contemporary dance, is traditionally abstract with full-body movement creatively used to express a certain theme, message, or story. While I did not wish to choreograph something literal and mime-like, I still wanted the relationships and story line to be clear. By channeling their personal empathetic experiences in order to portray their character, I believed the dancers could clearly articulate the meaning of the piece through the abstracted and gestural movement of choreography.

I lay out these original thoughts and ideas to be compared and contrasted with the resulting rehearsal process. Often in the Arts, plans do not go accordingly and both compromises and sacrifices must be made. I maintain the integrity of my work through intention and feel accomplished in the process and product that came out of several trials of organization and creativity.

The Process

I opened rehearsals with improvisation. I initially had the dancers improvise to music rather than first give them the story. My goal was to engage in a mindset of exploration and emotion. On first trial, the dancers moved habitually. They let their bodies move in the way that felt best, which happened to be the way they move most customarily in class. There was little connection to the music, and they did not let their environment influence their dancing. After a few minutes, I had each dancer remain stationary and asked them to let the music speak to them. I wanted them to find some sort of connection to the stimulus. When they felt ready, they began to move, allowing the music to influence and guide their movement. Each dancer took something different from the song and channeled that feeling through their body. One dancer felt pain and anguish, another imagined expressing a scene from *The Lion King*, and another simply danced to the weightedness of the melody. Even with the diversity of reactions, I noticed a profound change in movement quality among their performances. Their dancing was full and embodied, taking on qualities out of their typical comfort zone.

When I started to create the dance I began by gleaning information from the story to build a base phrase. Each dancer learned it so we had a common movement knowledge to improvise with later. I also used the phrase to build variations and thread an overall theme through the

piece. The movement was choreographed out of the following monologue spoken by the main character:

When I was a little girl, my mom would sit by my bed and tell me stories; stories of faraway places and brave men who would rescue the princess. There were magical creatures and remarkable characters that were never the same from night to night. There were monsters too, but I was never afraid of them. My favorite part was always at the end when she would kiss my forehead and tell me “It’s all real Lindsay, even the monsters are real. But you’re a brave girl, a smart girl. There’s nothing in this world that can touch you.”... Then one night there was blood... and Mom was hurt... She always told me that there was a better place than this, and things would always get better.

The movement created was indicative of the words in an abstract way, not “acted out.” The phrase is used heavily in the first half of the dance as choreographed. I asked the dancers to manipulate it and use pieces of it along with movement of their own generation for the second half of the work. We also improvised with the phrase in the movement quality of the character.

I originally sought out five dancers for this work. As circumstances had it though, I only ended up recruiting four and thus danced a part myself. The five characters are Lindsay (the main character), her mother (who suffers from schizophrenia), her father (who is under pressure to keep his family a cohesive unit), a truck driver (who lost his son and picks up a hitch-hiking Lindsay), and a hiker (who helps Lindsay get to the end of her journey). Each dancer (including myself) was instructed to read the story and determine how to empathize with their designated character. We talked about the distinction between self-oriented and other-oriented empathy, stressing that each of us should make a meaningful connection to the characters out of our own experiences. I understood the challenge of this task blatantly: nobody would be able to connect directly. No one had lost a parent or a child, no one was a father or mother themselves, and no one fully comprehended the experience of schizophrenia. However, just because one has not had these experiences directly does not mean one cannot relate. I had each dancer (including myself)

break down their characters experience/emotional state, and find an element to empathize with that could lead to a similar feeling outcome. The most universal emotions are happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and disgust, all of which can be broken down into secondary variations, ex. euphoria, melancholy, or panic (Damasio, 1994). I wanted my dancers to find these elements that make up other character experiences and find them in their own lives.

My character was the truck driver, a man who had lost his child years ago and spent a good portion of the time afterwards resisting the grieving process. He felt that no one really understood his pain and all he wanted was for everyone to leave him alone for a while until he figured it out. When he meets Lindsay, years have passed since his son's death, and he is at a place of peace and understanding. Providing that comfort to Lindsay, that things will get better, is his role in her story. Personally, I am not old enough to have had a child and both lived with him a long time and dealt with his passing for 6+ years. I am unable to empathize with the truck driver though direct sharing of experiences. However, I have dealt with the loss of a close family member, someone I knew for years and who has consequently been absent from my life for years. I also tend to deal with grief solitarily, not wanting anyone to really be close to me until I dictate otherwise. These are the experiences I used to influence my movement and how I empathized with my character. Zach, who portrays the father, connected with having a family member with a mental illness. He is constantly figuring out how to cope with his sister's disorder and keep his reactions together for her sake. Nathalie, portraying the mother, drew from a time in her life when everything seemed to be falling apart around her and her life was not in her control. Ariana, dancing the role of the hiker, tapped into her capacities as a supportive friend, a go-to person. Cristina, originally dancing as Lindsay, brought up an experience with an old relationship which fueled her interactions with the rest of the cast. Hannah, who later replaced

Cristina due to an injury, drew on experiences of vulnerability to energize her portrayal of Lindsay.

I will tie in some research done regarding emotional embodiment before I continue with my process. Lambie and Marcel (2002) make a distinction between describing emotion states and emotion experiences. Emotion states are defined as “a set of primarily bodily, behavioral, and cognitive attitudinal states” while emotional experiences are defined as “a set of phenomenal states and contents of awareness” (Lambie & Marcel, 2002). I believe the discrimination here lies in a brain-to-physical body way of considering emotion and a holistic mind-body oneness way of considering emotion. Damasio (1994) also entertains a similar separation. While he stands by William James’ initial ideas as using “the body as [the] theater for emotions”, Damasio also recognizes the experience of emotion without involving a full-body response. He calls these responses the “body loop” and the “as-if” loop. The “body loop” travels the emotional experience from brain chemistry to bodily reaction and back, a full mind-body connection; the “as-if loop” resides solely in the brain, as we conjure a semblance of feeling without fully engaging the body (Damasio, 1994). I bring these perspectives into the discussion to map out what my dancers and I went through to create our character personas. To develop a sense of personal understanding, we first discussed how the characters in the story “might feel” or “would feel”, a brain-only way of thinking. After solidifying the character’ experiences for ourselves, we went through a process of transformation, finding how to compare our own experiences. This becomes the “body loop”, eliciting the bodily response by remembering the situation in which we originally had the experience, an example of episodic reinstatement (Damasio, 1994; Lambie & Marcel, 2002).

Prepared with empathetic priming, the dancers and I first experimented with the base

phrase. I asked for each of them to perform the movement as their character/they would in their experience. Each dancer executed the same movement sequence but the effect of adding their own personal motivation made a definitive difference. Zach's movement was constricted and employed a lot of flexion; his face exhibited deep anguish and struggle portrayed through his movement. Ariana, conversely, represented a freedom of motion, lighthearted and airy. Nathalie showed conflict, alternating between a casual approach and a self-sabotaging experience. The dancers took an "as-if" simulation to a real-life participation and flowed it through their bodies fully devoting themselves to the encounter. As Gallagher (2005) states, "When I am immersed in experience... the limits of the body and the environment are obscure." The depth of these experiences are not quite proper for stage performance; a dancer should have an element of poise and control as to rightly perform the dance. However, in our rehearsals, we did not need to be performing constantly. Working towards better understanding of how to channel the empathetic experiences we were building was enough.

Following initial experimentation, we began to construct the dance fully. It started with Cristina reciting the monologue (recorded earlier) as Nathalie performed the base phrase in solo. The rest of the dance focused on the relationships between characters/people (ex, Mother-Father, Mother-Lindsay, Father-Lindsay, etc.). I allowed room for the dancers to have their own input, prompting them to use their character to drive movement experience. Much of the direct partner contact work was improvised before we found a rhythm to set the movement as choreography. The first section is about the family dynamic and addresses the growth of Lindsay from naïve, shielded child to a cognizant and active young adult. Her journey continues through duets with the truck driver and the hiker respectively. This second section parallels to the original story and follows Lindsay's path to healing. The last moment of the piece is a mirror image between

mother and daughter, culminating in a final recognition of shared experience and peace with life's outcome.

No rehearsal process is without tribulation. My final cast is set at six people with a last minute addition due to one dancer experiencing a late injury. Not everyone was available to meet during all rehearsals due to other minor injuries or sicknesses. In choreographing the work, I found myself stuck in a creative rut for a solid two weeks. I did not create any movement or engage in development and ended up changing my music in order to mix things up. As a result, I altered the length and ultimate ending of the work as a whole; fortunately it turned out better than any original plan I had. Although creating the dance may have been the most challenging part of the process, the influences of empathetic feeling on the dancers' movement expression revealed themselves regardless.

Effects of a Catalyst

The first full-out performance we executed was the audition for the Prime Movers concert. Before our turn, I led the cast in an induction of sorts to have everyone on the same level of investment. In the process of building a character, each dancer shifted the focus on "acting a part" to expressing *their* personal experience. As they developed feelings of empathy with their designated character, the dancers fueled their movement from inside themselves instead of seeking energy from outside forces. With regard to the audition, I did not want my cast to simply remember what it had been like to experience emotion in rehearsal, but rather I wanted them to bring those previous explorations to the table. Karen R. Codman (1974) explains the mental template in dance as a "plan of action" referred to when patterning movement. Once these patterns are established, the mental template encompasses what responses can be reproduced

without the presence of the original stimuli (i.e. memorized) and the faster recognition and response to material that is similar to the original stimuli (ex. repetitive aspects of improvisation to a theme/topic) (Codman, 1974). For this work, I tried to avoid creating a mental template for myself as well as inducing the thought process in my dancers. I wanted each performance to be a fresh expression of experience, a current telling. The risk with this is the dance has never been/will never be performed the exact same way twice. The reward is evident in the reports of the cast after performing.

With their permission, I have included some quotes from the cast about the audition, their ideas about using empathy as a drive, and their qualities of movement expression:

“If an emotion is sincere and full of passion, it will make the art much more powerful... I love exploring the deepness of emotions when performing.”

“Through movement, I could quickly find and genuinely feel the emotion”

“All three dancers were so focused on making it “look “ or “acting “ like they were fighting that it looked uncomfortable for them so as the viewer I too felt that way. But once again, after a couple more tries they pulled it together, got into character, and embodied the idea of confusion and anger that occurs during an argument.”

“I think connecting with the movement emotionally brings more passion to the performance rather than acting.”

“I am still myself but I am just putting myself in the dad’s shoes and immersing myself in that situation... While the two are not the same in any relation the way that I feel and react to the situations is similar and while that sparks many emotions for me.”

“Honestly a lot of the performance felt raw and real!”

“... I wouldn't call it my character. I am portraying a character, but the emotions I portray while I'm dancing are my own... Ariana knows the story so she knows what to expect, and her face still looked in "awe" like she couldn't believe what she was seeing.”

It is in these excerpts of thought my research is evaluated. At the beginning of this process, each dancer had a norm of movement, a way of approaching choreography, and a mode

of performance that was typical for them. Summoning energy to express is a type of “performance mode”. However, this expression goes beyond just giving a good show. Each dancer found it in him or herself to translate a personal emotion into movement. The result was a richness in expression and passion in movement. Each dancer embodied the emotions they had empathized with in their minds eye (after all, these characters are not real people). Even though Ariana knew the storyline and what to expect, she was still impacted by the effect of the other dancer’s immersions in their character. As a choreographer, I could not help but get excited at the amount of depth my cast was going into to tell the story with their bodies. As a dancer in the work, I could tangibly feel the connections being made not just through touch, but through empathetic understanding of one another. Any dancer can execute the choreography, but the effort of feeling Cristina, Nathalie, Ariana, Zach, Hannah, and myself put into this piece amplifies the meaning of the work and reaches to a different level artistic expression.

Research conducted by de Vignemont and Singer (2006) indicates we share other’s emotions by means of shared networks “activated when we feel our own emotions, as well as when we observe others feeling emotions.” Furthermore, they suggest we experience empathy as a crucial role in human communication (de Vignemont & Singer, 2006). My research uses the implications of the communicative value of empathy employing the corporeal communication of dance. By developing meaningful other-oriented empathetic experiences with characters of a short story, the dancers were able to better express the narrative and more fully embody the relationships established between the roles. Empathetic experience can be a powerful catalyst to artistic expression as it furthers the investment of the dancers and also the audience. Choreography becomes all the stronger with a driving emotional force behind it, and tapping into empathy was just that for my final work *Journey to Paradise*.

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