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## Ballroom Dancing in Conjunction with Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy: Increasing Emotional Connections Through Non-verbal Communication

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# Ballroom Dancing in Conjunction with Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy: Increasing Emotional Connections Through Non-verbal Communication

## Abstract

Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT), Dance Movement Therapy (DMT), and ballroom dance have each been found to be beneficial in developing individual and interpersonal verbal and non-verbal communication and emotional awareness; however, very little research has been performed on the combined therapeutic use of any of these modalities. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with therapists and ballroom dance instructors who work with couples in order to facilitate dialogue regarding the limitations and benefits of therapy and ballroom dance. The core theme of this study was the 'Interest in Application.' The eleven additional themes that evolved were 'Benefits of Ballroom Dance for Couples in Therapy,' 'Implications of Non-verbal Communication,' 'Emotional Reveal,' 'Emotional Dysregulation,' 'The Impact of Implementing Change,' 'Result of the Physical Engagement,' 'The Role of a Profession,' 'Competency and Comfort,' 'Professional Therapeutic Partnerships,' 'Challenges,' and 'Ethical Considerations.' The study demonstrated that there are benefits to utilizing ballroom dance as an enhancing therapeutic tool for couples in emotional distress when there is a deficiency in non-verbal communication skills. The results also suggest that there is a manageable partnership and application capability for therapists and ballroom dance instructors who work with couples.

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BALLROOM DANCING IN CONJUNCTION WITH  
EMOTIONALLY FOCUSED COUPLES THERAPY:  
INCREASING EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS THROUGH  
NON-VERVAL COMMUNICATION

A DOCTORAL PAPER  
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

BY

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Brandon Ward, PsyD

## BALLROOM DANCE IN CONJUNCTION WITH EMOTIONALLY FOCUSED COUPLES THERAPY

### Abstract

Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT), Dance Movement Therapy (DMT), and ballroom dance have each been found to be beneficial in developing individual and interpersonal verbal and non-verbal communication and emotional awareness; however, very little research has been performed on the combined therapeutic use of any of these modalities. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with therapists and ballroom dance instructors who work with couples in order to facilitate dialogue regarding the limitations and benefits of therapy and ballroom dance. The core theme of this study was the 'Interest in Application.' The eleven additional themes that evolved were 'Benefits of Ballroom Dance for Couples in Therapy;' 'Implications of Non-verbal Communication;' 'Emotional Reveal;' 'Emotional Dysregulation;' 'The Impact of Implementing Change;' 'Result of the Physical Engagement;' 'The Role of a Profession;' 'Competency and Comfort;' 'Professional Therapeutic Partnerships;' 'Challenges;' and 'Ethical Considerations.' The study demonstrated that there are benefits to utilizing ballroom dance as an enhancing therapeutic tool for couples in emotional distress when there is a deficiency in non-verbal communication skills. The results also suggest that there is a manageable partnership and application capability for therapists and ballroom dance instructors who work with couples.

*Keywords:* emotionally focused couples therapy (EFCT), dance movement therapy (DMT), ballroom dance, couples, non-verbal communication

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### Ballroom Dancing in Conjunction with Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy:

#### Increasing Emotional Connections Through Non-verbal Communication

Couples therapy is offered by psychotherapists to help two distinct individuals find a way to live their lives in a cohesive and complementary way. Each one has an emotional understanding based on experiences and interactions with friends, family, strangers, coworkers, and teachers. As a result, they develop relational and emotional patterns that are applied to their current relationship, which sometimes become rigid defenses disrupting emotional bonds and healthy attachments. These defenses are expressed non-verbally and verbally.

The recognition and development of verbal and non-verbal communication skills is an integral component in couples therapy (Johnson, 2004). Waltzlawick, Beavin & Jackson (1967) differentiate these two forms of communication in which verbal language builds relationships through speech; however, this form is insufficient to fully express emotions or engage in relationships. The second form, non-verbal expression through such actions as hand gestures (with the exception of sign language), body movements, posture, and space utilization, enhance communication and interpersonal understanding. People use these non-verbal cues to elicit positive or negative feelings that help guide contextually appropriate responses (Dovido et al., 2002).

Emotionally focused couples therapy (EFCT), allows a space for an individual to explore and express their emotional reactions and form new reactions within the context of the relationship and incorporates verbal and non-verbal communication styles (Johnson, 2004). Similarly, dance movement therapy (DMT) allows for individuals to better understand their own emotional experiences and how they communicate non-verbally (Meekums, 2002). Combining aspects of DMT and EFCT might enhance the understanding of emotional experiences, allowing

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both important relational and individual work to occur. However, since DMT is traditionally limited to individual and group therapy, the required partnership in ballroom dance facilitates a therapeutic model for couples. A constructive treatment evaluation strategy (Plante, 2011), described by Alan E. Kazdin, Ph.D., was applied to evaluate whether ballroom dance can facilitate a deeper awareness and skills of non-verbal communication to improve how couples communicate and understand one another. The following analysis sets up the reasoning for a study evaluating the potential use of ballroom dance as an extension of DMT, to enrich EFCT.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy**

The psychologist, Sue Johnson, Ph.D., pioneered Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT) in the 1980's. Johnson (2004) focused on emotions and emotional communication as a way to understand patterns of interactions between people such as in marital distress. She claims emotions are less susceptible to cognitive control and interference and, therefore, provide the most accurate feedback on how an individual experiences a situation (Greenberg and Johnson, 1988). When people allow themselves to recognize and explore their emotional reactions and use these to guide decisions and actions, they can function better as individuals within a healthy relationship.

Studies have been conducted to establish the efficacy of EFCT. Soltani, et al. (2014) compared 6 couples who received EFCT and 3 couples who did not and found that therapy for infertile couples helped reduce depression, anxiety and stress. Dalton, et al. (2013) studied the level of marital distress in couples consisting of a female survivor of childhood trauma and abuse. After completing a randomized controlled study of 24 couples, they found that there was a reduction in relational distress by applying EFCT.

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EFCT capitalizes on the belief that emotional communication and connection is key to understanding and developing the emotional connection of a relationship. It is rooted in attachment theory, which states feelings, behaviors and thoughts are developed through the responses of others, and that the comfort and security that others provide allows for attachment (Bowlby, 1973). The attachment that couples experience develops into an affection bond in adulthood (Ainsworth, 1994) in which they feel a sense of security and comfort based on emotional accessibility and responsiveness (Johnson, 2004). When someone has a secure attachment, they feel connected with others and have an ability to be open to other perspectives, aiding in the necessary problem solving found in relationships and addressed in EFCT.

EFCT is, thus, utilized when there is relational distress, to rebuild the secure attachment that has been destabilized through the experience of having a non-responsive partner. A non-responsive partner can be understood as someone who has rigid interpretations and reactions in their interactions with others (Johnson, 2004). The therapist creates a secure emotional bond through emotional engagement and corrective experiences by working with clients to explore past and current experiences and interactions, helping the couple become more flexible and sensitive in their responses (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). The therapist does this by applying a here-and-now method, allowing for new experiences to occur in the sessions (Johnson, 2004). The therapist's key method to create change is by assisting clients with becoming aware of their emotions by manifesting an emotional experience and enhancing secure interactions by encouraging the couple to take their time at clarifying a mutual understanding. During this process, attention is paid to family-of-origin to help gain an understanding of how patterns of interaction have developed (Johnson, 2004) to allow for corrective engagement. The couple then

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feels a stronger ability to communicate and negotiate through problems as they present over time.

As communication and connectedness improves, individuals then move from feeling defensive to actively involved in the relationship. Furthermore, they can define personal roles rather than blame their partners for the presenting problems and recognize their own fears and flaws, allowing them to change their responses and interactions. This change occurs on two levels. The first order of change is a cycle of de-escalation (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988), in which reactive emotions become less extreme (Levy, 1999) and a feeling of a closer bond emerges (Johnson, 2004). The partner moves from thinking of the other person as the enemy to understanding the cycle as the problem (Levy, 1999). The second order is evidenced by the partners' interactions being reorganized, allowing for a safer and more secure attachment to form within the relationship (Johnson, 2004).

While reflection on the meaning of a verbal communication is an important part of EFCT, it is the culturally consistent (Ekman, et al., 1987) non-verbal communication cues, such as facial and body gestures, that provide awareness of intent of the verbal message sent and received. Additionally, people use these cues to gain understanding of internal states since emotional expression can reveal clues about private experience. This understanding helps establish intimacy (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). For example, eye contact and body positioning signal how involved people are with one another. People use this information to determine if they are engaged or distanced. Additionally, the perceived message from non-verbal cues elicits emotional responses, organizing the interpretive and response patterns. There is limited instruction on how to address this within the EFCT structure, especially when working with a couple that is resistant.



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Dance Movement Therapy**

Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) begins to address non-verbal cues by rooting itself in the physical expression of emotional states. Physical expression precedes verbal language and was used to understand the emotional experience (Chaiklin, 2009). Meekums (2002) explained that when dance movement is assessed, the non-verbal communication style is invaluable in understanding personal and interpersonal patterns of behaviors and beliefs. As a form of communication, these culturally based dance expressions facilitate connection, communication and self-expression (Chaiklin, 2009).

Thus, DMT is a multidimensional experience using “creativity, the body-mind relationship, non-verbal communication, interpersonal relationship, and personal change” (Meekums, 2002, p. 13) for the integration of the physiological, cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural aspects of human beings (Wengrower, 2009). Sharon Chaiklin (2009) underscored how DMT “attends to the body and its posture and how it influences perception, tensions held within the body that might inhibit action or feeling, the awareness of the breath as it is used or withheld, and the sensory of touch” (p.10). By using the body to move based on impulse, improvised movements, and subconscious feelings, an individual allows for the external expression of an internal emotional state (Capello, 2009; Wengrower, 2009). The process parallels the use of creative art in helping someone convey emotions states that are difficult to express. For example, for those who paint and draw, the color white may be used for the expression of positive emotions, red for negative emotions (Adams & Osgood, 1973), and blue for calmness or sadness (Naz & Epps, 2004). As artists, dancers communicate emotionally laden messages to the observer without words. The movement takes on a symbolic meaning that can have meaningful words applied to the expressive movements.

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This communication protocol consists of two components that allow for the applied meaning established through DMT: intra-action and interaction (Patricia Capello, 2009). Intra-action refers to how the individual relates to his or her own body. In this process, self-understanding of body and behavior arises, establishing self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-esteem. They can then be creative and move authentically based on how they truly feel. Interaction with another dancer allows for someone to communicate his or her inner state to others, called movement dialogue.

DMT is primarily used in a group setting due to the ability to apply intra- and inter-action. Group dance therapy sessions offer members the opportunity to experience support and gain a place for individual expression communicated through movement dialogue (Capello, 2009). Working as a “sounding board,” group members provide each other with feedback, through movement, that encourages acceptance and diminution of defense mechanisms as each becomes more aware of their own movements and how it impacts those around them. After this movement, verbalization is used to discuss what was portrayed. This allows the client to gain a deeper and conscious understanding of their subconscious driven movements. The objective is to create a space where participants learn about themselves and how they present, improve social interaction and tolerance of others, and merge and create new learned skills.

In comparison to group sessions, individual DMT focuses on an individual’s ability to learn about themselves and their interactions with the therapist in a more intimate interaction (Capello, 2009). Within group and individual sessions, DMT establishes a safe environment where boundaries and structure are provided allowing interactions to occur and flourish.

There is a four-stage process in both group and individual DMT: preparation, incubation, illumination and evaluation (Meekums, 2000). The structure of the four-stage DMT process can

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be likened to psychotherapy. Following the cultivation of a therapeutic alignment, psychotherapy clients become less guarded and open up in a more natural way that allows for insight and emotional understanding of—possibly subconscious—psychological struggles and how that might be applied to improve the quality of their lives.

Additionally, just as the therapeutic process in psychotherapy occurs within the relationship between the client and the therapist, DMT work is accomplished through the client and the dance therapist interactions. The relationship provides a working framework where a therapeutic space is created (Winnicott 1971). In DMT, therapists invite clients to use the muscular movements and breathing techniques to communicate affective states within a safe environment (Fischman, 2009). The therapist employs kinesthetic empathy by dancing with the client (Fischman, 2009) while also verbally validating emotional experiences they observe (Meekums, 2002) and allotting time to explore the relationship between the sensation and meaning; however, since there is a constant change in movement, it can take time to recognize the patterns of expression (Nadel & Staruss, 2003). Just as in EFCT, the dance therapist mirrors, clarifies, elaborates or modifies the movement of their client, thus creating a therapeutic and secure relationship (Meekums, 2002, p. 14). Furthermore, as in talk therapy, it takes effort and patience to learn someone's verbal and non-verbal communication style, as a client's movements are rooted in personality styles (Stanton-Jones, 1992).

Dance movement therapy has been found to improve physical and mental health. Research suggests that DMT provides a subjective and objective improvement in individual's quality of life and depression (Haboush et al., 2006; Jeong and Hong, 2005; Kiepe, Stöckigt, Keil, 2012); body image, ego, and physicality (Earhart, 2009); mood, distress, body image, and self-esteem while increasing patient interpersonal warmth and self-expression (Dibbell-Hope, 2000). One

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study demonstrated that the therapeutic component to DMT involved organized dance movements such as circle dances involving multiple people (Koch, Morlinghaus, & Fuchs, 2007), which resulted in an improvement in motivation, coping, strength, energy and enjoyment, with a decrease in depression, lifelessness, anxiety, tension and tiredness in psychiatric patients. There was not the same therapeutic benefit when these dances were executed alone.

### **Ballroom Dancing**

Couples ballroom dancing differs from individual dance styles because there is a required component of intimacy in partner dancing (Ericksen, 2011). This develops through personal exposure and mutual dependency. The connection is fostered through the dance instructor who creates an environment where couples can emotionally connect in their dancing. Ericksen (2011) described the formation of this “instant intimacy” developing from the physical connection and public display of the relationship. However, the instant intimacy may not be deeply rooted. Open communication and effort are encouraged for instant intimacy to become more than surface level.

This work results in emotions of the dancers being portrayed to the audience. The feelings do not have to be real to be understood and experienced by the audience (Ericksen, 2011) as the content, tone of voice, and body language are all key factors for successful emotional communication (Winkelhuis, 2011); however, dancers work to present their emotional expression as genuine (Ericksen, 2011). Hochschild explained that there is emotional surface acting, which is when someone is physically expressing an emotion that they are not connecting internally, as opposed to deep acting, which is when internal experiences are aligned with the external emotions reflective of a stronger connection.

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Another important component to ballroom dancing is that each partner is inviting and accepting one another into the relationship (Winkelhuis, 2011). Recognition allows for the connection to develop and remain while dancing. Standard, also known as smooth, dances involve each person in the relationship going from being disconnected to a mutually desired connected partnership. Each person uses eye contact to initiate a connection, which is followed by the physical gap closing. The physical contact remains throughout most of the dance. On the contrary, Latin American dancing does not have the physical contact that smooth dance requires. Instead, eye contact and energetic connections are important, with body contact scattered throughout the dances (Winkelhuis, 2011). Each person instead uses their own physical movements to express a synergetic connection that never breaks between the partners.

Just as in non-dance partnerships, couples need to be open in their communication. Ballroom dance relationships between teachers and students create an environment in which conflict may be addressed (Ericksen, 2011). It is more difficult to express intense emotions when there is conflict between the partners because the emotional connection is impaired (Ericksen, 2011).

Lastly, ballroom dance automatically involves touch in its intimacy representation. Some students may have more difficulty than others with the necessary closeness (Ericksen, 2011). When a client does enjoy dancing in a partnership, they may feel safe and more intimate. Furthermore, there is a personal and public aspect that is being portrayed through this experience. This becomes particularly important when considering cultural values since different cultures may dictate how and which emotions are appropriate to express

Ballroom dancing has been found to have various beneficial mental health factors. A systematic review found that there was improvement in balance and coordination in patients with Parkinson's disease and quality of life in patients with heart failure (Kiepe, Stöckigt, & Keil,

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2012; Earhart, 2009). Haboush et al. (2006) found that ballroom dance could be helpful for treating depression in the geriatric population. They argued that ballroom dance could be used as a therapeutic approach for the geriatric population that is typically resistant to psychotherapy (Lasoki, 1986). The authors suggested that the improvement in their elderly subjects' depression may be attributed to an increase in self-efficiency and a decrease in hopelessness. There are many limitations to the research that has been conducted regarding the effect of ballroom dancing including the limitation of small sample sizes. The reported results show a trend in improvement of a client's mental state through ballroom dance; however, larger studies are needed to establish statistical significance.

### **An Integrated Theoretical Framework for the use of Ballroom Dancing as a DMT**

#### **Intervention Approach for Couples in EFCT**

There are a limited number of studies on the effect of dance on mental health and even fewer on the effect of ballroom dancing. Almost no research exists on whether ballroom dance can be utilized to assist in improving couples' emotional connections and, thus, relationships while in couples therapy. Current studies suggest an improvement in physical and mental health through the process of dance movement therapy and in the non-therapeutic use of ballroom dancing. I argue that when a couple self-identifies the need for therapy and attends couples therapy that is focused on emotional bonding development, the couple can utilize ballroom dance to assist in increasing their non-verbal communication skills to improve an emotional bond. Couples can learn by ballroom dancing what body and facial expressions are used to portray different emotions. This can be accomplished through the combination of two activities, observing and practicing ballroom dancing.

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The combination of observation and practice is key because dance is a multifunctional socio-cultural event as well as a complex form of communication that occurs between the observer and performer (Jola, Ehrenberg, & Reynolds, 2011). Dance is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2017) as a “form of expression that uses bodily movements that are rhythmic, patterned (or sometimes improvised), and usually accompanied by music.” Furthermore, Buck and VanLear’s (2002) theory of communication states that pseudo-spontaneous communication proposes that emotional perception from physical display is direct and no words are needed. This occurs by the ability to identify the relationship between specific physical movements and emotions. Dance provides the opportunity to communicate emotions through movement and choreographed patterns (Boone & Cunningham, 1998; Dittrich, Troscianko, Lea, & Dawn, 1996). This is because dance requires the ability to move the human body in an organized, detailed, and deliberate way while keeping track of surroundings, space, and their partner, all while moving appropriately to the accompanying music. An accomplished dancer can master these skills and connect emotionally with an audience by bringing images to life to tell a story and arouse the intended emotional reactions (Knoblich, 2007). At this time, affect and motor components work together when a spectator is responding to watching a dance performance. The audience can feel as if they are dancing in their chairs as they experience the physical, mental, and emotional expressions of a dance performance because the brain organizes the images of dance in the same way it would if the observer was dancing himself or herself. By understanding the cognitive processes underlying these abilities, we can explore how this can be applied to couples therapy geared to increasing emotional connections.

This supports the concept that clients in EFCT can learn dance techniques to develop stronger skills in understanding their partner. When dancing, couples are watching and feeling

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one another's movements. As such, they are able to physically experience the emotions their partner is expressing through their body movements. The couples are communicating with one another without words and just through physical expression.

But why use ballroom dance if EFCT already addressed non-verbal communication skills development? The use of ballroom dance would be appropriate for couples who are resistant to talk therapy. Other couples who would benefit are those who consistently struggle with understanding and developing non-verbal cues and the impact of body language as a form of communication despite multiple sessions of EFCT. The idea is that the integrated model would accelerate and enhance the therapeutic process.

With tone of voice accounting for 38% of successful communication, body language accounting for 55%, and content of what people discuss only accounting for 7%, it suggests that couples should pay attention to communication and body language when working towards enhancing their emotional bond (Winkelhuis, 2011). Often in therapy, couples can get caught up in the content of their problems, and avoid establishing emotional understanding and awareness. Therefore, ballroom dance can be a helpful tool in furthering an emotional understanding without verbal communication that focuses on content.

The best expression of oneself and increased likelihood of being understood occurs when the dancers feel good about themselves and are displaying honest feelings (Winkelhuis, 2011). In regards to positive self-image, this is similar to the efforts of couples therapy where the individual had to do their own work and develop their own understanding of self to foster the relationship (Johnson, 2009). EFCT, taking an individual and systemic approach, can be employed to facilitate the personal development in this circumstance while also implementing couples work.



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When dancing is based on honest feelings that are translated into emotions, the dance will be most convincing (Winkelhuis, 2011). This comes from the tone of communication. Couples can explore their current emotional state by choosing a dance that taps into that emotion. They can then learn what physical expressions they turn to in order to communicate their emotional state. Additionally, their partner can develop an awareness of what those cues are. For example, when stressed, dance quality decreases (Winkelhuis, 2011), for example with tightening of muscles or changing breathing patterns. Partners may feel disconnected as a result; however, they can then work together to understand the reasons for the presenting stress, and overcome the problem together.

Furthermore, the two different types of dances, smooth and Latin American, can be used to specialize their treatment. Smooth dance automatically establishes a physical connection between partners due to the close contact hold. Latin American dancers need to establish a physical connective feeling with bodies that minimally touch. Each can be challenging to couples in different ways, and allow for different emotional expression skills to develop. Moreover, specific dances can be implemented for identified emotions. For example, a waltz may elicit a caring feeling, rumba a provocative interaction, and tango a sense of pride (Winkelhuis, 2011).

Ballroom dancing also encourages respect and acknowledgment of one another. While EFCT allows time for each member of a couple to express themselves and have their feelings reflected back so they can be understood and recognized, dance emphasizes this interaction. This is because each partner desires to be recognized through the dance (Winkelhuis, 2011), and acknowledges that there is an equal role in the relationship. When couples have trouble taking turns and recognizing one another, dance helps facilitate this process. Ballroom dancing forces couples to respect one another and recognize how each plays an important role for the interaction

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to be successful. This awareness can be applied to show the couple that recognition enhances the success of partnership in a relationship.

### **Aims**

The present study has two main aims: (a) to determine if couples therapists and ballroom dance instructors feel there is a benefit for the use of ballroom dance for couples in therapy who are having difficulties with understanding non-verbal communication and (b) determine general themes for a couples' growth that can occur through the application of ballroom dance that would enhance EFCT sessions.

### **Research Methods**

#### **Participants**

Data was collected from a total of six participants with licensed couples psychologists and certified ballroom dance instructors equally represented (3:3). Four participants were male and two participants were female. The ages of the sample ranged from 34 years to 66 years with a mean age of 47.7 years. The participants ranged between 10 to 32 years of experience in their respective fields. The racial composition of the sample included Caucasian (83.3%) and Caucasian/Italian (16.7%).

#### **Procedures and Materials**

Participants were selected through convenience sampling. Psychologists were identified in the community as having a doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology with a minimum of ten years of experience whose private practices focus on couples therapy. Ballroom dance instructors were identified through local dance studios who were certified instructors with a minimum of ten years experience and taught private couples dance lessons. Final pairings were determined by participant availability.

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A semi-structured interview was conducted during three focus group sessions including one psychologist and one ballroom dance instructor. One researcher conducted interviews with sessions lasting about one hour each. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to uncover the similarities and differences between couples therapy and ballroom dance and to explore the application of ballroom dance as an enhancement tool for couples therapy. Participants were encouraged to answer the questions and converse. All participants were provided consent forms and question referencing sheets. (See Appendix A)

### **Results**

All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis (Ezzy, 2002) was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis uses a coding system to identify themes from the data collected. Pre-existing data was used to develop a semi-structured interview that created space for an open dialogue between participants. This method allowed for themes to then be identified based on the data collected. By following the guidelines of Ezzy (2002), coding was compiled through repeated readings and line-by-line coding.

#### Results

One core theme and eleven major themes arose from the data. The core theme was the 'Interest in Application' which displays the unanimous support for the application of a therapeutic ballroom dance program for couples. The major themes were: 'Benefits of Ballroom Dance for Couples in Therapy' which reveals the shared views of the benefits of ballroom dance for couples in therapy; 'Implications of Non-verbal Communication' which explores the importance of non-verbal communication in both therapy and ballroom dance; 'Emotional Reveal' which refers to each partner expressing their individual emotional experiences; 'Emotional Dysregulation' which looks at the impact of each partners' emotional distress on the

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couples ability to express, interpret, and respond behaviorally to one another; ‘The Impact of Implementing Change’ which identifies the positive changes that occurs through ballroom and talk therapy; ‘Result of the Physical Engagement’ that identifies change specific to dance; ‘The Role of a Professional’ which defines the guiding role of therapists and dance instructors in implementing change; ‘Competency and Comfort’ which addresses therapist and dance instructors own skill levels; ‘Professional Therapeutic Partnerships’ which shows the mutual interest for instructors and therapists in the application of therapeutic couples ballroom dancing; ‘Challenges’ which exposes the challenges that may arrive in therapeutic settings; and ‘Ethical Considerations’ which incorporates the ethical implications of a joint talk therapy and ballroom dance therapy protocol for treatment couples in distress.

### **Core Theme: Interest in Application**

The Interest in Application can be viewed as the theme showing unanimous support for a joint couples therapy and ballroom dance therapeutic approach to improve non-verbal communication between couples in distress. Therapists stated:

*I have suggested [ballroom dance] and some people have picked it up. One couple has stuck with it and it has made a big difference for them... I think there is a positive influence on the relationship.*

*Couples in therapy can and would benefit from dancing together by knowing themselves better, dropping their protectors down, being more present in the moment to moment with their partner or spouse, really enjoying the energy and energetic connectivity, touching that feels nothing but intimacy of all kinds, laughing and enjoying, [and] getting away from the problems.*

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Additionally, therapists shared support for ballroom dance because it addresses the limitations of talk therapy. One therapist in particular discussed the difficulty some clients have with talking about non-verbal communication and containing feelings.

*Talk therapy is problematic because how much can you talk someone into learning about their body, tuning into their body, and regulating the sensations in their body? You can go so far [in talk therapy] but then it is experiential after that. Bringing in dance, you would have therapy sessions that would be much more productive and people can be more contained in expressing it... The therapy session can get really unproductive and the tools for a couples therapist, especially traditional, can be limited. You always feel like you need adjuncts at the very least for things. I think the therapeutic component is the physical intelligence to be able to sit with and contain those feelings long enough to develop the ultimate thing of empathy in therapy and in dance.*

Dance instructors also shared their support for a ballroom dance program. They focused on dance encouraging and forcing couples into situations where being vulnerable is necessary, particularly through the physical frame that dance positions require. This refers to the arm positions of the partners while dancing. One stated:

*I like dance as couples therapy because [when couples] are not good at recognizing the non-verbal communication between each other, it forces them to become more clear and making sure the it is more clear and then being able to receive that message and respond to it.*

Dance instructors expressed their limited training in providing therapy for clients; however, they shared that there is a pseudo-therapeutic repair that occurs on the dance floor. One dance instructor noted:

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*This is really interesting to me because I had a therapist that was in one of my group classes and he said to me 'I bet a lot of your job ends up being couples therapy. Do you have any training?' I was like 'no,' so he said 'we should get together sometime and I can talk you through some stuff.' ... A lot of the time I am trying to be sensitive to people. I want them to learn to communicate with each other, not just in a movement but also in the way that they say things to each other. I jump in and say 'what I think they are trying to say is,' instead of [what] that is going on right now.*

This instructor went on to report an interest in developing a partnership with a therapist to improve their competency in providing a more formal service to clients.

### **Theme 1: Benefits of Ballroom Dance for Couples in Therapy**

This theme explores how both therapists and ballroom dance instructors view the benefits and healing components of ballroom dancing as a therapeutic approach as an augmentation for couples already attending talk therapy. The first step towards ballroom dance being beneficial for couples requires the clients to be invested in the process of therapy. Therefore, one benefit was identified as being open and vulnerable in doing the work required being in a relationship. A therapist shared:

*I would say if a couple is willing to show up for therapy or dance there is something underneath that that is healing in itself. Huge amount of couples would never go to dance together or go to therapy together. If they are willing to do that together there is something really lovely and healing about it.*

Client interest in therapy was found to occur when there is a road block in talk therapy. When a problem arises, there is rigidity in the relationship in regards to focusing on the problem.

Therapist participants expressed the limitations that occur in talk therapy when a client has such

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deep-rooted issues. They identified ballroom dance as a tool to bring clients out of their inflexibility.

*So many couples come in dwelling on the past, wounds, and the injury. They have a hard time being present in the moment... I think in couples therapy there is so much to learn about ourselves, about one another, about how we fit, how we struggle, and stay open to the journey. I would say, dance it helps with this to not be so hard on ourselves or our spouse, or our marriage when things don't go right, to have more grace. And I think, dance of all things is full of grace, particularly couples dance.*

Therapists identified that it is not about the clients dance ability that provides benefits. It is instead the development of the non-verbal skills.

*I like dance as couples therapy because whether they are [good or] not good at recognizing the non verbal communication between each other it forces them to become clear[er] ... and then able to receive that message and respond to it.*

Instructors also believed that it is the growth that occurs when clients make mistakes while dancing that enhances their ability to progress in therapy. Making mistakes help clients become more aware of the inevitability of making mistakes and the importance of being able to practice, learn, and move forward.

*I think, as a couple progresses that missteps happen and they learn to communicate better on how to handle a slight problem that went wrong and then they can keep pushing forward because they just have to keep going... There is no use in dwelling on a step that happened twenty seconds ago... It keeps people in the present as opposed to dwelling on the past.*

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### **Theme 2: The Implications of Non-verbal Communication**

Ballroom dance instructors and therapists each identified noticing clients displaying the same non-verbal communication in each setting. Non-verbal communication was defined as the interconnectedness of emotions and how they are expressed and understood through physical representations. Participants collectively identified the ability to recognize non-verbal cues as key components to the enhancement of relationships both in therapy and on the dance floor.

A therapist participant identified that non-verbal communication includes the expression of physical and tonal cues, which provide information of the meaning and intention of what is being said.

*Are you really saying what you are trying to say and are you doing what you think you are doing, the very visible things... And saying "will you do the dishes" is different than saying "will you do the dishes." It's the tonality, the facial expression, the coloring of the communications and that usually comes from an emotional place within somebody.*

The same pattern occurs when dancing in a partnership. There is constant communication occurring, and how information is conveyed is key to the emotional experience. The impact of inaccurately expressing and interpreting someone else's behaviors is constantly being addressed in dance. For example one instructor described:

*The right arm connection for the guy is very important for communication, the upper connection for the lady, and it the first thing that guys forget, so they are always dropping it, which is important for the lady, and instead of saying something, they tend to just pick their elbow up, and that is the cause of most of the fights. The guy responds that he is thinking about something else, and she responds that "I cant feel you" so I have to*



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*step back and explain that this is a path of communication and I know that you are thinking about this and he is not doing it on purpose.*

### **Theme 3: Emotional Reveal**

An individual's internal thoughts and emotions are expressed and experienced in both dance and therapy. Dance instructors identified that clients reveal their own emotional states with their partners while dancing.

*She can feel what you are thinking without ever saying it, so if you even think you are going to do an under-arm turn she can already feel you are thinking of doing an underarm turn, so you need to do it, so that our brains are thinking of the right thing all of the time, otherwise the woman is confused.*

Therapists identified that the same interactions occur in therapy.

*Your partner always knows that something is up before you put a word to it... Not putting words to it leaves your partner just guessing what the heck is going on for that person.*

Participants reported that clients feel more intimate with one another when they are emotionally revealing. This vulnerability happened when they recognize physical responses. Intimacy, connection, and romance were used interchangeably during the focus groups. Intimacy was identified as the growth of an emotional connection. A dance instructor shared:

*I have seen couples come much closer because they're both going through [the] process of deep self-reflection through physical movement... and then the intimacy grows because they can touch each other every physical way that's not sex.*

A therapist noted that couples in therapy benefit from dancing together in ballroom dance classes because it repeats the processes being vulnerable and developing a sense of connection.

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*Knowing themselves better, dropping their protectors down, being more present in the moment to moment with their partner or spouse, really enjoying the energy and energetic connectivity touching that feels nothing but intimacy of all kinds.*

Additionally, ballroom dance specifically encourages there to be intentionality when utilizing displayed emotional. Dance instructors work with clients to think about what emotions they are trying to display and work with them to make that message understood by an observer.

*If you saw it as emotionally angry you would interpret it that way... Let's say a waltz for a cha-cha hurry tango or a Viennese, how they are creating those emotions and those dances? Sometimes I'll have students write down what they see, smell, hear, feel, in each dance and we talk it through.*

### **Theme 4: Emotional Dysregulation**

Furthermore, when there are challenges in non-verbal communication there is emotional dysregulation. This was defined as the physiological expression of emotional distress. These were identified as an immature development of non-verbal communication which can have negative effects on a couples' therapeutic process.

Therapists identified that clients in distress showed their disputes through physical presentation in therapy. Participants described that an emotional disturbance can negatively impact the ability to implement talk therapy because physical expression of words can change or enhance the meaning of words in a positive or negative way. When clients participate in therapy they may sit with their arms crossed, on separate sides on the couch, or turned away from one another when in conflict. This makes it hard for clients to participate in therapy.

*Couples come in and it is emotional dysregulation... and gets in the way of reading non-verbal cues.*

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On the dance floor, partners experience each other's stress, and they may be unaware of the reasons for these behaviors. For example, one instructor stated,

*Sometimes there are stressors [expressed] that were in effect before they get [to the lesson] because I can feel if ... the hold is tight and then as the dance progresses, it goes to light and he can move her as opposed to pulling her [where he wants]. [Instead there is] an invitation to movement.*

### **Theme 5: The Impact of Implementing Change**

The ability to address non-verbal communication in therapy sessions and dance lessons was identified as important components of each. Addressing these behaviors allowed for acknowledgment, understanding, and therefore change. Implementing change of physical display, naturally and intentionally, was found to positively impact the dynamics between couples. Therapists noted that when there was a shift in one partner's behaviors, there was a change in the other partner.

*They sat for one year facing apart from one another ... One of the daughters just came over and screamed, "You have never said I am sorry to one another and it is important to say I'm sorry to one another" ...she screamed, "You need to say it now." The husband turned like this and said 'sorry.' That changed the therapy from then on. The little non-verbal of moving toward her, the verbal was just sorry. That started to shift things.*

Dance instructors noticed a similar change when a couple arrived for lessons. For example, sometimes a couple would arrive to a lesson and they would not be talking to one another in addition to keeping a physical distance. It was seen that both of these behaviors improve as clients progress with taking multiple dance classes together.

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*When they walked in on that lesson they are barely talking to each other and they are just maintaining that calm and that space because they don't want to be that couple who is fighting in front of everybody... but they leave in a better place.*

*I had one specific couple that when they first came in I did not know that they were married, they were very distant from each other and they seemed incredibly different from each other. There wasn't a lot of communication going on, and over the course of their lessons I started seeing him open the door for her... She started wearing lipstick and a lower cut shirt. I saw the flirty eyes with each other. I could see the fire starting to burn again and I felt this was the most amazing job.*

### **Theme 6: Result of the Physical Engagement**

Dance instructors described that when they use dance as an education tool to approach conflict within couple's partnership, couples become more aware of their behaviors and a positive change is evidenced through future dance encounters. A key component is that dance forces couples into a non-verbal position that makes them vulnerable with one another. This is because dance consists primarily of non-verbal communication development. There is minimal verbal communication allowed on the floor and instead reliance on understanding one another through body posture, touch, and steps. As a result, positive behaviors are engaged, learned, and applied.

*Most of this is all non-verbal for dancing because the guy isn't saying step back on your left foot. He has to move his body so that she can feel to respond to it.*

The requirement in ballroom dance to be close to one another with open arms, a behavior of emotional connection and vulnerability, creates an environment where partners start to feel more comfortable opening up to one another. Instructors and therapists mutually agreed that this

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process would enhance therapy by clients bringing this developed skill and knowledge into therapy.

*I like the being open in your posture non-verbal message. It is nice when couples that I am teaching, they are kind of forced to be in that position, when you are in frame with someone. We teach energetically connected whether we are touching or not from the core to core. If there are fifty feet between us and we are moving around the floor I still need to feel that you are energetically connected to me so if we are on the floor and you are moving to the left and I am walking to the right, because sometimes, couples are walking away like this, but its better when you can feel where someone wants to go even when there is this distance between us. Most of this is all non-verbal for dancing because the guy isn't saying step back on your left foot. He has to move his body so that she can feel to respond to it. and sometimes there are stresses that how that they were in effect before they get there because I can feel if I am holding the hold is tighter and then as the dance progresses it goes to light and he can move her as supposed to pulling. And it is this, it is an invitation to movement and if there are stresses before they get there this is translated her sketch there such as back leading.*

Another impact identified by dance instructors is the ability to become aware of behaviors by experiencing an immediate change in communication. The couple is able to physically experience the impact of their own behavioral changes on their partner.

*He thinks he is telling the follower to take a backward step but he is actually stepping way over here. That's telling her to take a different step and then he does not understand why she is stepping to the side. And I will have to explain that the movement has to be this way and a lot of times I will take the guys and do it so that he can feel the difference*

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*between the two actions and then they can see although I was telling her to go forward obviously I was not, then they do the new action and get the response they wanted from her.*

A contrasting approach appeared while discussing eye contact. While dance instructors noted that there can be limited eye contact in some dances, therapists might capitalize on asking clients to make eye contact with one another while talking.

*Eye contact is connected to that. I found it interesting when you say that people don't look at each other because when couples are really initially connective and there is eye contact and body expressive towards there is an energy core that is very connected and I feel that is very healing and strengthening for couples.*

*And if there is eye contact I like to say that they are in more contact when seeing one another and ask if they feel more heard or attended when your spouse or partner is seeing or looking at you, in terms of the non-verbal part.*

### **Theme 7: The Role of a Professional**

Therapists and dance instructors described themselves as tools to bring awareness to the conflict. When attuned to the non-verbal cues therapists are able to intervene.

*So when a couple is having trouble, and can't hold a conversation, as a therapist you slow it down, or you act as an auxiliary frontal cortex if it is getting to heated in the room you say wait a minute. And I may do some teaching and say look at your partner, what do you think she's thinking, circular question right now, what do you think she's thinking, what do you think he's thinking. Not asking you to be a mind reader I'm asking you to put yourself in your partner's shoes.*

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This similarly occurs for dance instructors. When there is tension on the dance floor between partners they can help the couple better understand the dynamics. Awareness then improves their ability to communicate effectively, understand one another, and feel more connected.

*Sometimes the guy is squeezing her hand too hard and her reaction is that he is doing it intentionally and I have to remind her that he is thinking of so many things right now, he's trying to remember this, is trying to remember that. That is what is happening and he is not meaning to do that. And then I can turn to him and say it looks like maybe your thinking response is to squeeze her hand and put that into your cycle of thinking about things so that you were not hurting her. Can we agree that she can give you some kind of signal that you are hurting her that won't make you feel that everyone is attacking you, that you are doing things wrong.*

### **Theme 8: Competency and Comfort**

When looking at the comfort level in discussing and applying non-verbal communication awareness and skills development, there were differences in comfort level between therapist and dance instructors. While therapists unanimously shared that addressing non-verbal communication was key to client growth, therapists reported that discussing the physical display of communication may be difficult to address with clients.

*I do feel that it can be jarring when I bring in non-verbal. Having it be more of a part of the therapy is helpful because if you bring it in when you are stuck it can be like shining a spotlight on someone before they are ready. Having them be comfortable with me talking about their body is hard. I find that challenging.*

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A therapist further expanded that even if there was an increase in skill and comfort level in addressing these behaviors in talk therapy, there is still the problem that talking alone can be limiting.

*Talk therapy is problematic because there is only so much you can talk someone into learning about their body and tuning into their body... it is experiential after that.*

*Bringing in dance [allows for] therapy sessions that would be much more productive and people can be more contained in expressing [emotions].*

Dance therapists reported more comfort in discussing physical display because dance involved primarily non-verbal communication and physical interactions. Beyond explaining the steps to the couple while learning, the primary aspect of dance relies on following and leading, which taps into non-verbal communication.

*It is an emotion they are trying to project because we don't do any verbal at all. You have to be able to do this non-verbally... it's about telling them what kind of energy to use for each dance so that we can create the tango or the waltz or the cha-cha or the rumba, or is it something like the bolero, I call it the Latin dance of love, what are you going to say with your body... We feed off each other, like you said, we are both meeting and we are both following. We feed that energy off of each other and when it is right it is awesome, and when it is wrong because there's only one doing it, I have to correct and make sure that their energy is the same as the others energy... This allows me to actually call it out pretty verbally... I'm pretty loud because I love what I do. I'm pretty passionate about it and I love people and I'm pretty open.*



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Given the difference in level of comfort and environmental systemic norm of addressing non-verbal communication participants mutually agreed that a partnership between dance therapists and instructors would reduce the stigma associated with addressing physical cues in therapy.

### **Theme 9: Professional Therapeutic Partnerships**

When discussing the initiation of dance in conjunction with couples therapy, the conversation explored the level of contact between ballroom dance instructor and therapist, number of sessions, and types of dances. Regarding communication, the instructors and therapists all agreed that they would like to have some form of open communication to help facilitate therapy. Some of each group identified wanting to be able to share common interactions and struggle points of clients. Possible interactions included discussions, attending dance classes with clients, and attending a therapy session with the clients. Therapists noted the need for release of information to maintain confidentiality of clients. In terms of time commitment, opinions included weekly dance and therapy, switching between dance and therapy each week, to weekly dancing with monthly therapy. Dance instructors noted that it would be important to start with weekly dance sessions to help reduce fear and anxiety around learning dances. Regarding types of dances, all dance instructors stated that client's would choose a dance that they both felt connected with, to help them feel equally invested, invested, and open to learning the dance. They shared that the emotions that are experienced for each person may differ between each type of dance.

*I had a therapist that was in one of my group classes and he said to me I bet a lot of your job ends up being couples therapy and do you have any training, and I was like no, so he said we should get together sometime and I can talk you through some stuff because a lot of time I am trying to be sensitive to people and I want them to be happy and learn to*

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*communicate with each other, not just in a movement but also in the way that they say things to each other.*

When the ballroom dance instructors and couples therapists concluded their focus group conversations, they all stated that they would provide referrals to the other. They noted that they would refer clients whom they feel would benefit and be receptive to dance or therapy. All participants exchanged information with one another at the end of the interviews with an interest to continue their discussions and learn from one another to grow their personal understandings of the uses of therapy and ballroom dance.

### **Theme 10: Challenges**

Both therapists and instructors identified that there can be challenges to therapy and ballroom dance. They noted that each client needs to be equally invested in improving the relationship. Both therapists and dance instructors described there being “pursuers” (those who want to participate), and “withdrawers” (those who are avoidant of the activity). An example from a dance instructor regarding investment is:

*Once you get them on board then you can start getting the communication between them going. But if you have one of them that does not want to be there or has an issue with it for some reason, it is not successful.*

Similarly, a therapist noted:

*When a couple agrees to come to therapy, usually the woman inviting or driving the man to come, but nonetheless, showing up, examining that, the person who doesn't want to be there as much is still a big deal, showing up is a big deal. So I would say if a couple is willing to show up for therapy or dance there is something underneath that that is healing in itself. Huge amount of couples would never go to dance together or go to*

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*therapy together. If they are willing to do that together there is something really lovely and healing about it.*

### **Theme 11: Ethical Considerations**

An ethical concern of confidentiality was addressed in the focus group. Therapists noted their legal and ethical responsibilities of maintaining confidentiality while dance instructors indicated their ethical duty. As a result, a release of information was identified as being important when developing a program involving dance and couples therapy.

A therapist noted:

*From the therapist position, as you know, the point of disclosure is difficult. So there would need to be actually a written release so that I could say anything to you. So that would be required. Then I would always talk with the client about how much information you would want me to give to*

Dance instructors shared the same concerns noting:

*There is a lot of sharing that happens as things progress... Client feels it is safe and we start to laugh and things get shared. There are no HIPPA rules, but things don't get shared [outside] because that is our time with them.*

### **Discussion**

The result of the study supported the hypothesis that ballroom dancing could be used in conjunction with Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT) to assist couples develop awareness and skills of non-verbal communication, which results in feeling connected. In agreement with previous literature, dance instructors work with clients to use their bodies to communicate affective states within a safe environment (Fischman, 2009). This study expands

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the field to utilize ballroom dance as a therapeutic tool and, specifically, be used to enrich talk therapy.

Previous research does not address the use of ballroom dance as a therapeutic form for addressing non-verbal communication development for couples in distress. The data suggests that ballroom dance instructors work with their couple clients on curating awareness of how their behaviors are impacting their partner. Instructors help couples become aware of how their behaviors elicit an emotional and behavioral response from their partner. This occurs by the instructors teaching couples to develop intention of the emotions that they are trying to express and requiring them to be physically vulnerable with one another. When couples are physically touching through dance, they are constantly aware of how their emotional experience is being expressed through their own body and how this impacts their partner.

There are two important implications of this research. Firstly, there is a benefit to bringing a greater attention to non-verbal communication in EFCT by utilizing ballroom dance as a tool. The unanimous agreement and support of developing a program suggests that there would be a way to implement a joint ballroom dance and emotionally focused couples therapy program. Perhaps a program would address developing appropriate professional partnerships and guidelines to identify couples that would benefit from this program.

Secondly, ballroom dance and EFCT are mutualistic. While therapists and dance instructors bring awareness to the miscommunication and challenges that couples are facing by intervening, each have their own limitations that the other can help resolve. Dance addresses the limitations of EFCT because therapists find it challenging to bring awareness to clients' non-verbal behavioral expression. Results suggest that the incorporation of ballroom dance into couples therapy can address this limitation and benefit therapists. The benefit is the ability to address

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non-verbal behaviors that are influencing the distress in the couple. While the therapist's goal is for clients to be able to express their raw emotions in a natural environment (Johnson, 204), some clients might struggle in understanding how to put their feelings into words and can be resistant to therapists helping them understand their emotions. In such cases, ballroom dance might be a method to increase comfort, awareness, and understanding of emotions that are being avoided or painful to express and/or are being expressed unknowingly in a negative way. Furthermore, by having clients in a dance program while in therapy, therapists can encourage behavioral changes that will allow for better verbal communication and understanding.

Comparably, EFCT was identified to benefit the processes of ballroom dance as a learning tool for couples. This particularly came into play when identifying that there are times when a dance instructor is in a position that they feel limited in their ability to de-escalate a couple in distress given that they may not have clinical training in couples therapy. This finding implies that by having a joint program, there will be supportive components simultaneously working to help a couple in distress. Based on the interview conducted, the program might be built around a twelve-session model, the average length of EFCT based couples work (Johnson, 2009). Clients would be referred to therapy or dance based on the observations of instructors and therapists. A formal confidentiality agreement would be signed to allow for communication between instructors and therapists, as a discussion with all parties would determine what information would be shared. Ideally, information would include the types of non-verbal communication that is displayed and lacking in each setting and can therefore be developed and better understood. Dance instructors would help clients become aware of how their internal emotional experiences are being physically displayed. This awareness can then be discussed in therapy, helping reduce the stigma of talking about body language and possibly increasing therapists' confidence in

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talking about non-verbal communication. Therapists would then be able to work on helping clients become aware of the impact of verbal and non-verbal communication that is supportive and detrimental to the intended message being expressed. As this progresses together, therapists and dance instructors can help clients develop non-verbal behaviors that would be helpful in creating cohesion between intended verbal and non-verbal messages.

The research suggested specific benefits to utilizing ballroom dance as a therapeutic method in conjunction with talk therapy. The data suggests that there are four levels of communication that are addressed through the process of ballroom dance; identifying what someone is feeling, intentionally expressing these feelings, developing awareness of how someone is being understood by their partner, and noticing what the elicited response is from the second partner. The results pointed out that body language can hinder communication and relationships when there is a disconnect between physical display and the intended verbal message. Through the process, dance helps clients become aware of how they can utilize their bodies to be more effective and efficient in their communication by understanding their ordinary behaviors while developing new skills. Immediately, when a couple steps into the ballroom dance frame, they are noticing their own body language by needing to move to accommodate another person in their personal space. Additionally, they are touching one another and are close enough to notice when one or both people's body tenses, loosens, pushes, or pulls. As a result, each partner is able to tell what state his or her partner is in. This opens a door to conversation because partners can share what they notice in themselves and their partner, increasing awareness of self and other. Moreover, the tonality in verbal and non-verbal communication is addressed. When dancing, an instructor noted that there is a difference between moving or leading in comparison to pushing or pulling. Dancing brings awareness and sensitivity to the tonal expression in the body. This can

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help improve speaking and listening skills in therapy. This overlap is perfectly seen in EFCT where there is a focus on the here-and-now interaction, looking at how someone is feeling in the moment, how they are expressing themselves, how they are understood, and what the elicited response is (Johnson, 2004), with the goal to increase connection by fostering a mutual understanding. Ballroom dance could further promote these skills and connections to develop. The data implies that this overlap occurs because emotions that are tapped into while dancing with a partner are the same emotions that emotionally focused therapy addresses.

The data suggest that when clients are put into a physical interaction where they have to let down some of their defenses, the process of vulnerability and emotional expression is enhanced and encouraged. Trained posture in ballroom dance encourages open communication. When someone forces him or herself to smile, they have an increase in positive mood (Neuhoff & Schaefer, 2002) or if they stand in a power pose before a speech, they have a greater chance of being hired (Cuddy, Wilmuth, & Carney, 2012). Dance similarly forces participants into an open posture. Ballroom dance teachers reported that this results in clients to let down their guard and be more vulnerable. It is possible that requiring clients to do this in dance can help them to be more vulnerable when in talk therapy because of the practice of these repeated behaviors. Both therapists and ballroom dance instructors can see the change in clients through the positive evolution of physical communication.

An additional result of the study showed that ballroom dance can help clients learn to move forward and together in working through problems. Because dance is always evolving as a learned skill and constant movement, clients become aware of their ability to reflect and learn from their past to improve their present and future interactions.

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This study had some limitations. The study included a small sample size, with six participants. Additionally, the participants were assigned to focus groups based on available times. To improve the reliability of the study, a larger sample with random assignments should be applied. A well-developed, empirically rigorous pre-post study needs to be conducted to evaluate if a significant improvement in emotional bonds can occur when couples utilize ballroom dance to develop skills in understanding non-verbal communication while in couples therapy. There would be two control groups, one control group consisting of couples who dance together and are not in couples' therapy, with a second control group where couples are in EFCT-based therapy without dance. The experimental group would consist of couples who are in both ballroom dance classes in conjunction with EFCT-based couples' therapy. Therapy and dance classes would each occur once a week for twelve weeks, the average treatment time for EFCT for couples.

In sum, the study investigated the professional views of the use of ballroom dancing in conjunction with couples' emotionally focused therapy to improve non-verbal communication and intimacy. All ballroom dance instructors and couples therapists agreed upon participating in a program that would apply ballroom dance in a therapeutic way. Results suggest that there can be an improvement in the efficacy and efficiency of talk therapy by integrating ballroom dance as a therapeutic intervention to cultivate non-verbal communication, with the goal of improving relationships.



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### Appendix A:

### Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this focus group. We will begin by going over confidentiality regarding this study. You will be asked several questions and given the opportunity to share your thoughts and answers. These questions will be open-ended and will evoke discussions that will be facilitated by the examiner. You can share your own opinions and experiences based on the questions asked and responses with others in the group.

1. What are the healing components of therapy for couples? What are the healing components of ballroom dancing for couples?
  - a. What are the stages of each that leads to improvement in relationships?
2. Given your experience as a couples therapist and ballroom dance instructors, in what ways do you find non-verbal communication skills and awareness to be important for the success of clients? Use the definition of non-verbal communication as the expression of emotions through physical body representations.
  - a. How do you define success?
  - b. What non-verbal communication do you observe in clients?
  - c. How important is it to be able to talk about non-verbal communication?
  - d. When a couple is having trouble because of non-verbal communication and cannot hold a conversation around the issue, how do you address the problem at hand?
  - e. Where would you start in therapy and in dance to improve non-verbal communication?

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3. As a couples therapist, what do you envision happening if you suggested ballroom dancing to a couple who was struggling with therapy due to issues influenced by non-verbal communication?
4. As a dance instructor, what do you envision happening if you got a referral from a couple's therapist for a couple having non-verbal communication skills?
5. In what ways do you as therapists and dance instructors envision dance instruction helping couples in therapy?
  - a. Are there particular dances that would be most beneficial to develop these skills and awareness?
6. How do you envision a program incorporating couples therapy and ballroom dance to be structured? For example, what would the level of communication be between therapist and dance instructor? How many total sessions would a couple go to therapy and dance lessons? How many times a week? How will you know when termination should occur?
7. Is there anything that I did not ask that you would like to discuss?