

Abstract

This review explores some of the existing literature on the practice of Embodied Imagination and Authentic Movement and the potential for augmenting and improving on the therapeutic value of Embodied Imagination using the practice using Authentic Movement. Published articles that both define and examine the value in each practice are reviewed and interpreted. Finally, the author considers connections between the two practices with regard to her own research with regard to how they might be combined and applied to emotional well-being.

Keywords: Embodied Imagination, Authentic Movement, dream work, mind-body, consciousness, well-being

How Authentic Movement Can Augment Embodied Imagination

In the practice of Embodied Imagination (EI), working with dream or memory images can be valuable in mitigating the painful symptoms experienced as a result of trauma, as well as helpful with problem solving and creative inspiration. The imagery found in the dream environment frequently tackles problems we feel unprepared to deal with in our waking lives. The images found in memories can also be powerful, as poignant memories can abruptly situate us in is experiences we have had before, often tied to strong sensations or emotions. In this literature review the author will define and examine the literature regarding the therapeutic use of both Embodied Imagination and Authentic Movement, followed by exploring how Authentic Movement might augment EI, and assist in the enrichment of one's relationship with dream imagery and the unconscious psyche.

Literature Review

What is Embodied Imagination

While not a therapy, Embodied Imagination is a careful exploration of the creative properties of the imagination as found in the dream realms. This exploration gives those who embark upon it the opportunity to engage with and immerse themselves in images that can both nourish the spirit and restore a sense of wholeness (Bosnak, 2007). The first experiments with active imagination, of which Embodied Imagination is a specific application, were performed by C.G. Jung in 1915. While active imagination has been in practice for nearly a century, to my knowledge, no adverse reactions which may be directly attributable to the method have been described in the literature. However, it has been widely suggested within the field of psychology

that one key to unlocking unrelenting dysfunctional behavior patterns lies in the imagination.

Embodied Imagination (EI), is a potent dream technique developed by the Dutch Jungian psychoanalyst Robert Bosnak (2007), which actively expands the imagination. It is based in Jungian psychology, and especially Jung's work on alchemy, as well as on the work of American archetypal psychologist James Hillman, and his thoughts on soul as a simultaneous multiplicity of autonomous states. (Bosnak, 2007). In addition to its use in healing both emotional and physical concerns, this technique is also used with actors, writers, scientists, innovators and artists to solve artistic, creative and scientific problems. In an article published by Domash (2016), she explores the value of EI in expanding the imagination and creating therapeutic change, using both her own dreams and those of her psychotherapy patients. She describes how Embodied Imagination can help to give new context for early implicit memories and change dysfunctional patterns. Her patients developed more flexible thinking and a greater ability to learn from experience. Additionally, she offered support from neuroscientific research, including the neurological underpinnings of the imagination and the capacity for change (Domash, 2016).

During EI the dreamer is prepared for the experience by initially becoming sensitive to, and exploring their body by way of a guided interoceptive body scan, in order to get a baseline against which to measure any changes felt during the practice. Using a particularly focused and body centered technique, EI is concerned with the direct effect of imagination on the body of the dreamer. The dreamer is guided into a hypnagogic state (a state of consciousness between sleep and waking), followed by a kind of artificial flashback during which dreamer then begins re-experiencing a dream or memory from multiple perspectives in the environment.

Using slow and careful attention, various images are explored to include sensations, emotional states and affect as they are felt in the body. The dreamer is asked a series of very specific questions that guide him/her through an in-depth exploration of the images contained within the dream. Using the present tense, the dreamer carefully recreates the dream as an imagined reality. EI is a totally immersive experience.

Next, the dreamer is instructed to recount the dream a second time, before which she also shares any associations or identifying information related to the dream images, thus placing the dream in a personal context. During this second recounting, the dreamer is carefully guided to pinpoint where within the body she most strongly experiences the sensations and emotions of various images. She is asked to see the events of the dream from the image's own perspective, to feel what it feels. The dreamer is then guided deeply sense and anchor within the body whatever the image is feeling, in the specific area they feel it most. The object is to help the dreamer make the dream body as vivid and real as possible. Questions help the dreamer embody and recreate the dream as a palpable environment. This kind of dream work allows for a strong emotional, body centered experience that can be quite transformative (Abraham, Fischer, Bosnak, Roy & Wager, 2010).

This dual state of consciousness allows both dreamer and guide to become engrossed in the images and environment while remaining aware that they are sitting safely together in a controlled setting 'working' the dream. The dream worker always identifies a positive, non-threatening aspect of the dream in addition to whatever other images the dream may hold. In this way, the dreamer encounters a complex network of embodied states. At this depth of

exploration, the dreamer will often answer questions in a way that indicates that she has become embodied by the image, and will answer in the voice and perspective of the image.

The dreamer experiences a consciousness that is frequently totally different than habitual consciousness, which can then shift one's experience of waking life, potentially resolving waking life conflicts. Using the several images that the dreamer has embodied, the therapist combines them to form a "composite," that is, a composition of the key images of the dream, which connect each state the patient has felt during the work. The dreamer practices—that is, mentally and physically reviews—this composite daily, for several weeks after a session (Bosnak, 2007, Abraham et al, 2010).

Therapeutic Value

While the above is only a partial description of the practice of Embodied Imagination, it can serve as a foundation to allow an exploration of its efficacy from a more neurobiological perspective. The dreamer experiences the dream images as each having their own emotional states. At the conclusion of the practice between 2 and 5 states are held together in in the dreamer's body both positive and enriching as well as negative or traumatic. According to Hanson (2009) when we sift positive feelings and views into painful and/or limiting ones, we build new neural structures, over time changing our brain. Perhaps, these states are fed into consciousness by our dreams for the purpose of healthy integration. If so, then holding them together in one body; as done during the composite in the practice of EI, could potentially help break the patterned cascade of trauma responses and behaviors that impede mind body wellness.

According to Bosnak (2007) the images are "not seen as parts of a fragmented self, but more as a community of subjectivities that reside in the dream". He also claims that the

“otherness” of the images is vital, because “Becoming infused with alien intelligence results in unexpected original flashes” that enhance and activate the benefits of the practice (p.21). The act of holding these multiple disparate states at the same time creates a psychological tension from which a completely new image or emotional state spontaneously emerges from the dreamer's psyche. This new image or state often presents a completely new and previously unknown awareness to the dreamer, one through which the dreamer often feels changed, transformed, or greatly expanded in the ability to embody and feel intensely (Abraham et al, 2010).

Researcher Judy White (2015), who works using EI with veteran's PTSD nightmares, suggests that while EI is in some ways similar to other methods of dream work, it's emphasis on a non-self perspective through the embodiment of images outside of habitual consciousness, makes it unique. Her research supports EI as a method that appears to strengthen posttraumatic recovery via the safely contained integration of stressful memories.

Van der Kolk (1994) points out that resolving distressing emotions through talk therapy alone can be insufficient. The experience of trauma is maintained in the body and the brain, no matter how much insight we gain. Some of the most powerfully healing integrative practices, such as meditation, calm the autonomic nervous system through stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), thus calming the body and mind. This can be accomplished in many ways including mindfulness of the body, and imagery (Hanson, 2009). Therefore, a practice that uses the mind-body connection, such as EI, could prove to be effective in some of the same ways. The act of embodying dream images could potentially activate the parasympathetic nervous system in ways that guide both mind and body toward an improved psychological functioning and a greater

sense of well-being.

What is Authentic Movement

Like Embodied Imagination, Authentic Movement was derived from the Jungian practice of active imagination which allows the image and its unconscious material to be experienced in consciousness. In heuristic research conducted by Curra (2016), she examined the use of both authentic movement and moving the dream image in order to explore the integration of The Great Mother archetype for psychic transformation. She described a flood of images that came out of both dreams and movement that helped her connect to both raw emotion and a deeper connection with her own psyche.

Curra (2016) describes Authentic Movement, founded by Mary Starks Whitehouse, as a therapeutic practice providing the link between psyche and soma, or the body language of the unconscious. She claims that Authentic Movement can allow one both deeper access to the contents of the unconscious as well as enhanced self-knowledge. During the practice, movers focus their attention inward with eyes closed. Movements are allowed to become very specific to each mover's own nature and history. Witnesses to the practice focus not only on what the mover is doing, but also their own experience while witnessing. By owning their own experience, the witness allows the mover freedom to follow movement impulses emanating from the unconscious. The mover's body gives form to formless material (Curra, 2016).

In research conducted by Lavendel (2017) she offered her personal reflections as a somatic and movement psychotherapist. Her practice was deeply influenced by the practice of Authentic Movement. Her explanation of the fundamental elements included: close attention to embodied experience by both mover and witness; the relational resonance between them; and

attention to speaking directly from experience. As Lavendel (2017) describes it, the mover listens carefully to any impulses that might arise from images, memory, sensations, emotions or intuition.

During the practice of Authentic Movement, experiences might be expressed as a bodily movement or remain as an internal experience. The mover is meant to stay in the moment without striving to do anything. Much as described in Curra's (2016) research, the witness sees the mover and brings the same kind of careful attention to her own somatic experience. Afterwards, they process the experience, using vivid words to express the experience. Lavendel (2017) points out that Authentic Movement is not therapy, but a practice of allowing movement to unfold without conscious involvement or direction while in the presence of a witness.

Meanwhile, Bacon (2011), describes Authentic Movement as a somatic *and* therapeutic practice. She mentions a tendency among practitioners to attribute both sacred and archetypal powers to the practice. In her article on the topic she points out the unique potential Authentic Movement holds for research within the dyadic experience, suggesting that exceptional language skills are needed in order to do the work. Participants are invited into a powerful kind of embodiment, involving senses and movements that may have never been fully sensed before.

Bacon's (2011) article is based on her own experiences as well as those of participants in a group. She also references experiential research conducted with Jungian analyst Richard Wainright, focusing on methods that might enhance the development of language that emerges directly from movement, rather than being about the experience. She asserted that by working with the language that emerges directly from the movements, the experience can be articulated imaginably, without giving undue importance to the sometimes biased perspective of the mind.

Therapeutic Value

Curra's (2016) research elucidates the power of movement and dream work in observing and integrating archetypal material within the psyche, presenting a subjective look into how dreams might be filtered through the body. Therapeutic value is demonstrated by way of how this shared wisdom can be brought into consciousness for greater self-understanding and well-being. All of the research on Authentic Movement reviewed is presented in a way that encourages the unfolding of unconscious material by way of movement in order to integrate it into consciousness, noting the damaging effects of a disconnect between body and psyche. However, Bacon (2011) notes that there may be particular therapeutic value in carefully articulating the experience in a way that does not overly rely on the processes of thinking.

Where the Two Practices Meet – Moving Forward

I found multiple similarities between Authentic Movement and EI in this review, leaving me of the opinion that both practices hold value in being practiced as they are *and* that they might very well augment each other. As an EI practitioner I recognize that not all of the clients who will benefit from EI; such as the cancer patients I have worked with, will be comfortable with movement. Some may have pain or fear of pain that restricts them. Additionally, as it is the dream imagery that is being embodied during EI, some imagery might not call for movement. That being said, for some dreams it is easy to imagine how embodiment might be encouraged by allowing the body to organically mimic the posture or movements of the dream images. Similarly, incorporating dreams and dream imagery into Authentic Movement could prove to be a deeply restorative interaction with unconscious material.

In the integration of the practices, I can imagine a scenario in which the EI practitioner serves as the witness, while the dreamer would be the equivalent of the mover. Much as in Authentic Movement, during EI, the practitioner concentrates deeply on her own experience while exploring the dream with the dreamer, closely accompanying the dreamer. Additionally, both practices require a certain trust in what is not known, and making space for all that may come.

While in EI there is trust in the nature of the dream images, an implicit understanding that they are benevolent parts of our own psyche or soul, there is also a kind of healing trust and spaciousness that is present between the mover and the witness in Authentic Movement. In both instances there is the sense that it is our own internal resources and willingness to look within that guides us to healing, no matter the wounds we carry. Whether a guide or witness, the presence of a trusted other is an integral part to the healing process.

In both practices life histories and personal stories emerge, for which the dreamer or the mover might not yet have words or the capacity to hold and feel in their ever day lives. In both cases what arises out of embodiment might be quite surprising or unexplainable, but feels familiar or useful. Both have the sense of discovery, of what was not fully conscious, or unbearable, or unowned. In one case insight is gained by way of shared by bodily movements and in another by sharing a body with archetypal dream imagery. In both cases all that comes about is witnessed and met with compassion and without judgement, which is in itself a healing act.

While one practice is completely non directive and the other closely guided, my impression upon review is that both practices allow that we do not know what either a movement

or an image may hold. Again there is an honoring and trust and surrender to what the unconscious might hold and share. Both allow space and time for somatic experience and the accompanying insight.

Taylor (2007) describes a process during Authentic Movement of letting the observer in her step aside while moving, and of feeling as though a trance or dreamlike state. She mentions a type of drama that is populated by images that interact with the dancers own character. Similarly, during EI the dreamer loses habitual consciousness or ego perspective, allowing themselves to become embodied by the images, sensing what they sense, sometimes even observing their “dream selves” from the images perspective.

While it is my understanding that the amount of time spent in each practice might vary; an EI session might take one and a half hours, and the moving process can sometimes take only minutes before being processed, it appears that both allow enough time and space for a new perspective. With further research I think it might be demonstrated that movement might ease the transition or embodiment process and therefore speed up the entire practice which could hold value when working with people who are not physically strong.

Moving forward it is important to consider that both practices seem to honor the imaginal world. That being the case there may be a shared language that could be used in a practice of EI augmented by Authentic Movement. Following a dream work session using EI we often will not process the experience, allowing the images and the composite of what was discovered in the embodiments to speak for themselves, and over time. If movement were incorporated, perhaps the focus on describing what came through the movement might become unnecessary, or incorporated into the composite. With only this level of research into the topic, I

am tempted to view augmenting EI with movement as an additional gateway, easing the transit into the images, and deepening the embodiment. Bacon (2011) points out that being moved by an internally perceived other might potentiate the experience of Authentic movement. She mentions the potential for discovering parts of ourselves that cannot be spoken. I think the same can be said for EI.

Having seen the results from informal research using EI during an 8-week program in a workshop of women suffering from breast cancer, as well as with other cancer patients who have received EI in a clinic setting, I feel that there is value in augmenting the practice with some movement upon consideration of the physical and psychological means at each individual's disposal. In the research patients typically experienced relief from symptoms commonly associated with PTSD. Some of the symptoms in which they improved included: insomnia, depression, lack of appetite, isolation, fear, and hypervigilance. Many of the women reported better familial relationships and improved communication with caregivers (Lawson, 2017). If this kind of outcome, not only cancer patients, but for anyone suffering PTSD could be enhanced by augmenting the practice of EI, then there is value in the effort with continued research into the topic.

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