

Empirical application of empathy enhancing program based on movement concept for married couples in conflict

Soo-Yeon Kim¹, Hye-Won Kang², Yong-Chul Chung³, Seungha Park^{2,*}

¹College of Physical Education, Kookmin University, Seoul, Korea

²Department of Human Movement Studies, College of Health Science, Ewha Womans University, Seoul, Korea

³Department of Physical Education, Graduate School of Education, Sogang University, Seoul, Korea

In the field of marital therapy, it is known that couple movement program helps married couples faced with conflict situation to rebuild the relationship and to maintain a family homeostasis. The purpose of this study was to configure and apply the kinesthetic empathy program and to assess the effectiveness for married couples in conflict. To achieve the research aims, qualitative research method has been conducted, subjecting three couples, 6 people, who are participating in expressive movement program for this study. The study used focus group interview method for collecting data and employed for the interview method by mixing the semi-structured and unstructured questionnaire. The results were followings. First, through kinesthetic empathy enhancing program,

one could develop self-awareness and emotional attunement. Second, the result showed the relationship between intention and empathy. It shows that "knowing spouse's hidden intention" is significant factors to understand others. Third, kinesthetic empathy program could complement general marriage counseling program. The results of this study provide empirical evidence that movement program functions as an empathy enhancer through the process of perceiving, feeling, thinking, and interacting with others.

Keywords: Empathy, Movement concept, Marriage counseling program

INTRODUCTION

Divorce rates have sharply increased from early 1990s in Korea. In 2003, divorce rate was highest, the total numbers of marriage amounted 304.9 cases in a day and the total numbers of divorce amounted 167.1 cases in a day (National Statistical Office, 2008). Divorce has become one of the major social problems. Furthermore, many couples never divorce but remain to live in distressed and offensive throughout much of their relationship (Smith et al., 1990). Marital distress and negative marital arguing are major hazard factors for many forms of dysfunction and psychopathology. National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) presented that destructive marital conflict is a generic risk factor for a variety of forms of psychopathology for not only adults like depression but

also children like conduct disorders (Coie et al., 1991). Therefore, the negative and destructive effects of divorce and marital distress on spouses are major social problem and have been estimated as costing a lot per year (Markman and Duncan, 1987). Followed by this social situation, numerous researches have focused on when they disagree with each other and what kinds of interventions are helpful for them (Baucom et al., 1998; Weiss and Heyman, 1997).

Fincham (2003) reported that marital conflicts are resulted from the different viewpoint of men and women. In other word, husbands and wives' perspective taking is different. Perspective taking has been defined as the tendency to adopt the psychological viewpoint of others (Davis, 1983). It deliberates as a complex, multidimensional social-cognitive skill and deliberates of predicting the perceptual experience of others; identifying other's thoughts,

*Corresponding author: Seungha Park

Department of Human Movement Studies, College of Health Science, Ewha Womans University, 52 Ewhayeodae-gil, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul 120-750, Korea
Tel: +82-2-3277-2588, Fax: +82-2-3277-2846, E-mail: seungpark@ewha.ac.kr

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behavior, and motives, and inferring other's feelings and reactions (Moore, 1990). Perspective taking is considered as one of the concepts of Empathy. Therefore, it is need to examine what empathy is. Empathy has been discussed as an essential aspect of emotional development and successful close relationships (Eisenberg and Miller, 1987). It is one of the vital means through which emotion is communicated between people, and it could play an important role in marriage. Some research has linked empathy to couples' relationship (Hill, 2010; Long et al., 1999). It is known that individuals are more likely to have stable, well-balanced relationships if they have partners who are capable of expressing empathy well.

Even though the empathy ability and couple relationship have been found to be significantly related, rare researcher has linked empathy to intervention program for couples. Long et al. (1999) examined empathy program for couples. The result shows empathy program is supportive to develop not only perception of a partner's empathy ability but also awareness of themselves' expression ability. Considering diversity of people, including adolescents, adults, and parents, have been subjected to empathy training program (Brems et al., 1993; Hatcher et al., 1994), it is required to develop more empathy training program for couples. Furthermore, most of the empathy training program are based on verbal communication or counseling curriculum. Therefore, it is need to consider empathy training program based on kinesthetic dimension using physical movement.

Meanwhile, researchers in the fields of body psychotherapy especially, dance & movement therapy (DMT) have stressed that therapeutic intervention based on bodily expression could function as the empathy-fostering and more generally interpersonal coordination developing (McGarry and Russo, 2011). In terms of enhancing kinesthetic empathy and interpersonal communication developing, DMT researches have focused on special needs population (e.g. Autism, ADHD). Considering empathy training program are almost based on verbal communication or counseling curriculum, it might be a one of the effective methods to examine kinesthetic empathy training program applied from DMT program.

In summary, one of the conflict factors in marital life is lack of empathic skill between men and women. Hereupon many researchers described empathy ability and couple relationship have been significantly related, and insisted people, who have good expressing empathy capability, maintain stable and well-balanced relationships. For this reason, diversity of empathy training programs has been examined. However, it was hard to find empathy training program based on kinesthetic dimension using physical movement. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to configure and ap-

ply the empathy training program based on bodily expression and physical movements for couples faced with conflict situation and assess the effectiveness of this program.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research participants

Participants for this study were selected three legally married couples, 6 people (husbands and wives) who were taking couple counseling program at family counseling center of B university. The researcher explained to participants the research purpose in advance, obtained prior consents from the participants about using the recorder and video camera to secure the research ethics of the qualitative research method, and conducted the study after collecting the consent forms from participants. Table 1 shows the general characteristics of participants in this study.

Procedure

We used focus group interview method for collecting data and, employed for the interview method by mixing the semi-structured and unstructured questionnaire. The reason for choosing focus group interview was it gave the interaction among participants as a source of data (Willing, 2001). Focus group interview was divided into two groups by participants' gender.

Program description by session

The program consisted of expressive movement exploration and dance sports for improving empathy and communication ability. Each of the four, two-hour sessions included expressive movement activity and basic cha-cha activity, one of the dance sports techniques. After the session, focus group interview was provided by interviewer. Common topics for the focus group interview included: (a) opinion about today's movement program (b) small victory in daily life during last week (c) my changes during last week (d) my spouse's changes during last week. (e) changes of our(me and my spouse) relationship during last week.

Table 1. General characteristics of research participants

No	Gender	Age	Academic background	Occupation	Marriage duration	Children
1	M	42	Under graduate school	Employee	13 yr 7 m	2
2	F	41	Under graduate school	Housewife		
3	M	39	Under graduate school	Public servant	7 yr 5 m	1
4	F	37	Graduate school	Teacher		
5	M	42	Under graduate school	Self-employed	14 yr 10 m	1
6	F	38	High school	Self-employed		

Movement program contents

It is known that body movement is the core medium for emotion perception and expression. Also, one could develop social-communication skills by expressive bodily movement (Behrends et al., 2012). From this viewpoint, movement program could be designed for fostering kinesthetic empathy ability through on the dimension of reciprocity in movement interaction. So our intervention program focuses not only bodily perception and expression of oneself but also the perception of the interaction partner for understanding empathy-preceding of others. Specifically, we aim to improve the dimension of bodily perception, expression, and interaction. For providing more systematic movement program, the concepts of Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) are applied, namely, Body, Space, Effort, and Relationship (Laban, 1971).

Session one: Body concept

During session one, participants explored the method about bodily perception and expression of oneself through body concept especially, focusing on breath awareness. Also, for maintaining spouse's psychological viewpoint, participants listened spouse's story of life map and expressed spouse's life via bodily movements.

Session two: Space concept

During session two, participants discovered the method about space perception and expression of oneself through space concept especially, focusing on personal space awareness. Also, for understanding spouse's psychological perspective, participants listened spouse's personal space at home.

Session three: Effort concept

During session three, participants understood the spouse's inner intention of action through effort concept especially, focusing on care-giving daily movement. Also, for understanding spouse's psychological perspective, participants observed spouse's walking style and imitated it based on their quality of movement.

Session four: Relationship concept

During Session four, participants explored the empathetic sharing through relationship concept especially, focusing on sharing most memorable moment of marital life. Also, for understanding psychological perspective of mine, participants observed themselves reaction from "command play".

Dance sports contents

It is known that couple dance helped conflict couples to rebirth

the relationship and to maintain a homeostasis (Park and Yoon, 2013). From this viewpoint, we designed dance sports program based on cha-cha, one of the dance sports technique. For providing suitable program for beginners, basic cha-cha routine were applied like Close basic steps, Under arm turn, and New york steps

Analysis

All of the focus group interviews were recorded and the conversations transcribed verbatim. The total sentences were 1,023 (in Korean). For analyzing data, Patton's (2002) thematic content analysis was used. First step was reading and re-reading the original transcriptions to understand interviewee's story. The second step was breaking down the raw data into meaning unit so that it could possible to develop the initial classification system by identifying, defining, labeling, and classifying the data. The third step was developing systematic classification by uniting the lower order themes. From this process, "essence phrase" is maintaining. The fourth step was developing a process-outcome matrix (Table 2) across the three higher order themes and interpreting and categorizing raw data into themes.

RESULTS

The analysis procedure resulted in two higher order themes related to the effect of movement program in terms of change of subject and change of contents. Agents of Changes themes were divided into three lower order themes, namely my change, my spouse's change, and our change. Contents of Changes themes were divided into four lower order themes, namely physical change, emotional change, behavioral change, and relationship change (Table 2).

For examining the effect of movement program more specifically, we analyzed participants' experiences by contents of class.

Session one: Breath awareness

In session one, we focused on breath awareness in terms of Laban's body concept. From "breath perception" activity, participants built up body awareness by themselves. It could be supportive to notice one's body reaction by emotional change. For example, one husband said:

<Husband C>

I really enjoyed "breathing activity". At home, I have practiced a lot. My wife is also very satisfied it. When I felt a pressure on my chest, breath awareness was very helpful to calm down.

Table 2. Coding framework

	Higher order theme	First order theme	Raw data theme
Global change through out the activity	Agents of changes	My change	My change through objectification work of Situation Cognition e.g. Wife B - "I realized that my demand for accepting my standard could be very stressful to him."
		Your change	Awareness of spouse's behavioral change throughout the activity e. g. Husband C - "My wife seemed to be relaxed and I felt my wife cares about me and cooked for me."
		Our change	Mutual change through taking lessons and homework activities together e. g. Husband A - "I'm very pleased that we have lots of subjects to share while we exercise the breathing method together."
	Contents of change	Physical change	Positive physical effect throughout the activity e. g. Wife A - "Breathing method helps me to sleep well."
		Emotional change	Mutual change of emotional feeling e. g. Husband B - "My wife sent her picture to me via cell phone; She looked so different to me. She was so beautiful."
		Behavioral change	Awareness of spouse's behavioral change e. g. Wife C - "My husband did the laundry even though I didn't asked for it. He started to do the housework by himself."
		Relationship change	Sense of closeness between husband and wife e. g. Husband A - "When we were dancing together, we talked about many things. It seemed we were connected each other."

Also, breath perception activity played a role in identifying body movement not by thinking process but by sensing process using proprioception. Furthermore, participants built up how to perceive partner's body expression. For instance, one wife said;

<Wife A>

I knew I'm breathing in my head. However, I didn't feel it from my body. Now I'm aware of not only my breathing but also my husband's breathing. When I sleep, I could notice my husband's sound of breathing. It makes me so relaxed.

Session two: Personal space awareness

In session two, we focused on personal space awareness in terms of Laban's space concept. From "invading partner's space" activity, participants had a chance to think seriously where my own space is in terms of physical space as well as psychological space. For example, one wife said;

<Wife B>

Personal space perception activity makes me to think about my own space in my house. I had been loved to do sewing so one of the favorite spaces at home was sewing machine spot. However, I was self-consciously aware of my family members, I had put away sewing machine in the veranda. After thinking about comfortable place for me, I moved sewing machine in the kitchen where I spent the most hours at my home.

Also, participants notice not only my psychological perspective but also my spouse's perspective. From this viewpoint, participants change their behavior in daily life by putting themselves in their spouse's shoes. For instance, one wife said:

<Wife C>

After discussing about personal space, I realized my husband's cozy space at home was bed room. Normally I didn't clean up the bedclothes and always my husband did it. However, yesterday I felt like cleaning up the bedclothes for caring my husband personal space. So I cleaned it by myself.

Session three: Intention awareness

In session three, we focused on intention awareness in terms of Laban's Effort concept. From "care-giver" activity, participants realized my spouse's intention of daily-life behavior and interpreted it differently. It could be helpful to understand my spouse's hidden mind. For example, one husband said:

<Husband C>

My wife used to clean the bathroom. However, I didn't know that she did it for me. I thought it was just her work as a housewife. I did not know that it could have been her sacrifice for our family. After I realized it, I felt so different feeling when I watched her cleaning the bathroom.

Furthermore, it could be possible to change their mind set and reaction to spouse's behavior. For instance, one wife said;

<Wife A>

I always thought that my husband's "care-giving activity" was physical exercise. Therefore, I was really surprised when he said playing with his computer is his real hobby. In fact, I didn't like him to spend time with his computer; Since last week's activity, I let him use the computer as much as he wants. I realize that he needs some time and space for himself.

Session four: relationship awareness

In session four, we focused on empathetic sharing in terms of Laban's Relationship concept. From "movement poem" activity for relationship awareness, participants had a chance to share most memorable moment of marital life and performed that moment by expressive movement. It could be supportive to give emotional contagion to their spouse and to get kinesthetic empathy from their spouse. For example, one wife said:

<Wife A>

When we discussed about our memorable moment of our marital life, we realized our most memorable moment was same; that was the day our first kid were born. As we wrote the poem about our kid and choreograph the movement, I felt we were closer and more connected than before.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to examine kinesthetic empathy program and assess the effectiveness to married couples faced with conflict situation. A qualitative research method has been conducted, subjecting three couples, 6 people, who are participating in expressive movement program to achieve this study. In the field of marital therapy, it is known that couple dance helped married couples faced with conflict situation to rebuild the relationship and to maintain a family homeostasis (Middelberg, 2001; Park and Yoon, 2013). However, Behrends et al. (2012) pointed out that dance therapy program should have expressive and intuitive process than controlled and standard process. Therefore, in this study, we designed kinesthetic empathy enhancing program based on expressive movement to deal emotional problems. The findings provide a unique contribution to the not only couple counseling field but also exercise rehabilitation field in several ways.

Firstly, one's self-awareness of own body and personal emotion

should be preceded for maintaining kinesthetic empathy. In this study, participants had developed self-awareness by the objectification process of them through Laban's body and space concepts. Result showed similarities with Goleman (2006)'s statement about empathy and self-awareness. He declared that empathy required self-awareness and capacity for empathy stemmed from one's own emotional attunement. Results represent that one of the methods for improving self-awareness and emotional attunement could be utilizing bodily dimension of perceptive and expressive process.

Secondly, kinesthetic empathy had much improved when one discovered spouse's hidden intention. Results from current sample showed that "knowing spouse's intention" was significant factors to understand their partner. In this study, after perceiving partner's intention of care-giving action, participants changed their attitude toward spouse not only emotional level but also behavioral level. Similarly, Farrow and colleagues (2001) had explored from the results of a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study that people were required to infer other's intention for predicting and experiencing the emotions of others. This research provide empirically example of assessing the relationship of intention and empathy.

Thirdly, we assumed that kinesthetic empathy program could complement general marriage counseling program. Many marriage counseling programs' general goals were to support partners in understanding their emotions more clearly, recognizing behaviors they need to change, and providing specific skill training (Kaplan and Hennon, 1992). In this study, some participants pointed out the downside of general marriage counseling programs based on verbal communication which was to focus on negative sides of marital life. For example, one husband stated that "General counseling was the process of mistake indication and constantly was focused on "understanding my partner" and "finding an agreement". However, expressive movement program was the process of sharing a laugh. When I made a mistake in class, we just laughed. There was no need to find an agreement. I thought the reason, this is possible, is program's core materials were body and movement." From this statement, we could understand the value of movement counseling program. This study contributed empirical evidence that movement program functions as an empathy enhancer by process of perceiving, feeling, thinking, and interacting with others.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was re-

ported.

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