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# **The therapeutic elements of flamenco**

Suvi-Maria Helin

Tutor: Rosa-María Rodríguez-Jiménez

*Department of Clinical Psychology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona,  
Spain*

## **The therapeutic elements of flamenco**

Flamenco is a versatile Spanish art form which is characterized by a strong emotional expression, intensive rhythms, confident attitude, and distinctive actions of clapping, stomping and rounded movement of wrists. All this wrapped up in aesthetics that celebrate both feminine and masculine aspects. The therapeutic effects of these components of flamenco have not been discovered only by the flamenco enthusiasts and professionals all around the world, but also by the professionals of the therapeutic field. The purpose of this phenomenological study with qualitative heuristic approach, is to use the method of introspection and bibliographical revision to present the therapeutic elements of flamenco, which in this work are named as 1. Expression of emotions and communication, 2. Rhythm, 3. Materials & Visuals and 4. Movement, body, posture and attitude. The hope is to benefit both the therapeutic and pedagogical fields by introducing and deepening the knowledge on the potential of flamenco and its possibilities in benefitting different groups of people.

Keywords: therapeutic flamenco; dance movement therapy; rhythm; emotions; grounding; transnational dances

### **1. Introduction**

I started dancing flamenco when I was 13 years old. I saw a glimpse of a sevillanas-class in a local gym in my hometown Tampere, in Finland, and got immediately enchanted seeing women of different ages and sizes smiling and enjoying themselves dancing together to a rhythmic music. I can still vividly remember their faces glowing pure joy and the connection between the dancing couples. It was something I had never seen before. At that time, I was dancing classical ballet, and the emotions I used to experience in class were fear, anxiety and humiliation.

I quickly converted as an enthusiast aficionada of flamenco dance, training nearly every day. I was fascinated by the fact, that in flamenco the expression of one's inner self and authentic emotions was more important than the external appearance. The complex rhythms and intense music resonated in me, and I somehow felt home in flamenco, though being a Finnish girl far away from the origins of this art form.

Over the years I confronted different crisis with flamenco. First one had to do with injuries and discomforts in the body. This led me to study somatic techniques to “bear the burden” of dancing flamenco. I was also intrigued to explore how to move and use my body in an intelligent and harmonious way. I was searching in my bodily movements for the same understanding and authenticity as I experienced whilst expressing my inner emotions through flamenco. I graduated as a Pilates instructor and studied many other techniques such as Feldenkrais and Alexander-technique and applied my discoveries to my dance training.

In flamenco there are no classified styles nor schools, traditionally this art form is transmitted in families from a generation to another, from a master to a student. Thus, each teacher creates his/her own school and pedagogy, and students look for the teacher whose style they want to learn (Lindroos et al., 1999). After several years of flamenco studies in Finland, I moved to Seville in 2005, and found a teacher who I have been following ever since. In classes of Yolanda Heredia, I felt that I was learning the essence of flamenco, but at the same time I was guided to connect with my own corporality and understand the core of each movement in a more profound way, instead of merely imitating the teacher. I noticed that the different aches in my body started to dissolve, and I didn’t need my Pilates routines to prepare and recover from these classes, as the movement itself was nurturing me while dancing. I felt that my two worlds of flamenco and somatics were uniting and coming together.

Later on, as a Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) student, I realised that this very somatic approach to teaching of Yolanda Heredia included many same principles as DMT. Heredia herself had suffered severe injuries in her body as a young flamenco dancer, and this had led her to explore the movements of the body and create an approach to the flamenco dance technique, which instead of harming the body, would nurture it. Heredia is known as a specialist of the *bata de cola*, the traditional garment “with a tail”, which due its heavy weight can cause back pain and other injuries if not treated mindfully. Heredia applied the steps of Argentine tango to the technique of *bata de cola* (Luna, 2018), and created an approach which converted the dance into an enjoyable duet with this garment, instead of a fight.

Heredia encourages her students to see the limitations and difficulties as a possibility of growth and to take care of one’s inner internal state in the learning process as this develops the personality which is the most important thing in flamenco (Zanocco, 2011). According to Heredia, in an emotional level everyone can adapt flamenco to be a part of their personality in their own way, independently from which country they are from (Keskinen, 2009).

These ideas of Heredia are very much aligned with the pedagogical approach of the Finnish flamenco teachers, including myself. Siljamäki et al., (2014) conducted a study on Finnish teachers of transnational dances and discovered that all the flamenco teachers participating in the study considered dance as a “path towards personal expression”, and their pedagogical guideline was to support their students “in taking pride in themselves and finding their own ways to dance” (p. 60). The authors presented also in their paper a somatic approach to dance, which was applied in the teaching of oriental dance.

I consider that the teaching of Yolanda Heredia, as well as my own personal approach to flamenco, is a somewhat combination of the two above mentioned approaches. To my understanding, through this approach, one can both connect to one's authentic self, and the essence of flamenco. I consider especially important to emphasize this in Finland, and other non-Spanish countries far away from the roots and cultural context of flamenco, so that the dance doesn't convert into a stereotypic imitation. Heike Wieschiolek (2003), a researcher of dance, states that "if a certain form of dance is adopted in another culture, it will often be considered a simple imitation" (quoted in Siljamäki et al., 2014, p. 61).

My second crisis with flamenco had to do with this: being a Finn practicing flamenco in Finland. After few years of studies in Seville, I came back to Finland, and worked as a flamenco dancer in dance pieces and did my own projects. Nevertheless, gradually an anxiety started growing in me. I found myself thinking on stage: "what am I doing here?", dancing a choreographed piece to a recorded music, in front of people who I can't even see because of the lightning. Finland lacks the cultural side of flamenco, and during that time there were very few flamenco musicians in the country. Flamenco existed mostly on stages in choreographed shows, not in different gatherings among people in everyday life. I found myself yearning for that, communicating with people. Living and breathing through flamenco instead of showing of my skills. I didn't feel an urge to perform but I longed for an interaction and expressing myself through flamenco. And even though I tried, I couldn't leave flamenco behind. It was a part of me.

In the middle of this crisis, my friend and colleague, flamenco guitarist Juho Koskimies phoned me, and asked whether I would like to go as volunteers to perform in retirement homes and senior centres. I felt that it was the answer to my prayers and solution to my crisis. Instead of performing, we decided to create interactive flamenco gatherings with the participants. During each one-hour session, we sat in a circle, got to know each other, chatted about flamenco and then continued moving to a common rhythm, everyone according to their capacities. We improvised to the different *palos*/styles of flamenco, and I was mirroring the movements of the participants and dancing little dialogues with them. During these sessions I could witness the power of music and dance, as I saw people who had lost their words and means to communicate due to a severe dementia, coming "back to life" and expressing themselves through movement. I was deeply moved by the (verbal and bodily) conversations shared in these gatherings, and I felt that I was finally achieving and experiencing something that I had yearned from flamenco in Finland.

Later on, along my studies, I understood, that what I did in these flamenco gatherings, completely intuitively, was very much aligned with the principles of Dance Movement Therapy. These precise experiences motivated me to participate in a year-long training course of DMT in the Theatre Academy of Helsinki in 2011, and further on continue to the master's studies on DMT in the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

The intention of this paper is to present different therapeutic elements of flamenco through bibliographical revision and personal experiences, and by that increase the understanding of the therapeutic potential of this art form in both pedagogical and therapeutic contexts. The article searches to raise awareness and invite reflection and critical thinking on different sensitive themes emerging in the contexts of flamenco, such as identity, gender, body and the cultural context. The hope is, that by viewing

flamenco from this therapeutic perspective, it might contribute tools to the different flamenco professionals constituting their own pedagogies, and eventually support the transmission of the complex essence of flamenco with all its layers and cultural contexts to students all around the world. Finally, the aim is to open doors for future investigation, dialogues and collaborations between the professionals of flamenco and therapy fields.

## **2. Methodology**

This is a phenomenological study which applies the qualitative heuristic approach on the method of introspection to discuss the topic. Qualitative heuristics highlight the qualities of exploration and discoveries in the research process. The process is seen as a dialogue where the researcher is in interaction with the research material. During the research process, the researcher maintains an open mind to possible new concepts and insights, that might replace his/her preconceptions on the original topic (Kleining, G. & Witt, H. 2000).

To carry out this introspection, I have performed a literary review to collect information on different therapeutic elements of flamenco. I have included in this search all the studies and articles found on flamenco in the therapeutic context. There is a clear void of literature on flamenco in therapy. This fact has been recognised also by Koch et al. (2019), the authors of one of the most recent studies on the subject, also used as source material in this article. I have made use of the bibliographical findings of other authors working on the similar themes. Existing literature relevant to the topic has also been utilized on the fields of Dance Movement Therapy, flamenco, and dance pedagogy. Internet search engines and data bases such as *google scholar* and *Taylor & Francis online* have been used for this study, likewise the database of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, using key words such as “flamenco therapy” and “therapeutic flamenco”. I have limited the searches to the languages of English, Spanish and Finnish. I have excluded from the search studies concerning merely folklore and primitive cultures.

I have organised the findings of the research in four different chapters where the material is presented with an aim to benefit both professionals in pedagogical and therapeutic fields working with flamenco. In the latter part of the article, I use my personal experience on flamenco to execute an introspection on these different therapeutic themes.

## **3. The therapeutic elements of flamenco**

Flamenco contains several aspects that can be experienced therapeutic and thus used for therapeutic purposes. I have divided these elements in four sections:

1. Expression of emotions and communication
2. Rhythm
3. Materials & visuals
4. Movement, posture, body and attitude

Even though presented separately, these elements intertwine with each other and occur simultaneously. Presenting these different therapeutic elements of flamenco, I highlight the aspects that are aligned with Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) and thus useful in therapeutic contexts. Prior to going through these elements, I present the studies and articles found through the bibliographical search, where flamenco is used in a therapeutic context.

There is scarce amount of literature and studies measuring the psychological effects of flamenco. In the next section I present examples of studies where flamenco has been used as an intervention or described as a therapeutic vehicle. I use some of these studies also as source material in the following chapters where I describe with more detail the above-mentioned therapeutic elements.

Serrano-Guzmán et al. (2016) investigated the effectiveness of flamenco and sevillanas program in improving functional measures (balance, mobility etc.) and quality of life in postmenopausal women in Spain. The authors highlighted the fact, that despite the well-known benefits of physical exercise to perimenopausal and postmenopausal women, the engagement to these activities is low. The authors suggest the reason for this being the lack of social interaction and pleasure while training. Other reasons might be among other things embarrassment of the obesity and fear of criticism. Due to this, flamenco and dance could be an ideal option to motivate this group of people to move, as “When used as therapy, dance provides innovative, creative, and useful ways to help women rehabilitate through a comprehensive focus on the mind and body and integrating both cognitive and social aspects” (p. 966).

Another intervention where flamenco classes were used for therapeutic goals, is described in a paper by Megía et al. (2021). A group of Spanish women between ages 45 to 69 suffering from fibromyalgia, participated in flamenco sessions taught by a specialized nurse. The intervention proved to be effective in improving the general well-being, mood and mobility of the participants, who suffered from widespread pain, anxiety and depression. The authors emphasize, how flamenco music and its different *palos* / styles represent different emotions, and thus help the participants to channel and express their emotions and feelings.

Lopera-Auñón et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between the different emotions and basic flamenco movement patterns, using the movement qualities of Laban to analyse it. The results suggested that flamenco dance could be a useful tool in the expression and channelling of emotions in the DMT context.

Cristóbal (2020) committed a study where flamenco was used as a part of DMT interventions for people with severe mental disorder. The sessions were designed using Marian Chace’s model, and flamenco was used in the free movement part in the middle of the session as a “socio-affective experience that facilitates body expression” (p. 254). The author highlights the vast variety of resources flamenco holds, and how it can enrichen the DMT sessions. The benefits achieved through these interventions were improvements in memory capacity, coordination and perception of space, as well as positive impact on the interpersonal relationships amongst the patients.

Garcia (2017) investigated in her thesis the effects of flamenco dance on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The base of her study was her own experience as a flamenco

dancer and personal experience on severe PTSD. The author suggests that daily practice of flamenco dance can help to mediate the effects of PTSD on the brain and body.

Koch et al. (2019) conducted an experimental pilot study using Flamenco Therapy intervention for traumatized inpatients. The authors see a great potential in the usage of flamenco in therapeutic context. According to the authors, “trauma survivors have often lost the ability to express themselves authentically, because they feel disconnected from them-selves, or from life, often associate strength with violence, and can be flooded by strong emotions when moving” (p. 444). To avoid or regulate negative emotions, many traumatized patients harm themselves or dissociate. Flamenco, through it’s clear, strong and self-confident expression of both negative and positive emotions, could according to the authors be a useful and encouraging tool for these patients to learn how to channel and regulate the emotions, experience being strong and proud, express themselves courageously and find a connection to themselves.

Getting in touch with oneself through expression of the emotions via flamenco is described also in the papers of Matteucci (2013) and Sánchez García & Pinna-Perez (2021). Matteucci conducted a study about how non-Spanish flamenco enthusiasts in Seville Spain experience flamenco as an art form. According to the study these tourist experiences of flamenco resemble a spiritual journey, where the flamenco tourists are seen as pilgrims who travel to their sacred centre of Seville to experience the most authentic flamenco in the rituals (flamenco courses) led by the spiritual leaders (flamenco artists). In the core of these experiences was the effect on the self. Matteucci talks about different dimensions that contribute to this transformative experience (*environment, challenge, arousal, ineffable and self*). With the concepts of arousal and ineffable, the author apparently refers to the same concept of *duende* (without naming it as such), which is described also in other sources (Sánchez García & Pinna-Perez, 2021; Lopera-Auñón et al. 2021).

Arousal is described as “visceral experiences, such as body awareness and intense emotional state” and ineffable as “those extraordinary experiences that translate into states of transcendence and feelings of unity” (p. 112). Through these states, which are closely connected to each other and occur while dancing flamenco and are described also reminding the state of ‘runners-high’. Matteucci refers also to Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) experience of flow which is “the merger of action and awareness” (p. 118). The experience is connected to the multisensorial experience and feeling of communion with the music and the connection to peers sharing the moment simultaneously. Through these experiences the participants of Matteucci’s study, gained greater sense of self and “notions of enrichment, meaningfulness, transformation and eudaimonic well-being” (p. 112).

Sánchez García (2021) developed the expressive arts practice Expressive Flamenco© through her personal practice of the combination of flamenco and expressive arts during her post master’s advanced certificate studies of Expressive Therapies. She used her professional experience as a flamenco dancer together with expressive arts methods to process her personal existential crisis with different health problems. According to Sánchez García, through this art based emotional expression one can transcend to the state of *duende*, which to the author corresponds the connection to the authentic self. The main hypothesis of the paper is that “the emergence of the “duende” facilitates an epistemological process of self-knowledge and an emotional process of catharsis,



suggesting that when this art form is utilized as ‘Expressive Flamenco’ it helps facilitate holistic healing” (Sánchez García & Pinna-Perez, p. 3, 2021)

As discovered in above mentioned studies, flamenco can benefit the mental and physical health in many ways. The transformative nature of this art form has led its individual practitioners to go through healing processes and get in touch with themselves. The professionals of the therapeutic field have also started to notice the potential and benefits of flamenco dance in the therapeutic context. In the following chapters I present with more detail the therapeutic elements of flamenco.

### 3.1 Expression of emotions and communication

More than an art form, flamenco could be seen as a form of expression. The development of flamenco was influenced by different oppressed groups of people, such as gypsies, Arabs, Moors and Jews, living in Andalusia in the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Lindroos et al., 1999). Flamenco was born out of the necessity of these people to express themselves (Cuellar-Moreno, 2016).

Flamenco is expressed through its three main elements: dance, song and guitar, which communicate with each other in a harmonious way (Cristóbal, 2020). In the core of each element is the transmission of the vast variety of the deep human emotions from sadness to happiness (Brao, 2015). The powerful expression of the emotions can lead to experience an ecstatic state of *duende* (Brao, 2015; Lopera-Auñón et al., 2021). Sánchez García & Pinna-Perez (2021) describe the concept of *duende* as “a divine connection with the authentic self” (p. 3).

In flamenco dance the emotional expression and communication occurs through movement. This is also the basis of Dance Movement Therapy (DMT). According to Chaiklin & Schmais (1979), one of the basic principles of the DMT pioneer Marian Chase is: “dance is communication, and this fulfils a basic human need” (as cited in Levy, p. 24, 1988). Chase worked in a psychiatric hospital and utilized movement to facilitate the self-expression and communication of the inpatients, who could not express themselves verbally (Levy, 1988). Similarly, flamenco evolved to fulfil the need of self-expression of marginalized peoples who were impeded to do it otherwise.

Regarding communication and expression, more connections between flamenco and DMT can be detected. One of them is the use of circle. The form of circle is a typical structure used in folk dances and primitive cultures, and it is said to be the earliest space form in dancing (Borges da Costa and Cox, 2016). DMT pioneer Marian Chase had background in folk dances, and this influence appeared in her work with the usage of the circular structure to support the social interaction of her patients (Levy, 1988). The “Chacian Circle” has later become a basic tool amongst Dance Movement Therapists as it provides containment and holding and enables physical contact and possibility to mirror/echo emotional states between the group members. Working in a circle, reaffirms the group identity, increases the sense of connectedness and solidarity between the group members and facilitates the possibility to learn from each other (Meekums, 2002; Karampoula & Panhofer, 2016). Encouraging patients to be in the “spotlight” and take

turns in the middle of the circle can have a positive effect on self-esteem (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2015).

The form of a circle is also commonly used in flamenco, especially in its most traditional form. The circular form gives structure to the space and facilitates communication, interaction and the change of roles between the dancers and musicians. (Cristóbal, 2020). This structure can be seen on stage in flamenco shows, but also in the form of flamenco which lives amongst people as a part of their everyday life in social gatherings, parties and events. In these commonly shared occasions, everyone who are present are part of this collective art (Cristóbal, 2020).

Integrating this communicative, interactive and social side of flamenco to therapeutic context could be a useful and beneficial tool, as the meanings and elements it holds are so closely aligned with principles of DMT.

### 3.2 Rhythm

Rhythm is what combines all the different elements of flamenco together (song, guitar, dance etc). It's like a shared matrix which gives a common structure that enables individuals to express themselves and communicate with each other. Studying flamenco in Madrid, flamenco dancer Manuel Reyes used to say in class, that rhythm is something that we can't negotiate. We'll have to maintain the *compás* and search our freedom and personal expression within this structure, maintaining the "head cold and heart warm".

Having a clear structure through rhythmic activity is especially beneficial to people with mental health problems (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2015; Koch et al. 2019). Psychotic people have lost their connection to themselves and to the life here and now, and rhythm is something that can help them to connect to the present moment and get in touch with themselves again. Rhythm is a fundamental element of dance and music, but it is also something that accompanies us in our lives from the womb until the last breath, in heartbeat, circulation, conversation, walking etc. (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2015; Cristóbal, 2020).

Like in dance, in our everyday life, rhythm is something that enables us to be emphatic and connect with other people, whether it is making love or having a conversation. A predictable safe rhythm creates a basis for a trusting relationship (Payne, 2019). There are differences between internal rhythms of different individuals, as well as between the rhythm of the external world and the internal of every person. Difficulties to adapt these to each other might provoke imbalances and conflicts (Cristóbal, 2020). Rhythm is an important component of a DMT session, and it can be used in different ways. The therapists use both internal rhythms (heartbeat, breath, voice) and external rhythms (recorded music, instruments) (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2015).

Flamenco allows the individual to express one's authentic self and at the same time feel the connection and communicate with others via the common rhythm in a harmonious way. This aligns well with the principles of DMT. The DMT pioneer Marian Chase was specialized in working with psychiatric hospitalized patients. Working with rhythm was

one of the basic elements of her work. Simple and contagious rhythmic patterns provided a safe structure in groups, which facilitated even the most withdrawn patients to join in movement. The common rhythmic structure gave support and helped to organize chaotic emotions and thoughts and provided a tool to modify extreme behaviours (Levy, 1988).

Rhythmic activity is not beneficial only to the inpatients with mental health problems, but also to all “normal functioning neurotics”, which is a label that the DMT pioneer Blanche Evan gave to the adult population that she was specialized working with (as cited in Levy, p. 34, 1988). Evan was concerned that the urban mechanized world and its pressured pace would provoke children and “normal functioning neurotics” to lost contact with their body and emotions (Levy, 1988). This might be one of the components to explain why flamenco dance is a so popular hobby worldwide. By attending dance classes, one gets to benefit the several therapeutic effects of flamenco.

### **3.3 Movement, posture, body and attitude**

As a physical activity, flamenco dance contains various elements that promote health and wellbeing. Mobility improvements were discovered in two studies using flamenco as a mode of intervention. The study of Serrano-Guzmán et al. (2016) measured the effects of flamenco and sevillanas based program on Spanish sedentary postmenopausal women. The results revealed improvements in mobility, balance and levels of physical activity. Articular mobility alongside with the mood and general functionality in everyday life was found to improve also in the group of women suffering from fibromyalgia who received flamenco classes as an intervention (Megía et al. 2021).

Aerobic exercise has many positive effects. In addition to above mentioned mobility, it is the best way to improve blood pressure disorders, as suggested in a study of Quintero et al. (2015) (cited in the paper of Serrano-Guzmán et al., 2021). Nevertheless, even though many people acknowledge the benefits of aerobic movement, and on the other hand the negative effects of sedentary lifestyle, it seems difficult to motivate especially the older adults to do physical exercise (Serrano-Guzmán et al. 2016). Both above mentioned studies suggested dancing as a well suitable option to practice aerobic exercise for their focus groups. Dancing includes aerobic exercise in a more motivational manner: including music which adds pleasure and the possibility to interact with others.

Clapping and stomping the feet are characteristic actions of flamenco dance. Cristóbal (2020) suggests in her article about the usage of flamenco as a part of DMT process, that these actions are useful for getting in contact with ones' body boundaries, identify different body parts and by that improve ones' body image, which is fundamental to the development of the notion of oneself. This is especially useful to psychotic people, whose bodily knowledge might be distorted and scarce. By clapping and striking the feet to the ground one gets a notion where the body starts and ends, and thus the body image gradually improves (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2015; Cristóbal, 2020).

The footwork of flamenco dance also includes working with weight shifting, which is commonly used in DMT to enhance grounding (Meekums, 2002; Tord & Bräuninger,

2013; Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2015). Grounding refers to one's ability to connect with the present moment of "here and now" and to the contact one has with the ground (Meekums, 2002). The concept is based on the body-mind psychotherapy by Alexander Lowen (1910–2008), and according to Tord and Bräuninger (2013) working with this fundamental element of DMT, is beneficial to many people, not only to people with a mental health diagnosis. One aspect and option to enhance grounding is to concentrate on the relation one has with the ground in vertical axis and work with balance and physical strength (Meekums, 2002; Tord & Bräuninger, 2013). These are all characteristic properties of flamenco dance, as the dancing occurs (traditionally) always in the vertical position and the foot work strengthens the connection to the ground and enhances balance, as already discovered in before mentioned studies.

Cristóbal (2020) executed DMT workshops including flamenco for people with severe mental disorder and discovered these interventions to be effective in creating the sense of weight for the participants, as "when striking the feet on the ground in a progressive way, one is able to feel presence, rootedness, connection with the ground (grounding) and with the "here and now" (p. 252). The author highlighted, that to be part of the same common rhythm with a group, even though challenging to execute, was greatly rewarding for this population.

Grounding can be worked also through the different movement qualities of the Laban Movement Analysis (Tord & Bräuninger, 2013) which has proven to pair well with flamenco based DMT sessions, as flamenco dance allows to engage with a great variety of themes such as expression and channelling the emotions and different movement qualities (Lopera-Auñón et al. 2021; Koch et al. 2019).

### 3.4 Materials & Visuals

Traditionally the aesthetics and movement repertoire of flamenco dance have reflected very stereotypical gender roles. Nevertheless, since the 1800s there have been women breaking these roles, and nowadays it is quite common to see a woman dancing in trousers and focusing on footwork, instead of on the rounded and feminine movements of the upper body. To see men engaging in a traditional feminine aesthetics has been rarer, but during the recent years even those taboos have started to break.

In 2019 the dancer Manuel Liñán (born 1980) created a dance piece *Viva!*, where he together with six other male dancers dived into explore the feminine world of flamenco dance with its typical clothing and props such as scarfs, fans and *bata de cola*. In a documentary *Queer Flamenco* by Bernas & González (2021), Liñán comments that the show was born to heal his childhood trauma. As a young boy living in Granada, southern Spain, he learnt to hide his feminine side and interest in wearing dresses as it was not accepted by the society. With his creation *Viva!*, Liñán wishes to encourage every individual to express themselves as they want.

As the example of Liñán shows, flamenco dance with its clothing and props can support working with delicate and vulnerable themes of (gender-)identity, role issues and body identity. This was discovered also by Koch et al. (2019) who in the study for traumatized patients, suggested the action of getting dressed before the flamenco

therapy session, as an intervention to focus on themes such as gender and roles issues, shame, guilt and mood. The authors highlight, that the dressing up should be voluntary, as putting on high heels, skirts etc. could be a major trigger to some patients. A milder way to work these themes could be through props (scarfs, fans etc) in a central part of the session.

The use of castanets in a group session can according to Cristóbal (2020) improve concentration, group cohesion, coordination and strengthen the muscles of the torso and arms. It also offers a new way to work on the posture.

#### **4. My own journey**

My experience of flamenco is greatly influenced and “coloured” by the fact that I am a Finnish person mostly “living my flamenco” in Finland. I felt my home in flamenco since the very beginning. Curiously, I had never felt drawn by the Finnish folklore. As a result of having studied flamenco and lived several years in Spain, first in Seville and later in Madrid, I feel I am continuously fluctuating between cultures.

According to the study of Siljamäki et al, (2014) this is common also to other Finnish teachers of transnational dances (flamenco, Oriental dance and West African dances). The authors refer to the cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2002) who states that “identity is a process rather than a finished product” and that “cultural identity can simultaneously be both similar to and different from the dominant culture” (cited in Siljamäki et al, 2014, p. 57). In addition to identify as a Finn, the transnational dance teachers of the study felt in home and identified also with their dance community consisting of people from all over the world, and in their pedagogic work continuously reflect the Finnish culture to the cultural background of the dance form their represent.

Building up my identity from layers of Finnish and Spanish cultures at times feels burdensome, but the good side is, that not having ones’ identity fixed in only one culture, helps to avoid stereotypic notion of other people or dance forms (Löytty, 2011, as cited in Siljamäki et al., 2014, p. 57). This I consider important especially when working with flamenco outside its native country. I share the experience of the flamenco teachers in the study of Siljamäki et al., that the attractive aesthetics and often stereotypic notions of the passionate and exotic flamenco dance bring people to classes, and sometimes they later on get disappointed when confronting the complexity to learn this art form. On the other hand, some people are drawn to flamenco especially due to its demanding nature and profundity. Nevertheless, I alongside with the teachers in the study, consider it important to broaden the view on flamenco so that people would perceive it as something much more than a cliched stereotypic notion of Spanish exotism.

Reflecting on the visual side of flamenco, over the years I have started to feel more and more uncomfortable with some typical flamenco clothing and accessories such as patterns with *lunares*, big frills, earrings etc. Partly because I consider these features representing cultural context of flamenco which is very far from my own origins.

Secondly, in my everyday life, I don't wear earrings nor other jewels and I rarely even use dresses. In one point, when preparing myself to a flamenco performance, I started to feel I'm on my way to a masquerade. I didn't feel that the aesthetics reflected who I really am.

Cultural researchers Ryan, Ingram, and Musiol (2010) state that "clothing can express who we are in a symbolic form, presenting to the world a visual image of our inner being and often the desire to be part of a social group or identity with a cultural ideal" (cited in Siljamäki et al., 2014, p. 64). As pointed out before in this article, expressing oneself through flamenco is about connecting with one's true self and authentic feelings, thereby having the clothing aligned with this purpose can be beneficial to achieve this goal. Clothing and accessories can be an effective tool both in therapeutic and pedagogical contexts, but it is worth being conscious and sensitive of all the meanings and aspects it contains.

When I started to dance flamenco as a teenager, I assumed that dressing up the typical traditional flamenco clothing was part of the deal. But over the years my relation to the flamenco aesthetics has changed to reflect more of who I am. In a larger scale this has happened also generally in the flamenco world during the past few decades as mentioned before in this article with the example of the *Viva!* of Manuel Liñan.

Many colleagues of mine have mentioned that the films of Carlos Saura (Carmen, Bodas de Sangre etc) in the 80s inspired them to start dancing flamenco. What got me enchanted by flamenco was something different. My first sight on flamenco was not actually flamenco at all. I went to see a flamenco class, but what I saw was actually Sevillanas, a popular Andalusian folk dance. Sevillanas does involve the typical movement aesthetics of flamenco, but it is considered more part of Spanish folklore than pure flamenco. Flamenco is typically danced individually, but Sevillanas is danced in pairs. What I saw in my first encounter with flamenco, was the first two verses of this 4-verse dance, danced by these Finnish women, without arms (they had learnt only the steps in that point). And what stroke me was the joyful happy atmosphere of the group: the dancers were enjoying themselves and each other, dancing together and having fun.

Thus, what attracted me, and still what I enjoy the most, was the communication and interaction through music and dance, the shared experience and the sense of community. These features are of course always included in flamenco but are especially characteristics to the more cultural and folkloric side of flamenco that lives among people as a part of everyday life and social events in Spain. Finland lacks this cultural side of flamenco, and even though the interest is growing, still there are not that many flamenco musicians in the country, in my current hometown there are none. The moments when I feel that I get to experience something about that communal and interactive side, is when I dance sevillanas or in the flamenco gatherings mentioned in this article previously. When I get to work with flamenco musicians, I especially enjoy the rehearse period before the actual performance, when we get to communicate and play together through the common language of flamenco.

One big turning point in my flamenco journey happened 2006, when in addition to the dance classes of Yolanda Heredia, I started attending her *cante & compás* (song & rhythm) classes in Seville. The classes were directed to dancers to profound their understanding of the flamenco music. In class we aimed to do the *palmas* (clapping) and

thereby maintain the rhythm while singing. Doing the rhythm and singing the melody simultaneously, was challenging, but worthwhile and rewarding, as the same actions occur always while dancing flamenco. After succeeding to internalize the music and accompany my singing with my *palmas*, my dance started to evolve as I was more in home in the music. It was easier to execute complex rhythms with my feet, while my upper body was moving and expressing the “melody”.

According to the father of the concept grounding, Lowen (2006), “the upper part of the body moves freely with the melody and lower part with the rhythm” (as cited in Cristóbal, 2020, p. 252). This division is characteristic to flamenco dance, and I noticed that the same happens when singing and clapping. Both activities include producing melody and rhythm simultaneously, and in a similar way I experienced them equally grounding. It was as the music would manifest itself through my body, whether it was sitting on a stool and singing or dancing. My body, mind and soul were involved in a similar way. Our teacher Yolanda Heredia emphasized, that even though we are sitting when doing the *palmas*, the whole body is involved. My experience was, that singing and executing the rhythm with my hands was like a “pre-state” of dancing.

Flamenco is a very complex and challenging art form and understanding the music requires a lot of attention and concentration, especially in the beginning. My singing and rhythm studies helped me to relax, internalize the music instead of trying to chase the complex rhythms and accents. Being able to relax more in the rhythmic patterns of the music made room for other things such as self-expression, enjoyment, creativity and connecting with myself and the world around me while dancing.

Nowadays I feel that what keeps me grounded is flamenco. Even though being a Finn living in Finland, I have found my way to “live my flamenco”. It is a part of me and whenever I put my flamenco shoes on, turn on the metronome/music and start to train the footwork in the studio, I feel that I gradually start to connect with myself. To the present moment here and now, connected to the ground, feeling rooted. My flamenco practice strengthens me and supports my wellbeing and mental health and strengthens my self-esteem. The movements nurture me, recover my posture and mobilize my joints. I feel that I can at the same time be firm and strong and still enjoy and celebrate my femininity. Whenever I feel lost, I go to the studio, and after my dance training everything makes more sense again. I feel balanced, physically and emotionally. I feel more myself. Eventually I can’t imagine a greater reason or purpose to continue my path with flamenco. Hoping to deliver and pass on the richness of this art form in different pedagogical and therapeutic contexts.

## 5. Conclusion

This article presents therapeutic elements of flamenco through a bibliographical revision and an introspection of the author on these themes. The findings suggest that flamenco possesses several therapeutic components, as through this art form it is possible to process several themes connected to the mental and physical health, such as communication, self-expression, grounding, group cohesion, (gender-)identity, physical functionality, mood, self-esteem and general well-being.

Expressing the emotions through flamenco dance can support getting in touch with one's authentic self. The social aspect of flamenco and often utilized circular structure offers possibilities to interact with others and feel the sense of belonging. Working with rhythm provides structure and helps to organize possibly chaotic emotions and thoughts and be present in the "here and now". Being part of the same common rhythm with others offers a possibility to express oneself whilst communicating and feeling connected to the group.

Flamenco holds positive effects on the body as it improves balance, articular mobility, posture, general functionality and offers a motivational option to do aerobic exercise. Flamenco dance can be an effective tool in enhancing grounding which is especially beneficial to people with mental health problems. Flamenco clothing and accessories can support working on (gender-)identity, body identity and role issues, but are worth dealing respectfully and with consideration and delicacy due to the many meanings they hold concerning the cultural background of flamenco and the (gender-)identity of each person.

The results of this study provide hopefully beneficial resources and information on the potential of flamenco dance in pedagogic and therapeutic context and encourage collaborations between the flamenco professionals and DMTs. Thereby new possibilities would open for scientific research and studies on the topic.

The limitation of this study is the scarce amount of scientific literature and studies especially on the psychological effects of flamenco and the usage of flamenco in therapeutic context. Much of the information concerning flamenco is transmitted orally, which complicates the possibilities for bibliographical references. Future research on this topic could involve interviewing figures of flamenco dance and document their ideas and experiences on flamenco and its' therapeutic nature alongside with their methodologies on transmitting it in different contexts.

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