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The choreography of oppression: An embodied dimension. A pilot study on the mental and somatic imprint of police oppression

Maria-Paraskevi Pynirtzi

Margaret Hills de Zarate (tutor)

Master in Dance Movement Therapy

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

Abstract

This pilot study is a qualitative research that explores the oppressive police practices and their impact on mental health and somatic experiences among individuals who have been subjected to such oppression in Greece. Five activists who expressed their willingness to explore their experiences of police oppression, were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview to share their embodied lived experience. All the research is imbued with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and the results were approached and analysed through these lenses, leading to the unfolding of three main themes consisting of several sub-themes. This research contributes valuable insights into the mechanisms through which police oppression is enacted, underscores the necessity of recognizing this systemic phenomenon as a significant factor which influences mental health and offers an embodied dimension to it. In conclusion, I present some reflective thoughts on how Dance Movement Therapy can serve as a potential framework for addressing and engaging with this issue.

Keywords: Police, oppression, embodiment, mental health, Dance Movement Therapy

Περίληψη

Αυτή η πιλοτική μελέτη είναι μια ποιοτική έρευνα που διερευνά τις καταπιεστικές αστυνομικές πρακτικές, τον αντίκτυπο τους στην ψυχική υγεία και τις σωματικές εμπειρίες μεταξύ των ατόμων που έχουν δεχτεί σε τέτοια καταπίεση στην Ελλάδα. Πέντε ακτιβιστές που εξέφρασαν την προθυμία τους να εξερευνήσουν τις δικές τους εμπειρίες αστυνομικής καταπίεσης, κλήθηκαν να συμμετάσχουν σε μια ημιδομημένη συνέντευξη με σκοπό να μοιραστούν την ενσώματη εμπειρία τους. Όλη η έρευνα είναι διαποτισμένη με τις αρχές της Ερμηνευτικής Φαινομενολογικής Ανάλυσης και τα αποτελέσματα προσεγγίστηκαν και αναλύθηκαν μέσα από το πρίσμα της, οδηγώντας στην δημιουργία τριών κύριων θεμάτων που αποτελούνται από πολλά υποθέματα. Αυτή η έρευνα συνεισφέρει πολύτιμες γνώσεις αναφορικά με τους μηχανισμούς μέσω των οποίων ασκείται η αστυνομική καταστολή, υπογραμμίζει την αναγκαιότητα αναγνώρισης αυτού του συστημικού φαινομένου ως σημαντικού παράγοντα επίδρασης στην ψυχική υγεία και προσφέρει μια ενσώματη διάσταση σε αυτήν. Συμπερασματικά, παρουσιάζω μερικές αναστοχαστικές σκέψεις για το πώς η Χοροθεραπεία μπορεί να πλαισιώσει αυτό το ζήτημα και να δουλέψει με αυτό.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: Αστυνομία, καταπίεση, ενσωμάτωση, ψυχική υγεία, χοροθεραπεία

Introduction

This pilot study derives from the perception of myself less as an individual and more as a social and relational being existing and interacting in and within systems that enact institutionalized oppression. In my work as a psychologist, I am questioning the dominant psychological norms, the sociopolitical system and I advocate for social justice addressing intersectional oppression issues. It is exactly this critical perspective that led me to the question of how the oppression enacted specifically by the institution of police force as part of the greek sociopolitical system is impacting our mental health. Later, whilst being a trainee of Dance Movement Therapy (DMT), I started integrating more the body dimension, observing my own living body and developed an interest in how we embody that oppression, including how the police are influencing our movements, while noticing at the same time that the body is oftenly unaddressed in psychology. This lack of attention works in tandem with the common tendency to disregard the body as a crucial source of social understanding, thereby reinforcing our embodied interactions as a central point for implicit social regulation (Johnson, 2009).

The emergence of social sciences, focused on social theories and the relationship between society and individuals. The individual, though, was perceived as disembodied for many years. The politicization of the body revolves around its role as an intersection between private and public realms, as well as its representation through the actions of institutional politics, specifically those carried out by governments or states (Pourkos, 2017). According to Foucault (1979), our bodies, movements and body positions are ideologically charged actions and are subject to constant monitoring by society and the institution of the state. He designated the body as the site of creation, constitution and consolidation of the subjectivity of individuals.

Choreopoliice and Choreopoliicing

Foucault's (1979) and Rancière's work (as cited in Lepecki, 2013) assert that the police, by monitoring individual's bodies and movement, choreographing their actions, and determining the routes they follow and the spaces they occupy, ensure conformity. Police disperse the crowd, break the pathways, intervene wherever political protests arise, aiming to suppress initiatives and dictate the "appropriate" courses of action for demonstrators. In the context of a protest but not only, the primary role of the police is to serve as regulators of movement (Lepecki, 2013). Drawing on the works of Foucault, Rancière and Arendt, Lepecki (2013) introduced the concept of "choreopoliice" to describe the police's efforts to regulate human movement in ways that divert it from the pursuit of freedom. The notion of "choreopoliicing" integrates the elements of movement, its political dimensions, and the concept of freedom, building on Arendt's understanding of politics as ontologically tied to freedom. This concept critically interrogates the extent to which our movements and consequently our political agency—remain free under systems that confine and monitor them.

Greek context

At this point, it will be of a significance to depict an image of the Greek police and their role. Firstly, it's worth mentioning that the current body of police force is partly derived from the old so-called *Gendarmerie* or *Chorofylaki* which is quite interesting due to its meaning of guarding the space (CPA Law, 2018). After the fall of military dictatorship in 1974, Greece underwent a period of political and institutional reform known as *Metapolitefsi* during which the police force which was heavily militarized, was under pressure to become more democratic. However allegations for residual authoritarian tendencies persisted. Numerous allegations of police brutality and insufficient accountability mechanisms came to the surface over the following

years, leading to the murder of 15 years old Alexandros Grigoropoulos by a police officer in December 2008. The murder sparked episodes and a wave of riots and protests around Greece, exposing the systemic issues within the police force, the excessive violence, the insufficient training they receive, the corruption and a growing lack of public trust (Amnesty International, 2012). Greece right now ranks as the EU country with the second highest number of police officers per capita and faces long standing issues of police violence, human right abuses and insufficient accountability particularly concerning the treatment of minorities and political dissidents. Following the election of the New Democracy government in 2019, which emphasized a law and order agenda, the size, responsibilities and funding of the police force have significantly expanded, paralleling an increase in violent incidents (King, 2022).

The magnitude and depth of this systemic issue are not recognized by the Greek authorities, who accept the presence of human rights violations by police force but categorize them as isolated incidents. Through tolerance, the state seems not only to sustain this issue but also to promote it implicitly and put the rule of law in the country into risk. Consequently, in everyday life, police officers make crude remarks, sexist comments, whistle, block the routes, carry out unnecessary body controls and make gestures mainly at femininities and LGBTQIA individuals but also to everyone that happens to walk alongside them without fear that there will be any repercussions. Some police officers' perceptions are revealed by the sexist traits shown in this type of "everyday" verbal aggression, and oppression which occasionally involves physical violence and restriction of movement. These perceptions then portray the act as the foundation for more serious criminal crimes, actions or inactions on the part of themselves or their coworker (De Vylder et al., 2020; Gousetis, 2024). Only in 2020, there were approximately 18,500 allegations for human rights violations against Greek police (Gousetis, 2024).

Embodied oppression

Oppression can be embodied and leave a somatic imprint. Oppression is a multifaceted and multidimensional system. It is the systematic and institutional misuse of power by one group at the expense of another, together with the use of force to uphold this dynamic. The idea that certain groups are superior and others are inferior forms the foundation of an oppressive regime (Colorado Funders for Inclusiveness and Equity, 2010). Inequality systems operate in internalized, institutional and interpersonal spheres to allocate privileges to some people while marginalizing others. Oppression works as this mechanism that maintains unjust social structures. People whose identities might diverge from the norms, are perceived as a threat and challenge to the dominant elites so oppression aims at controlling them and at enforcing powerlessness through shaming (Icarus Project, 2015). Johnson (2009), pointed out that oppression is a deeply embedded aspect of social and political life, learned implicitly and relationally through everyday experiences and that the body serves as a central point where intersecting identities and systems of power are negotiated and expressed. According to Frye (1997) it is an action of pressing down on someone and that can include physical and movement control and restriction (as cited in Karcher & Caldwell, 2014). Another, less commonly recognized aspect of oppression as Henley (1977) mentioned, is its ability to manifest through non-verbal interactions between individuals. This can include actions such as occupying more physical space, using gestures to assert dominance, employing specific facial expressions, or modulating tone and volume of voice to exert control (as cited in Karcher & Caldwell, 2014).

Oppression inherently possesses an embodied dimension. Koch and Fuchs (2011) in their work, they presented a definition for embodiment.

Embodiment denominates a field of research in which the reciprocal influence of the body as a living, animate, moving organism on the one side and cognition, emotion, perception, and action on the other side is investigated with respect to expressive and impressive functions on the individual, interactional, and extended levels (Koch & Fuchs, 2011, p. 276).

Merleau Ponty (1962), with his work into phenomenology challenged the Cartesian dualism and integrated the dimension of embodiment, emphasizing the integral role of the body in shaping human experience. For him, the consciousness, the body and the world are deeply interconnected and co-constitutive. External perceptions directly influence internal experiences, as shifts in physical posture or musculature can alter emotional states. Central to his philosophy as well is the concept of intercorporeality, which underlines the deeply interconnected nature of human existence. According to his perspective, contact with other lived bodies is necessary in order for someone to become fully embodied and individuals are both shaped by and contribute to a shared relational field.

As for the somatic imprint of oppression, Caldwell and Leighton (2018) have referred to it in their project claiming oppression as traumatic. They highlight that growing evidence indicates that continuous oppression increases the individuals vulnerability to experiencing trauma symptoms like post-traumatic stress symptoms and body dissociation. Furthermore, Johnson (2009), through their study examining the lived and embodied experiences of oppressed individuals, proposed that oppression as well leaves a somatic imprint. The study's participants described experiences of somatic vigilance and a sense of disconnection from their bodies, while also highlighting challenges related to body boundaries, body language, and the impact of trauma.

Current study and Dance Movement Therapy

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the oppressive behaviors of the police, how those who have experienced police oppression embody it, and how this has affected their mental health in observable ways. Unfortunately, during my review research, I identified a lack of bibliography around this topic, specifically of research around DMT and police oppression. However there is a thesis which focuses on the field's historical background and highlights that DMT techniques and methods can address trauma brought on by experiences of oppression, create a path for investigation of oppressive systems and be used as tools for personal development which can foster a collective action that can lead to social change (Pope, 2024). Another study examines past traumas, such as police brutality against Black people, the impact they have on mental health fields and the application of certain DMT techniques. This culminates in the proposal of a model that enables an examination of how oppression manifests within the body and it encourages reflection of one's privileges and systemic inequalities through embodied awareness (Jorden, 2020).

Methodology

In this pilot study, since my intention was to conduct research about the personal experiences of people affected by police oppression, I chose to turn to qualitative methodology because its interest focuses more on the quality and texture of an experience and less on exploring correlational or cause-and-effect relationships between two factors (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The results of the survey were analysed on the basis of the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is also an epistemological position that inspires and guides the entire research process, starting from the formulation of the research question, defining the method of data generation and the analysis of them. IPA was "built" on the already existing existing fundamental principles of hermeneutics, phenomenology and the Kantian concept of idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) and it aims to understand in depth a field but through a more personal, individual pathway and reality, where subjects' stories are heard in detail (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). What will ultimately emerge as a conclusion from these stories is preferably not to be predetermined, as it is a method that is quite flexible and open to the unexpected (Smith, 2004).

For the selection of participants, the technique of avalanche was used. Given the potentially sensitive and activating nature of the topic, this familiarity facilitated the ethical process of informed consent by providing participants with a clearer understanding of what their participation would entail. All participants are between 20 and 30 years of age, three identify as white cisgender women while two identify as white cisgender men, three are from Greece, one is from Ireland and another one is from Germany. All either currently reside in Athens or have lived there in the past, identify as activists, have experienced police oppression, and willingly expressed their interest in reflecting on these experiences through an embodied perspective.

I formed two research questions: (a) how do police deploy oppression and (b) how is that oppression embodied by the participants and which is its mental imprint. I did five semi-structured interviews which consisted of non-directive questions in order to achieve a more spontaneous unfolding of the participant's experience. The choice of semi-structured interview as a method of data collection was made after exploring and examining the ontological and epistemological principles of the methodological framework I chose to follow. The reason for its choice was that it has a more flexible flow, it allows me as a researcher to engage in an interactive relationship with the participants, understanding their experience and examining their interpretations and feelings about it (Hermanowicz, 2002).

Adhering to the procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), after the transcription of the interviews and the translation in english, I conducted a detailed coding of each individual interview, which facilitated the identification of themes specific to each one. These initial themes were then synthesized to develop overarching themes and corresponding sub-themes. Ultimately, three primary themes were identified, each consisting of several sub-themes linked to the two research questions. The main themes are as follows: (a) control and violence from the side of police (b) the invasion of psychological space (c) the restricted and fortified body. All of them are followed by several sub-themes. The code given to each participant is indicated in the quote. Last but not least, during the whole process I tried to be reflective of my personal experiences and my background. The concept of reflexivity in research pertains to the self-aware examination of the intersubjective dynamics between the researcher and the participants (Finlay & Cough, 2008). To reduce individual bias and strengthen the study's validity and credibility, I involved another psychotherapist and researcher

in the data analysis and I protected the participants' data by eliminating any personal information which could be identified through them and substituting their names with codes.

Results

Control and Violence from the side of police

The first emergent theme pertains to the mechanisms through which the police exert control and enact violence. This overarching theme is further delineated into four distinct sub-themes: (a) the paradox, (b) the role of the director, (c) their violent role and (d) surveillance. The majority of participants highlighted a perceived paradox in police function. In particular, they noted that police practices frequently inspire sentiments of fear and insecurity rather than safety and security. As P02 mentions *“The police face immunity from this, they keep doing the same. Policemen can do the same thing every night of the week. So when the police are the ones that are violent and not the people, it makes me feel unsafe instead of safe.”* while P03 adds that *“You feel somewhat hostile from their presence. Somehow you feel an insecurity from the opposite of what they offer”*. Another participant of the study (P01), underlines one tactic that police are using to generate fear: *“And then while living more in Athens, like seeing them on their motorcycles, going around the city always like trying to make people scared. Like they would appear suddenly on their motorcycles, and people would look around and would notice their presence everywhere all the time, like they could always appear at any time[...] I think they're there to show their presence and to make the feeling like you are being watched all the time, like every step you do is what must be done exactly.”*

In relation to the role of the police as directors, participants described how law enforcement exerts control over their movements and the spaces in which they are permitted to move, either

through verbal or non verbal indications. P01 notes that the police, through their physical positioning or through an indirect subtle way, can effectively block or restrict a passage, thereby controlling movement: *“They were just standing there, not letting you pass, or by creating fear, they would make me not wanting to pass because I do not feel safe”*. P03 discloses: *“I feel a lack of free movement, as I choose my routes not based on free will but on their presence. They determine my paths through the city. They can tell me where to go, where not to”*. Especially during covid P04 remembers: *“they had every right to ask you where you were going and what you were doing and to give you a fine or tell you to go home, while they could go out”*. Apart from controlling movements, they can control the space or the connections as P02 mentions: *“Claustrophobia is what I feel with them in the city, you feel like you have no space, they are there holding their guns or batons. Police is purely there to intimidate, to break up the social neighborhoods, the communities and in a way our connections”*.

Regarding the third subtheme, which addresses the violent behavior exhibited by the police, participants reported that this can involve both verbal and non-verbal forms of harassment. P02 specifically emphasizes, *“It's just a show of absolute authority in the city. They look like they're eager to fight. They're eager to serve people with violence. They use different tactics to scare and to make people obedient to their desires, like strategically placed on corners and patrols around the neighborhood in full body armor. They harass people, targeting specific people that they think are different or weird or shouldn't belong there”* with P03 adding that *“...with their violent behavior, standing around the city, harassing people, seems like they have the absolute authority over everything “* which leads to an *“innate insecurity that something might happen at any time, like I have to be in an alert state constantly”* (P02). Two more participants mention incidents of verbal harassment that include catcalling: *“more than one policeman catcalled me.*

I felt very uncomfortable” (P01) and whistling: “they have whistled at me and talk to me rudely” (P04).

In addition, participants highlighted police monitoring as another oppressive tool, stressing how it serves to maintain order and social control, generate fear and ultimately suppress dissent or resistance. P02 mentions: *“In the way that they occupy the space, like blocking off corners, watching you, protecting people depending on what they look like, what the skin color, if they're wearing black, if they have bandanas, bags, whatever, that makes you feel very unsafe”*. At times, surveillance is conducted through physical control, which particularly P04, perceive as a violation of personal boundaries, noting: *“Because they threw our stuff, bags and so on, I was thinking that no one else has the right to violate, but they do. They can do it, check you, whenever they want and however they want”*. These tactics according to P05 are perceived as *“micromanagement”* and serve not only *“to keep as many groups as possible cohesive”* but also to *“be aware that there is surveillance somewhere, in some corner and it doesn't matter if you go downtown to riot. It's important to see them in the corner so you know what you potentially can't do”*.

The invasion of psychological space

The second theme identified through the analysis is related to the mental health impact of police oppression on the participants and consists of three sub-themes : (a) the lack of sense of safety, (b) the anxiety and (c) the lack of sense of self-agency. Most of the participants mentioned a sense of fear and a lack of safety with P01 stating: *“In Athens, when I went to the protest, I was not scared to protest, but to encounter with the police and from that part, I think I noticed that it's really restricting me where I can go, where I feel safe “*. The pervasive feeling of insecurity is still deeply ingrained within her as P03 notes: *“There are remnants of that*

experience and in my everyday life. The part about feeling insecure". P04 observed that the fear and the lack of safety she feels are manifested through the thought of encountering the police, because "Encountering them is always a possibility for beating, arrest and a long healing of mental and physical wounds".

Continuing with the impact on mental health, participants also reported experiencing a general sense of anxiety with P04 even describing more severe manifestations such as panic attacks. P01 describes that: *"I would get anxiety reminding me of the sexual assault. I would not get help from police, if something would happen to me, I couldn't trust them and especially with the case of I think 1 or 2 women who were raped by police in Exarchia two years ago... they have more power in that sense".* Somatic symptoms of anxiety were also reported by P02 as a consequence of police oppression: *"I feel anxiety in the chest like a heavy weight that's there, along with like a sensation in my spine".*

Some participants discussed the issue of self-agency, reflecting on how much control they possess over their feelings and behaviors and questioning to which extent police support or undermine this sense of control. P05 specifically mentions: *"Today I am a person that does not go out much outside of his house. There was once the ability to exist in space, in public space, as I wanted, as I am, but after thirteen years, I question this term of learned incapacity, where it has become so embedded that I no longer know whether it is my choice that I stay so much at home or whether it is learned conformity because of the possibility of a violent act from police. But I think it pretty much is. This is what Foucault says with the surveillance, with the cyberpolitics of that type. He says that they are not always going to beat you up, but they will teach you somehow with constant surveillance and the possibility of punishment. And to what point are we potentially willing to forget who we are in order to convince ourselves that we are*

not oppressed? ”. Moreover, P04 speaks about the sense of loss of free movement and of a liberated body: “The choice of how I move around is not that free. That's why I think I said before that not having police would be very liberating in many ways and physically”.

The restricted and fortified body

The final theme explores the imprint of police oppression on the bodies of the participants. Many of them reported experiencing tension, fear, restriction, closure and alienation from their bodies. This theme is divided in three sub-themes: (a) somatic surveillance, (b) the personal kinesphere and (c) the body dissociation. Starting with somatic surveillance participants noticed conscious or unconscious regulation and monitoring of their bodily behavior, posture and movement in response to police presence. P01 states: *“if they would come address me from the front, I would look down on the street or turn around because I don't want to cross them ”.*

Another participant describes experiencing stiffness and rigidity in his movements and posture, perceiving these physical responses as an involuntary expression of submission in the presence of police, something that is echoing through his everyday life: *“And I notice that I cycle in the city, trying to focus straight ahead or down and try not to look left or right of me, or sideward up as if I wanted to avoid a conflict and become rigid and stiff as if I am ashamed of myself when I keep walking. It shows submission, I don't know, I feel like that's what they want to exert their dominance over me, to my body”* (P02). He further describes an alteration in his self-expression so as to minimize any perceived risks in his interaction with the police: *“So when I walk by them, I would say that I don't feel myself, I feel like I'm trying to be somebody that they want me to be so as not to be a threat, like I have to put on a show just for 10 seconds 20 seconds and I don't feel even comfortable with the costume changes. I just go silent. And that's what I feel like. They are intimidating. I lose control of my characteristics, my emotions”.* P05

mentions similar experiences of modifying his movements in an effort to avoid being perceived as a threat: *“So I have to restrain myself 24/7. Any movement of mine or any attitude of mine can cause police repression”*.

Following the next sub-theme, two participants noticed an effect on their personal kinesphere describing how their sense of physical space and freedom of movement has become restrained. P05 describes: *“I shield myself in order to protect, I shrink because I can't express myself as I want, neither verbally nor physically. I feel like my body is a stone. All my muscles are tense. All the time. It's like you have a certain extension of the body and then this extension becomes much shorter, it shortens, it shrinks in. All your muscles contract”*. Moreover, P01 recounts a similar experience, describing an attempt to fortify her body and create a sense of protective shelter: *“I would make myself small, I tried to go out of their sight and make myself not presented and I would do the same motion, like I tried to save myself through closing my body. I noticed mostly my head and my shoulders because for me this is a good point that is like a tent going around you”*.

Participants also shared experiences of embodied dissociation during the interview, describing moments of alienation from their bodies as a somatic imprint of police oppression. P02 recalls: *“There are moments that I am not there, I am not habitating my body”*, P04 shares same experiences: *“So many times I recall them in my memory, I experience them as if I was filming them from somewhere with a tape, as if there is a disconnection from my body in that moment”*. P05 also reflects on similar experiences: *“But this was also my fear, to detach from my body, from my desires up until the point I reached that I was not reacting, I was not even going down to the protests sometimes. The fear of oppression”*.

Discussion

The aim of this pilot study was to give voice to unheard voices and hear the stories of lived experiences of embodied oppression stemming from police practices, as well as to examine its psychological and somatic impacts. Participants shared very interesting insights into the mechanisms of police oppression in Greece, the psychological challenges they endure as a result and the ways in which they physically embody this oppression. The findings of this pilot study hold valuable implications especially for dance movement therapists, as the body plays a central role in addressing the impact of police oppression and as Cantrick et al. (2008) emphasized, the body serves as the locus of marginalization with oppression experienced and expressed through embodied processes.

The results of the first theme capture how the participants perceive the role of police and the ways that oppressive practices are enacted. They highlighted experience of control, surveillance, discrimination and violence, alongside a skepticism regarding the fundamental role of the police as protectors. Individuals expressed that rather than feeling protected, they often felt targeted or scrutinized. Some of them even mentioned experiences of verbal harassment and invasion of their personal space. They generally spoke of an absolute power law enforcement system that functions with impunity by the government. These findings align with the work of DeVylder, Fedina, and Link (2020), who argued that police violence occurs within an institutional framework designed by organizational culture which enhances a code of silence surrounding abusive behaviors from police. Police violence and control is a systemic phenomenon that contributes significantly to the decomposition of public trust (Gousetis, 2024). This type of oppression is sanctioned and has historically been tied to the maintenance of social hierarchies,

social cohesion and the discipline of the public as Foucault has mentioned (1979), a sentiment that echoes in participant's reflections as well. They mentioned that police not only exert oppression on a personal level but also on a broader socio-political one, with efforts seemingly aimed at dismantling the social net of their community.

Participants also reflected on another form of police oppression that operates in a more implicit and subtle way, the choreographic control or the role of police as a director of movement, that Lepecki (2013) called *choreopolicing*. This concept emphasizes the embodied nature of oppression, wherein authority is asserted through the gestures, patrolling and postures, effectively influencing how individuals occupy and navigate spaces leading to the restriction of participant's free movement and the disruption of collective actions. Overall, their narratives suggest that oppressive policing practices contribute to a pervasive atmosphere of fear, mistrust and vigilance, which can have long-term effects on their mental health.

The findings from the second theme clearly illustrate the psychological impact of police oppression as experienced by the participants of this study. They reported pervasive feelings of unsafety, fear and anxiety as a result of their encounters with police that persist and follow them throughout various aspects of their lives. Moreover, two of them mentioned a lack of self-agency and personal control over their choices or their body, while simultaneously reflecting to what extent police surveillance as an oppressive form, has deprived them of their freedom. The mental health effects of police oppression often remain invisible, yet they can be profoundly impactful (DeVylder et al., 2020). Communities subjected to police brutality often face significant long term challenges including depression, anxiety, fear and anger (Ford et al., 2012). Caldwell and Leighton (2018) emphasized that a continuous body of research demonstrated how oppression occurring at an institutional, interpersonal and cultural level,

make people more vulnerable to trauma symptomatology and that people exposed to persistent stressors can exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms.

In the following and last theme concerning the somatic imprint, participants described how their encounters with police oppression left tangible imprints on their bodies. Burstow (2003) associated trauma with oppression emphasizing the inherent physicality of trauma even in the absence of overt bodily harm, adding that oppression can be understood as traumatic and can lead to a degree of alienation from the body. Some participants of the research, while recounting how they embody police oppression, described experiences of body dissociation, a sense of detachment from themselves, as if they were not habiting their bodies. Moreover, they mentioned a feeling of somatic surveillance, a constant need to adjust their physical behavior in public spaces in front of police, so they will not be perceived as a threat. Adjustments included alteration of their posture, their movements and their behavior in order to minimize the risk. Two of them perceived as well changes in their personal kinesphere, describing how they consciously shrank it as a way of self-protection. These narratives align with research on traumatology which suggests that individuals facing chronic external threats often adopt physical postures that convey self-protection and withdrawal (Van der Kolk, 1994). The shrinking of personal kinesphere is also aligning with the work of Angeletti (2016) who has highlighted that when individuals experience distrust or discomfort in an environment perceived unsafe, their kinesphere tends to shrink, causing the body to contract inward (as cited in Boix & Panhofer, 2024). The results concerning the embodied dimension of police oppression, are consistent with Johnson's (2009) research, which examined how individuals embody oppressive social conditions and discovered connections between oppression, trauma and its somatic

manifestation. Johnson's study narratives include a range of somatic effects such as somatic vigilance, body image, issues of mobility and experiences of body alienation.

The results of that pilot study indicate that participants' bodies have become sites where police oppression is both experienced and recalled. They highlight the need for an anti-oppressive approach and social justice informed approach to address the mental health needs of the individuals affected by police oppression. DMT can provide a potential framework for addressing this psychological and somatic impact. Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) is defined by the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA, 2013), "The psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual, for the purpose of improving the health and well-being". DMT emphasizes the experiential process of sensing movement and the body and exploring the meaning embedded within it as Fischman (2009) has mentioned. Consequently, it can help people develop greater awareness of their bodies and reclaim bodily authority and agency within their lived experiences of oppression (Caldwell & Leighton, 2018). Research in DMT has shown as well that movement-based interventions can help individuals process their experiences by reconnecting with their bodies, releasing stored tension, and fostering emotional expression in a safe environment. By focusing on non-verbal communication and bodily awareness, DMT offers an alternative pathway for individuals who may struggle to express verbally (Meekums, 2006).

Another interesting approach is that of critical psychology which has objected to the common psychotherapeutic approach of helping people adjust to an unfulfilling world. It advocates for addressing societal issues within the field of psychotherapy, recognizing their role in contributing to existing problems and difficulties. Rather than focusing on "fixing" an individual body, it proposes challenging the body system (Fox et al., 2009). As a DMT trainee, I

would also like to add that it is critical that we recognize our own prejudices and our roles as therapists within hierarchical power structures. Also, as Timothy and Garcia (2020) mentions, an anti-oppression psychotherapy can place a strong emphasis on developing resilience in clients while at the same it identifies and recapitulates tactics to combat all types of intersectional violence.

Limitations and proposal for future studies

Through this pilot study, I tried to highlight the impact of police oppression on mental health and attribute as well an embodied dimension to that impact through the narratives of individuals who have been subjected to police oppression in Greece. However, as I mentioned above, the therapeutic framework is not isolated from the broader socio-political environment, which in this case is the Greek one. A first limitation, therefore, may be the fact that despite this framework, most of the analysis was not carried out in the light of the Greek bibliography, as it is incomplete, resulting in the lack of available material to carry out my review comprehensively.

Additionally, while the research sample is small (five individuals), generalization of the results is not a primary goal of qualitative research. Rather, it focuses on highlighting the diversity of individual experiences and on a meaningful engagement with them. The present study, based on the principles of phenomenology regarding the intersubjectivity of each human situation, sought the unique characteristics of each experience. Although the participants of this study have different identities concerning gender, sexuality and race, the research did not focus on the association of these identities with embodied police oppression. Future research could explore the intersectionality of identities and its relationship with police oppression and the impact of it.

What is more, other future studies could focus on developing specific tools derived from the context of dance movement therapy to work with individuals with these experiences.

In conclusion, my subjective position derived from my identities and my political ideology and my own experience of police oppression, are those which have led me to constantly question power structures and the dominant order and they could be seen as a limitation in the analysis of

the data. However, I believe that it is precisely these positions and experiences that created the desire and passion to engage with this study with undiminished interest.

Conclusion

This pilot study offers valuable insights about police oppressive practices in Greece, places the body in the center by acknowledging the sociopolitical dimension of embodiment and implies the urgent need to address what often goes unspoken, that systemic phenomena like the police oppression which perpetuates a system of dominance, control and exclusion, can impact our mental health. It is important to underline at this point that this thesis was written during a period for Greece where the repression and violence from police officers continue and multiply targeting anyone who is trying to resist and raise their voice, spirit and body.

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