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Myth #4: It's okay to heal me with contact improv - Contact Improvisation Blog

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4–6 minutes

Sometimes, by dancing contact improvisation, we encounter and expose parts of ourselves that we usually keep guarded. We can find ourselves opening up in the presence of our dance partners, and because touch has the capacity to unwind emotions and traumas stored in the body, this can be quite profound, even healing.

Also, because dancing CI has the capacity to build attunement and empathy on physical levels, it can have healing effects on how we relate with others: it can positively shift how we move through the world.

I say this because I don't want to negate the idea that people experience healing through CI.

However.

Sometimes people use CI to intentionally evoke a healing experience for a dance partner, and this can be not only invasive behavior, but also part of sexually predatory dynamics in CI.

What do I mean by intentionally evoking a healing experience?

Sometimes I see people dancing in ways that appear to revolve around their dance partner having a healing experience. This often includes using certain kinds of touch, rhythms, and social dynamics, for example:

- Placing and keeping your hand over a dance partner's heart
- Using touch to specifically address a vulnerability or wound that you perceive in a dance partner (it could be physical, emotional, or energetic)
- Pressing "third eyes" against each other
- Elongated cradling
- Overly-tender dances
- Dances with the dynamic of one person being soothed by the other
- Dances with the dynamic of one person being driven into a cathartic emotional state

Over the years, I have observed these forms of touch etc. as part of a trajectory of manipulative behaviors, sexual coercion, and/or the grooming of sexual partners.

The story goes a bit like this:

1. CI dancer elicits a cathartic experience for their dance partner
2. Dance partner becomes vulnerable, emotionally open, even attached to their dance partner
3. Dance partners spend a lot of time processing these emotions (either verbally or nonverbally)
4. Emotional bonds lead to sexual connection

In short, these forms of touch, though obviously they aren't always problematic, can generate conditions in which consenting to sexual relationships is more difficult, because they establish unequal power dynamics.

What's problematic about power dynamics?

A healer/healed power dynamic can lead to a loss of personal empowerment for the dancer being healed, who could experience:

- Feeling a sense of indebtedness toward a dance partner for having "helped" them
- Feeling a sense of attachment toward a dance partner for having "seen" them
- Feeling a sense of closeness toward a dance partner for having "accompanied" them
- Etc.

These feelings create an emotional climate in which saying "no" to expressions of sexual or romantic interest is more complicated.

Over the years, I have observed individuals repeatedly having these kinds of dances (year after year, in festivals, jams, etc.) resulting in sexual/romantic encounters. I consider this predatory because:

- Generating a healer/healed power dynamic is one of the many ways by which I've observed more experienced dancers in CI approach, single out, isolate, and sexualize newcomers (usually beginning level, young, conventionally attractive female dancers).
- Engineering opportunities to establish emotional bonds with dance partners in order to have sex is coercive/grooming behavior
- Creating an unequal power dynamic in order to have sex is unethical.

In conclusion, one of the ways that unethical sexuality presents itself in CI is through dances that have a dynamic of someone healing another person. I think it's important to mention this because historically, CI culture has propagated the idea that we can't discern sexually problematic behavior, saying that somehow CI is too magical and subjective. This is a false notion. Many predatory behaviors that happen in CI are akin to predatory behaviors that happen in other contexts, and if

we are informed and sensitized about consent culture, we see them.

It's important to demystify CI, to stop pretending that every dance is an entirely unique experience, to stop ignoring patterns of abuse that exist within our community. And most importantly, it's important that we take responsibility for our own actions, that we reflect upon our motives, and hold ourselves accountable to higher standards of sexually ethical behavior.