

**Women in Midlife:
Experiences of the Mind and Body Movement of Nia**

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Abstract

A new form of exercise called Neuromuscular Integrative Action (Rosas & Rosas, 2004), known as Nia, has been added to the mind and body paradigm. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of eight midlife women who have integrated the mind and body movement of Nia into their lives and to query its potential for counsellors to consider, as an adjunctive therapeutic means to aid in managing and enhancing greater well-being. The women's narratives revealed: 1) reflections through time 2) the body's wisdom ~ the body's movement 3) transforming relationships, and 4) living well-being in midlife spaces. An overarching theme of how the revisioning of self-identity of midlife women practicing Nia leads to a sense of wellness through reconstructions of the reflective self, the connected self, the authentic self, and the contextualized self and considerations related to aligning social identity with well-being are discussed.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Tables.....	vi
Acknowledgement.....	vii
CHAPTER ONE – Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Research Questions.....	3
Purpose of the Study.....	4
How I Identify with the Research Topic.....	4
Clarification of Terms.....	5
Midlife.....	5
Holistic-Mind and Body Approach.....	6
Nia.....	6
Well-Being.....	8
CHAPTER TWO – Review of the Literature.....	10
Nia.....	12
Women in Midlife.....	16
Body Therapies.....	22
Feldenkrais Method.....	25
Bioenergetics.....	29
Dance Movement Therapy.....	31
CHAPTER THREE – Methodology.....	38
The Meaning of Hermeneutics.....	39
The History of Hermeneutics.....	39
Phenomenology.....	40
Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Heidegger.....	42
Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Gadamer.....	43
Rational for My Choice of Methodology.....	44
Procedures.....	45
Hermeneutic Guideline.....	45
Ethics Committee Approval.....	46
Recruitment and Selection Process.....	46
Participant’s Characteristics.....	48
Journal Writing.....	48
Interview Process.....	49
Analyzing the Data.....	51
Audio-Tapes.....	52

Journal Entries.....	54
The Writing.....	54
Rigour in Qualitative Research.....	55
Credibility.....	55
Fittingness.....	56
Audibility.....	57
Confirmability.....	58
Ethic Considerations.....	58
Limitations.....	60
 CHAPTER FOUR – Connecting the Experience of Nia to Midlife Women	
through Time.....	63
Stories of the Past.....	63
Childhood Stories.....	63
Shifting Stories.....	69
Tragic Stories.....	73
Living in the Moment.....	77
Future Glimpses.....	84
 CHAPTER FIVE – Awakening at Midlife towards a Deeper Understanding:	
Nia and the Body.....	92
Being Body ~ Listening Body.....	93
Music ~ Movement ~ Emotions.....	101
Energetic Connections ~ Spiritual Connections.....	106
 CHAPTER SIX – Midlife Women Transforming through the Experience of Nia:	
The Interpretation of Relationship.....	113
Self-Discover ~ Self-Acceptance.....	115
Self-Expression ~ Self-Care.....	120
Compassionate Responses.....	125
 CHAPTER SEVEN – The Experience of Nia with Midlife Women:	
A Sense of Space.....	131
A Welcoming and Safe Space.....	132
Making Connections with Other Women.....	135
Well-Being in Midlife ~ Lived as a Lifestyle.....	139
 CHAPTER EIGHT – Enhancing Well-Being during Midlife through Nia:	
Revisioning Self-Identity.....	149
Creating a Sense of Wellness.....	149
The Reflective Self.....	151
The Connected Self.....	154
The Authentic Self.....	158
The Contextualized Self.....	164
Aligning Social Identity with Well-Being.....	167
Myself as the Researcher.....	171

Informing Counselling Practice.....	174
Future Research Considerations.....	182
References.....	186
Appendices.....	200
Appendix A: Facility Access Request.....	200
Appendix B: Instructor Access Request.....	201
Appendix C: Information Sheet.....	202
Appendix D: Poster Advertisement.....	204
Appendix E: Pre-Interview Questions for Participant Selection.....	205
Appendix F: Journal Questions.....	206
Appendix G: Informed Consent Form.....	207
Appendix H: Demographic Information Sheet.....	208
Appendix I: Participant Contact Information Sheet.....	209
Appendix J: Interview Questions.....	210

List of Tables

1. Nine Movement Forms of Nia.....	7
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Mind and body exercise programs continue to increase in popularity as a way to manage with life stressors and enhance well-being. Traditionally, Eastern forms of physical activity such as t'ai chi, tae kwan do, aikido, and yoga have been referred to as mind and body exercise. Likewise, Alexander technique and the Feldenkrais method, both originating in the west, are known as mind and body approaches. A common thread that exists between these 'holistic' mind and body movement forms is that they emphasize mindfulness, an awareness that is internally directed toward the self (La Forge, 2005).

Over the past 20 years, a new form of exercise called Neuromuscular Integrative Action (Rosas & Rosas, 2004), also known as Nia, has been added to the mind and body paradigm. Nia has been described as a 'holistic' or mind and body fitness program integrating the physicality of movement with an inner focus of awareness that is ever-present, self-monitoring, and nonjudgmental (Kern & Baker, 1997; Perez, 2000). Since its inception in 1983, Nia has rapidly grown as a popular form of fitness integrating dance, martial arts, and body awareness techniques (La Forge, 2005). Along with encouraging individual creativity and self-expression, cardiovascular components are included to strengthen and support a healthy mind and body.

Statement of the Problem

There has been substantial evidence that supports the link between physical activity and health benefits for men, however less is known about the benefits for women (Eyler et al., 1997). According to Eyler et al., this is largely due to a lack of inclusion of women in the research and the fact that in previous decades women have not been encouraged to be physically active. Nonetheless, there is a growing recognition of the value of exercise on

physical and mental well-being (Brehm & Innotta, 1998; Dubbert, 2002). The benefits of physical activity for women have focused on risk factors for chronic disease (Woolf et al., 2008) and health concerns such as cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, and cancer (Brehm & Innotta, 1998). As well, research has demonstrated the benefits of physical activity on psychological well-being with studies primarily focused on depression, anxiety, mood, self-esteem, and stress reactivity (Gauvin, Rejeski, & Reboussin, 2000; Scully, Kramer, Meade, Graham, & Dudgeon, 1998). There is a paucity of research exploring mind and body exercise approaches on psychological well-being; however, studies suggest improved mood and reduction in stress response with yoga (Danhauer et al., 2008; Shapiro et al., 2007) and t'ai chi (Sandlund & Norlander, 2000; Taylor-Piliae, Haskell, Waters, Froelicher, 2006).

Even though more women are active today than in the past, research still indicates that women participate less in physical activity at all ages than do men and the degree of activity decreases as women age (Statistics Canada, 2005). Furthermore, research indicates that a need exists to target physical activity in women in midlife to further abate ill health and to increase quality of life and well-being in preparation for the latter stage of life (Gillis & Perry, 1991; Villaverde-Gutierrez et al., 2006). In addition, Glazer et al. (2002) suggested that understanding the midlife period for women is important to health practices because some women undergo life changes that can be stressful during the middle years.

Parry and Shaw (1999) explored the benefits of leisure activities for women in midlife. Physical activities were among all of the women's leisure time. However, specifications of the kind of physical activities that contributed to health and well-being were unclear. In a literature review, Scully et al. (1998) discussed the need to further understand the relationship between exercise and mental well-being and to be able to delineate which

type of exercise is most beneficial in relieving particular forms of psychological distress. Scully et al. proposed that the lack of understanding in this area may be due to a wedge between the psychological and physiological disciplines given that Cartesian dualism separates the mind and body. It is argued that collaboration between the two disciplines would inevitably be beneficial. Furthermore, Scully et al. suggested that further investigation into exercise and psychological benefits will help promote guidelines for health professionals to use when making recommendations.

Saylor (2004) asserted that an essential element to health and well-being is an integrated view of the mind and body, stressing its relevance and importance to holistic health practices. She further argued that instilling health through a mind and body 'holistic' paradigm expands the potential for positive outcomes and health promotion. Considering the literature reviewed, exploring midlife women's experiences in the mind and body movement of Nia may inform health practices. Furthermore, physical activity may be a viable recommendation as an additional treatment option for counsellors to consider when working with women to enhance psychological well-being (Dixon, Mauzey, & Hall, 2003).

Counsellors need to be aware of the stressors inherent in midlife and ways to help women manage with life changes that include supporting a wellness-based paradigm (Degges-White & Myers, 2006; Patterson & Lynch, 1988). This inquiry was undertaken to better understand the role Nia has as a mind and body movement form with women in midlife and its potential for use as an adjunctive therapeutic means to aid in managing and enhancing greater well-being.

Research Questions

The central questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the experiences of women in midlife as they participate in the mind and body movement of Nia?
2. Does Nia influence a sense of well-being, and if so, how?

The Purpose for Studying This Topic

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of women in midlife who have integrated the mind and body movement of Nia into their lives. It was also to query whether Nia has an influence on their perceived well-being. A dearth of research exists that gives voice to midlife women and their experiences with mind and body forms of movement. Vertinsky (1998) explains that it is essential to listen attentively to what women have to say “about their own experiences in their lived bodies and how they see them as providing a location for health and healthful practices” (p. 99). Moreover, midlife is a time when women become more introspective and a readiness emerges to share their knowledge (De Andrade, 2000). In undertaking this study, it was my intention to better understand midlife women’s experiences of Nia and to query whether Nia offered possibilities for counsellors to consider as an adjunctive therapeutic option. The inquiry informs counselling practice by explicating the influence of the practice of Nia and the types of issues for which Nia may be beneficial when working with midlife women.

How I Identify With the Research Topic

I am drawn to wanting to understand those aspects of life in which I have personally been influenced. It was during my years as an adolescent that I was introduced to modern dance, and as a university undergraduate, I continued to explore movement as a means of self expression. My years of teaching physical education and dance have focused on how ones’ body movement goes beyond merely the act of moving. I believe that the mind, body,

emotions, and sense of spirit are interwoven. Thus, affecting any one aspect affects the other. I believe through movement people can connect more deeply to their inner selves, become aware of the body's intricacies, tap into emotions, release blockages held in the body, draw up inner power, strength, and confidence, and recognize hidden potentials. Furthermore, I believe through movement the body has the ability to heal itself physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

In 2004, I began taking Nia classes. Immediately, I had a sense of freedom within my body. I was able to release physically and emotionally, areas that otherwise had been blocked. I began to feel grounded and powerful. My Nia experiences enabled me to feel more self-assured in my daily life particularly as I managed with the stresses of losing my job. I envisioned myself as a strong and capable individual with the ability to move through life's challenges.

Through my studies in counselling and in dance/movement therapy, along with my personal experiences, I have been able to further explore my interest in holistic fitness by focusing on movement approaches that I believe warrant further discovery. Reflecting on my experiences of Nia, I wondered how other women experienced Nia and if it influenced their well-being. As I reflected on turning the age of 45, I wondered how my midlife experiences would be similar or different from other women and in what ways would my experience with Nia influence my ability to manage during this time of life.

Clarification of Terms

Midlife. Researchers have yet to clearly define a midlife age span. The end of midlife is referred to as reaching the senior stage of life, 65 or older (Statistics Canada, 2005). However, pinpointing the age midlife begins has yet to be determined. Lyons, Langille, and

Gardner (2005) and the Women's Health in Midlife Years Project (2001) focused on Canadian health and defined midlife as beginning at age 45; hence, for this study midlife was identified as 45 to 64 years. There is a consensus among the literature that during midlife, change occurs. Historically for women, midlife has been associated with the onset of menopause. Today midlife encompasses a far greater view than merely physiological changes. Midlife can include changes in roles (i.e. family, work, and community), relationships, physical changes, and changes in one's perceptions and values. It is how one manages with these life transitions that will influence the midlife experience (Glazer et al., 2002).

Holistic-mind and body approach. A holistic approach is based on the philosophy of holism, in that the parts are inseparable from the whole. The integration of the mind, body, and spirit is the foundation of many eastern disciplines such as meditation, yoga, tai chi, and other martial arts. A mind and body movement approach connects movement, breath, emotions, and the ability to be inwardly directed toward self-mastery and self awareness without judgment (La Forge, 2005). Therefore, fitness programs that are geared to enhancing both mental and physical aspects while incorporating an inner focus would fall under the holistic – mind and body paradigm.

Nia. Nia technique was established as an approach to fitness in 1983 by fitness professionals, Debbie and Carlos Rosas. The Nia technique is based on a process termed “the body's way” (Rosas & Rosas, 2004, p. 30), which focuses on using the body in a manner that honours the body as it is, including its structure and the way it functions. Rather than seeing the body idealistically or pushing the body to conform, the body's way encourages moving with ease and balance by utilizing a holistic fitness approach. Nia is based on the philosophy

that “fitness must address the human being, not just the body” (Rosas & Rosas, 2004, p. 17), and that what is experienced while participating in Nia is internalized and becomes part of a way of life. Nia is comprised of nine basic movement forms, thirteen principles, and 52 basic moves. The nine movement forms (Table 1) are derived from Eastern and Western influences, with each movement form falling under one of the three categories: the martial arts, the dance arts, or the healing arts (Rosas & Rosas, 2004).

Table 1

Nine Movement Forms of Nia

Martial Arts	Dance Arts	Healing Arts
Aikido	Duncan Dance	Alexander Technique
Tae Kwan Do	Jazz Dance	Feldenkrais Method
T'ai Chi	Modern Dance	Yoga

The thirteen principles are foundational to the practice of Nia. They are the base in which fitness, personal growth, and lifestyle are practiced in Nia. Each principle specifies an area of focus and together they encourage self exploration, self awareness, and self expression. Along with being conscious of how one's whole body moves, the thirteen principles are centered on the joy in movement, moving to one's own personal rhythm, making movement choices that feel right, and making positive changes while integrating one's mind, body, and spirit into one's daily life. The 52 moves of Nia are designed to improve fitness. They are categorized into three areas of the body: the base, the core, and the upper extremities. The 52 moves are designed to engage all parts of the body, to develop a movement vocabulary, to improve movement technique, and to further self-healing. It is

suggested by Rosas and Rosas (2004) that the practice of the 52 moves fulfills therapeutic needs such as managing more easily with developmental disabilities, respiratory and heart disease, cancer recovery, and drug rehabilitation, and overcoming self-defeating behaviours.

Well-being. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1948, p.100). In this definition the concept of well-being encompasses differing dimensions including mind and body, yet does not address the possibility that the dimensions may be integrated rather than separate entities (Saylor, 2004). In contrast, Saylor describes the holistic health model as viewing well-being as a state of interconnectedness without separation between mind and body, an integration that comprises one unitary system. In the ITP Nelson Canadian Dictionary (1997), well-being is defined as the state of being happy, healthy, and prosperous. Furthermore, happiness is defined as a state of well-being and contentment. For this study, well-being will be defined as a state of happiness and health as is integrated through the mind, body, spirit, and emotions along with supporting positive social interactions.

Summary

One can speculate that women in midlife are choosing to participate in Nia for a variety of reasons. Women who have experienced midlife have expressed their struggles with physical changes along with psychological, intellectual, and spiritual changes (Mudry, 1996). In undertaking this study, my desire was to expand the understanding of the experience of Nia, particularly with women in midlife, and to inform counselling practice as to the possibilities Nia may provide for women at this time. Chapter One provides an introduction to the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, how I identify with the research,

and has clarified relevant terms. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature from the areas of Nia as a mind and body movement approach, the developmental issues of midlife for women, and body therapies relevant to the research that considers the value of a holistic view. Chapter Three contributes the philosophical basis for the study and will delineate the methodology used. Chapter Four, Five, Six and Seven explicate an understanding of the experience of Nia for midlife women set within the four lifeworld existentials of time, body, relationship, and space. Chapter Eight focuses on an interpretative-analytic synthesis and discussion based on the preceding four chapters set within an overarching theme of revisioning self-identity. The chapter also includes sections regarding aligning social identity theory with well-being, myself as the researcher, how the research informs counselling practice, and future research considerations.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The acceptance of mind and body movement approaches as a direct link to well-being is widespread in Eastern cultures. However, Western society has only begun to invite these concepts into mainstream and they have yet to be fully embraced as a path to betterment. Medical science and the field of psychoanalysis have traditionally been based on the dualistic Cartesian philosophy which places the mind and the body in separate entities, each representing different systems of functioning. Young (2006) claims that historically, the body was an essential component of psychotherapy. However, he further explains that during the early 1930s a definitive shift occurred away from any reference to the body and toward a focus on object-relational understanding, transference and counter-transference, and psychodynamic history. Young states that conventional psychoanalytical theories that stem from Freudian thought have continued to profess that the mind influences the body, and not the reverse. Therefore, talk therapy is exclusively used, with the psychoanalyst often sitting out of view of the client's body prohibiting any non-verbal communication. There is evidence, however, that the body is slowly re-emerging in some branches of psychology as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) and somatic counter-transference are being recognized as effective techniques (Young, 2006). Furthermore, body psychotherapies that are based on the ideals of Janet (cited in Young, 2006), Reich (1945), Kelman (1986) and more recently Rothchild (2000), have continued to challenge the mind-body split in theory and practice. They postulate an inseparable, interactive, unitive functioning of the whole human being.

Mind and body movement approaches such as t'ai chi, yoga, and Nia support a sense of well-being and healthfulness. The practice of these approaches encourages an internal

focus, enhancing a person's body awareness (Daubenmier, 2005; Rosas & Rosas, 2004; Sandlund & Norlander, 2000). Furthermore, by looking inward one can begin to reflect on bodily sensations, memories, images, and feelings that emerge through the process of moving. And with this new knowledge be able to make informed choices based on what is experienced.

Conversely, traditional movement approaches such as non-impact aerobics and step aerobics can be extrinsically oriented and focused on physical aspects of body image over other aspects of wellness (Falberg & Falberg, 1990; Meyer, 2004). Vertinsky (1998) explains that these types of activities promote beauty rather than health and that the pressure to satisfy social standards of slenderness and acceptable body types fails to attend to women's everyday embodied experiences. Thus, traditional fitness activities tend to dismiss holistic understandings of the self that include body, mind, spirit, and emotion, creative expression, and positive social connection. As a means to living happier and healthier, it is imperative that midlife women are given the opportunity and permission to embrace their body's experience holistically and without imposed constraints.

"Nia uses physical activity to integrate one's neurology (including the mind, emotions, and spirit), with one's outer body, or musculature...this whole-being integration...address[es] the whole person, using a comprehensive, holistic exercise approach" (Rosas & Rosas, 2004, p.17). Rosas and Rosas encourage Nia participants to continue practicing healthy living in every aspect of their lives. It is through awareness of one's daily movements and postures, breathing patterns, and emotional and spiritual sensations that self-healing can be achieved. Rosas and Rosas suggest that as a person takes responsibility for his or her healing, they become more empowered to live in wellness.

The purpose of this literature review is to provide the reader with an understanding of the research on Nia, to provide an overview of women's developmental issues at midlife, and to place body therapies into a perspective that considers the value of a holistic view. I retrieved and reviewed research articles published in peer-reviewed journals from CINAHL, ERIC, Health Source/Nursing Academic Edition, MEDLINE, Primary Search, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, and Women's Studies International databases. Reference lists were examined for additional articles related to Nia, midlife women, and body therapies. I selected only English-language publications.

In addition to the peer-reviewed journal articles, I included sources that would provide a more comprehensive understanding particularly where analytical literature was scarce. These additions included edited chapters of relevant books, dissertations, theses, original writings, and prominent authors in the field.

Nia

There was one published study located relative to Nia. It compared the teaching method of Nia to that of traditional aerobics assessing the subjects' self-esteem, physical-esteem, and state-trait anxiety (Kern & Baker, 1997). The convenient sample consisted of 77 female participants with 37 designated to the traditional aerobics and 40 designated to the Nia group. The quasi-experimental study utilized rating scales plus a focus group that provided qualitative insight. Results indicated no significant differences between conventional aerobics and Nia on pre and posttests that evaluated general self-esteem, physical self-esteem and state anxiety. However, a significant difference was found when evaluating trait anxiety (a measurement which gauges an individual's overall level of anxiety

in life). The Nia group scored lower than the conventional aerobics group, which suggested an improvement in anxiety coping skills for those subjects participating in Nia.

The following section focuses on four other studies in the form of theses and dissertations that have explored the practice of Nia. Even though these studies have yet to be published in professional journals, they do provide the opportunity to consider the potential Nia has to contribute to well-being and expand the existing knowledge base in regards to mind and body movement approaches.

Kawano (1999) utilized quantitative methodology to create new questionnaires that were specific to the research. Spielberger's State-trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) and the Profile of Mood States (POM) were also used as instruments of measurement. Kawano assessed the effects of exercise on awareness of body and mood states. The participants' ages ranged between 18 and 70 and there were significantly more females (74) than males (9) who took part in the study. Five forms of exercise were examined. Yoga, t'ai chi, and stretching were considered nonstrenuous activities while aerobics and Nia were classified as traditional strenuous exercise. The researcher's goal was to determine whether nonstrenuous exercise activities would improve mood states and body awareness as much as strenuous exercise. Results indicated an increase in mood for all five types of exercise, with yoga and stretching out-performing the other exercises, decreasing anxiety and improving general mood. A significant increase in mood without improvement in awareness was found for strenuous activity, while a large increase in awareness was found for nonstrenuous exercise. However, small sample size may have contributed to sampling error with aerobics (43), t'ai chi (19), yoga and Nia (8) and stretching (5). Gender was not addressed at any time in the study (Kawano, 1999).

Perez (2000) conducted a survey using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Perez asked 32 female participants aged 21 to 65 (with more women in their 30's and 40's) to respond on a likert scale that she developed to questions related to physical, mental, and spiritual perceptions of themselves while participating in Nia classes. Participants also replied to an open ended statement, requesting the reasons they participate in Nia classes. It was found that a positive self-perception existed in women with regards to mind, body, and spirit as a result of participating in Nia. As well, quality of life and a sense of self were evident as themes generated by the open ended survey questions.

Similarly, Meyer (2004) explored women's feelings about their bodies and the relationship with exercise. The 48 participants were between the ages 35 to 55 and engaged in Nia (19), traditional aerobics (15), or no exercise (14). The women participated in either a group forum or an individual interview. A feminist orientation was used along with a form of qualitative analysis referred to as Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA). The IQA systems approach produces categories common to most qualitative methods. In addition, IQA identifies relationships among categories and comparisons among individuals and groups. Each group generated categories during the group forum that were subsequently used to guide the interview process. The data analysis revealed differences between the two exercise groups in class components, structure, and teaching style. The traditional exercisers described an extrinsic-oriented experience while the Nia exercisers spoke of an intrinsic-oriented experience. Both exercise groups found that their choice of exercise supported their personal values and understandings of health and health behaviors. Specifically, the Nia group valued the inherent naturalness of the movements while the traditional exercise group appreciated the more rigorous workout. Managing stress, however, was accomplished differently within

the two exercise groups. The traditional exercise group released stress by pounding it out and using strategies that would promote distraction either by turning off the mind or focusing on effort and complex movements. In contrast, the Nia group created a safe environment that allowed participants to experience a powerful release through emotional expressions and vocalizations. As well, listening to the body, increasing body awareness, noticing sensation, finding pleasure in movement, and releasing self-judgment were themes. It was noted that an internally directed teaching approach was used during Nia encouraging mindfulness and fostering the letting go of stress.

The non-exercise group described few positive memories of physical activity. They expressed concerns around body image particularly being judged by others on appearance and ability. Meyer states that the non-exercise group could benefit the most from a change in environment suggesting that an internally-oriented environment rather than an externally-oriented environment may encourage non-exercisers to take the steps needed to increase their physical activity.

Lenning (2003) compared the holistic healing properties of Genevieve Stebbins' nineteenth century Harmonic Gymnastics with Debbie and Carlos Rosas' contemporary Nia. Lenning explains that Stebbins' Harmonic Gymnastics was a variation of the Delsarte system that promoted emotional expression through voice and gesture. Harmonic Gymnastics was primarily developed for upper-middle class women and incorporated breath, imagery, and rhythmic movement as a means to promote physical fitness and health. Its development was further integrated into the areas of physical exercise, pantomime, and dance.

In Lenning's dissertation, Harmonic Gymnastics and Nia were viewed as forms of a system of health and fitness that are rooted in performance, expression, and personal growth

in which she calls “expressive physical culture” (p. 7). Both movement approaches were promoted as having aspects that can counterbalance limitations and problems for women’s health in the medical paradigm. Lenning claims that Harmonic Gymnastics and Nia have common core ideas and structures that enhance health practices. She states both practices are: mind-body-spirit approaches to health, an outlet for self-expression through physical movement, an addition of aesthetic and spiritual elements to physical fitness, an opportunity to investigate imagery, and a chance to pursue health and personal growth in a daily life context (p. 6). Thus, Nia provides an opportunity to better understand the role holistic healing has for the women who practice it.

The research thus far indicates that Nia has inherent properties that support: (1) a positive perception of the self as related to the mind, body, and spirit, (2) an increase in mood, (3) a heightened awareness of the mind and body in the moment, (4) an opportunity for emotional expression, and (5) the potential to contribute to contemporary health practices for women. However, studies have yet to explicate the significance and meaningfulness Nia has in women’s lives during midlife through a phenomenological framework. Therefore, by listening intently to the rich and in-depth descriptions shared by midlife women as they participate in Nia I sought to explore, more deeply, their experiences in order to understand the influence Nia may have on their well-being at this time of their lives.

Women in Midlife

There is a lack of agreement on how midlife should be defined for women. Fogel and Woods (1995) characterized midlife as a transition rather than a specific phase within the lifecycle. Other researchers have focused on age boundaries, reproductive capacity, and role patterns to define midlife (Woods & Mitchell, 1997). However, within each of these

categories, specifications are unclear. The age span of midlife has been defined as early as 35 and as late as 65 (Mansfield & Voda, 1997; Sampsel, Harris, Harlow, & Sowers, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2005; Woods & Mitchell, 1997). Reproductive capacity often refers to menstrual changes or menopause. The terminology, however, is not well defined. Perimenopausal, premenopausal, climacteric, and postmenopausal are terms interspersed throughout the literature without any standardization (Dan & Bernhard, 1989). In addition, women today differ from previous generations and role changes that have been established are being challenged.

Likewise, it is difficult to capture a definitive picture of the development issues for women during midlife. McQuaide (1998) pointed out several factors that have contributed to a lack of understanding of women at this stage: (1) research has typically been done by male investigators with male subjects and has been applied to women, (2) popular books addressing midlife in the early 1990s focused on menopause and were not research based, and (3) presently, women influenced by the feminist movement are gaining control of reproduction and shifting women's identity to include women in the workplace. Furthermore, midlife has historically been situated within a biomedical paradigm with menopause being the sole factor (Huffman & Myers, 1999). It is generally understood that 12 months after cessation of menses, the stage of menopause has occurred retroactively (Dan & Bernhard, 1989). However, this definition narrowly describes women's experiences of midlife. Positioning menopause as a midlife transition within the biomedical and psychosocial/cultural paradigms provides an integrated perspective honouring the variability among women's midlife experiences (Huffman & Myers, 1999). Therefore, menopause can be viewed as a stage within the context of one's own life as changes occur.

Few women define menopause strictly as a medical event involving only cessation of menses and issues with fertility; bodily and emotional changes and life transitions are also considerations (Woods, 1999). Kittell, Mansfield, and Voda (1998) interviewed sixty-one women experiencing menopause to further understand the social and cultural expectations influencing feelings and behaviours. Results indicated that women attempted to conceal and control unexpected menopausal changes such as heavy bleeding, intense hot flashes, and emotional outbursts to dispel potential disruptions and feelings of embarrassment in social situations. Women often sought information and used self-management strategies (i.e. counting days between cycles, always carrying protection, listening to body cues, and avoiding possible triggers) to cope with the unpredictable events. If the women regained control, they felt secure and undisturbed, if not, the women became frustrated and would seek professional help.

Menopausal transitions are characterized by change which may be annoying or disruptive. However, these transitions need to be viewed as normal and respected by all helping professionals when women seek information (Mansfield & Voda, 1997). With varying disruptions in menstruation, the point at which the waning of fertility occurs is questionable. Jarrett and Lethbridge (1994) explored women's perspectives and experiences regarding their fertility at ages 40 to 50. The women's attitudes varied. Those who were still menstruating felt they were fertile and those whose menstruation had ceased for at least a year were confident they were not fertile; however no one knew for certain. For some women the end of fertility represented a loss and for others a sense of freedom.

Several studies focused on women's body image or body changes during midlife, emphasizing the ambivalent plight between personal standards of youth and societal terms.

Banister (1999) noted that women struggled with their physical appearances of aging and feelings of unattractiveness while frustrated by conforming to society's values. In addition, some women experienced a loss and longing for their youthful self, challenging their sense of identity and self esteem. According to Saucier (2004), women feel pressured to defend themselves against aging within a society that measures success for women by beauty and sexiness. Furthermore, women are set up to fail because they cannot maintain their youthful appearance in the face of aging, leading to low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. However, in trying to understand the experience of body changes in relation to sociocultural discourse for 20 middle-aged women, researchers found that these women challenged cultural ideologies and acknowledged body ideals as being unrealistic and out of their control, arriving at a comfortable acceptance of their newly middle aged bodies (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). Moreover, a shift occurred from an external to an internal focus, emphasizing aspects of the self that are not dependent on looks.

Women's experiences of midlife revolve around re-assessing, re-defining and re-evaluating aspects of their lives. Change is a common catalyst spurring a shift to look at life from a different perspective. The changes are as varied as the women themselves. However, central in the research are changes related to relationships, roles, and responsibilities.

Shifts in women's relationships, roles, and responsibilities are portrayed as being intertwined as many women end their child raising years (Woods & Mitchell, 1997), begin care-taking of aging parents or other dependent relatives (Lippert, 1997), and experience changes in marriages or with intimate partners (Sands & Richardson, 1986). Researchers note that women will experience these transitions differently and at varying degrees depending on their familial circumstances, marital status, whether they had children or not, age of offspring

(Jarrett & Lethbridge, 1994), and cultural attitudes (Huffman, Myers, Tingle, & Bond, 2005). Thus for some women, the shifts contribute to the stress in their lives (Lippert, 1997) and for others, there is a sense of freedom and independence (Woods & Mitchell, 1997). And still yet, some women experience both positive and negative effects of midlife transitions.

Among the changes, midlife is a time for personal reflection. Self-evaluation often includes a reassessment of values, health, personal achievements, and financial security. Howell (2001) explored the middle age experience of 18 women age 35 to 60 through the use of focus groups. Using grounded theory, a model was developed that described women's midlife developmental process. It was determined that achieving satisfaction during midlife, particularly as changes occurred, was related to the congruence factor of three aspects, the women's behaviors, their life circumstances, and their personal values. When congruence was achieved between these aspects the women felt satisfied, happy, and comfortable. However, when incongruence occurred the women reported feeling sadness, emptiness, and other 'bad' feelings. The women addressed their discomfort by examining and assessing the changes and their personal values. Through exploration, the women made repeated adjustments until balance and peace was reached. Similarly, Arnold (2005) identified themes that echoed the need for women in their fifties to explore their inner turmoil as they struggled to redefine their self, and reassess what was essential and meaningful in their lives and to their well-being.

In addition, many women reinvest in health promoting activities as they prepare for the second half of life. There is recognition that to counter the effects of aging, midlife is the time to honor oneself and engage in self-care activities that include body and spirit (Banister, 1999; Jarrett & Lethbridge, 1994). Adopting healthier diets, increasing efforts to exercise and

sleep more, taking vitamins, reducing levels of stress and being happy with their lives were also identified by researchers as strategies women used to live healthier and prepare for an older age (Howell, 2001; Jarrett & Lethbridge, 1994).

Furthermore, based on results of a telephone survey of 131 women born between 1935 and 1955 in Seattle, USA, Woods and Mitchell (1997) reported that women reappraised their personal goals and recognized the need to let go of expectations and unmet goals. Realizing that time is limited, priorities are often realigned and new goals are set, meeting one's need to achieve, rather than rally to others' expectations (Sands & Richardson, 1986). Moreover, a change in career, returning to school, purchasing a new home, finding new interest in spirituality and/or sexuality and planning for relaxation and enjoyment are central to women's experience of midlife (Howell, 2001; Jarrett & Lethbridge, 1994).

Likewise, at this time of life women begin to review their financial status to ensure financial security in the retirement years. Howell (2001) found that women valued material circumstances less than relationships, but more than health. People with more resources worried as much about their financial well-being as did individuals with fewer resources. Similarly, Woods and Mitchell (1997) reported that financial problems were among those events which women labeled as distressing. Furthermore, the results of a questionnaire which surveyed 103 Caucasian women age 40 to 59 living in the New York City area found that a family income below \$30,000 was associated with low levels of well-being during midlife (McQuaide, 1998).

Midlife as a developmental stage encompasses a wide range of possible experiences for women. Change appears to be a significant component in the transition into the middle years. Howell's (2001) developmental model described midlife for women as beginning

when an accumulation of changes became distressful. Predicting how a woman will experience her midlife transition is not an easy task. Research indicates that the experience of midlife today differs from an earlier cohort as women have passed through the feminist movement and have become an integral part of the workforce. Women report that midlife can be an arduous process. However, being able to manage the changes often leads to personal growth and well-being.

In order to ensure women's health and well-being during the middle years, it is imperative to gain an understanding as to how women best manage with midlife challenges. Researchers need to broaden their scope of explorations beyond traditional medical approaches to include holistic mind and body movement approaches to wellness.

Body Therapies

There is not a unified definition of what constitutes body therapy. Therefore, the term *therapeutic*, I will define as belonging to a positive life change. In preparing for this review, I completed a thorough search into all areas that could be considered body therapies using the following keywords: mind and body therapy, bodywork, mind and body interventions, mind and body-oriented therapy, body-centered therapy, body psychotherapy, mind and body movement therapy, movement therapy, and dance movement therapy. In order for the body therapy to be considered for the literature review, it needed to espouse a holistic mind and body point of view and not be solely based on a massage or touch technique. I also excluded studies in which the primary focus was descriptive of physiological properties that did not include a psychological component. In addition, consideration was taken to include therapeutic modalities that are part of the philosophy of Nia, are incorporated in the physical practice of Nia, and are relative to the practice of Nia. As well, I took into consideration the

amount of analytical literature I could locate and unfortunately it was sparse. Thus, in this section, books relevant to the topic and revered as prominent works were also included. The intention of this section is to place body therapy into a perspective that considers the value of a holistic view. The three body therapies, for lack of a more inclusive word, that fit the criteria are the Feldenkrais Method, bioenergetic analysis, and dance/movement therapy.

The notion that any event or experience will impact the functioning of a person's body, emotions, thoughts, and behaviours is the basic premise for body therapies (Caldwell, 1997). This stems from the understanding that "a person is a unitary being" (Lowen, 1995, p. x), the mind, body, emotions, sensations, and spirit are interconnected and that by awakening and engaging these aspects of the self, we can then heal the self.

The Feldenkrais Method, Bioenergetics, and Dance Movement Therapy all share theoretical commonalities, yet the methods of addressing people's challenges and meeting therapeutic goals differ. For example, the Feldenkrais method uses techniques that are therapeutic in nature; however, it falls under a student/teacher paradigm (Jain, Janssen, & DeCelle, 2004) and bioenergetic analysis and dance/movement therapy use a client/therapist paradigm. Bioenergetic analysis (Coven, 1985) and Feldenkrais Method (Feldenkrais, 1977) both prescribe or direct movement and actively manipulate the body, whereas dance movement therapy uses self-directed movement (Stanton-Jones, 1992). Given that each of these body therapies will approach people's issues differently, there is still an understanding that much of the work is process-oriented and reflexive, in that past memory, experiences, and history are brought forward and explored in the here and now. As well, there are commonalities between the use of movement, metaphor, and the relationship between client and practitioner.

Movement is an essential component used in the practice of body therapy to restore a person to wellness. It is also the basis for bringing a person's awareness to the forefront and an impetus for change (Hadar, 2001; Meekums, 2002; Schlenger, 2006). Body therapies view movement as an expression of one's personality and self-image, such that how a person moves reflects their state of being in the world (Feldenkrais, 1977; Lowen, 1975; Stanton-Jones, 1992).

The use of body metaphors is central to this type of work. For instance, a person may adopt a slouched posture when describing their physical conditions or life challenges and the trials to managing them (Lowen, 1975; Meekums, 2002; Rappaport, 1975). Meekums explains that movement as metaphor is a type of nonverbal communication that provides valued insight into patterns of behaviour, beliefs, and relationships.

The client/therapist and student/teacher relationship is based on a genuine, nonjudgmental attitude that holds the body in its highest esteem and instills that there is no single correct way of doing any movement. There is a creative process that occurs within the space of the working relationship as the therapist or teacher empathically listens to the client or student's bodily expression. More precisely, the therapist or teacher assumes the bodily attitude of the client or student, "sensing what it feels like to be that other person" (Lowen, 1975, p. 101) in order to better understand the meaning or feeling that the client is attempting to convey (Feldenkrais, 1977; Stanton-Jones, 1992). In addition, body therapies in general integrate nonverbal techniques with verbal interactions to fully address the self-discovery process and interconnection between mind and body. For instance, people may verbally share their concerns with the teacher or therapist and then use movement to explore further. This process may also be reversed or both modalities may be interwoven throughout a session.

Body therapists also use nonverbal communication as a tool to inform their practice and for assessment purposes.

Brown (1973) argued for counsellors, psychiatrists, social workers, and other helping professionals to take note of the use of body therapies and their potential to help people become enlightened to their own body's wisdom. He claims that by listening to the body's inner workings including energy flow and blockages, emotional and psychological rigidities, biologically based behaviour, and body perceptions, people are able to connect more wholly to their true selves.

Feldenkrais Method. Feldenkrais Method was founded by Moishe Feldenkrais. His original work spanned the years 1904 to 1984; however, throughout the world many practitioners continue to teach his method. Feldenkrais's method has been described as a system of movement that seeks to re-educate and expand movement options through body awareness (Schlinger, 2006). It is a technique that brings inefficient movement habits into conscious awareness, breaking old patterns and creating new more beneficial ways of moving (Feldenkrais, 1977). The Feldenkrais system consists of two modalities, Awareness Through Movement (ATM) and Functional Integration (FI). ATM is directed through movement explorations given via verbal cues in a group setting to increase body awareness, movement sensation, imagery, and visualization (Kerr, Kotynia & Kolt, 2002). FI is directed through one to one lessons and is a non-invasive hands-on approach. Feldenkrais explains that our self-image is ever-changing and with "instinct, feeling, and thought being linked with movement, their role in the creation of the self-image reveals itself together with that of movement" (p. 12). Thus, improving neuromuscular functioning positively influences people's movement patterns, how they think, and feel.

Critical reviews on existing literature recently conducted on the FM revealed that there are few well-designed, blinded, and controlled studies with standardized outcome measures published in peer-reviewed journals (Ives, 2003; Jain et al., 2004; Kolt, 2001; Schlenger, 2006). Much of the literature consists of case studies and anecdotal evidence. Ives reports that current evidence supports that the FM may be equally as effective as comparisons, but difficult to recommend as better than other treatments in producing change in motor performance. However, in a review of the literature, Ives and Sosnoff (2000) concluded that the FM is best evidenced as having an influence psychologically rather than physiologically.

Gilman and Yaruss (2000) conducted an uncontrolled case study that examined two female patients who stuttered. They reported that after 8 weeks of Feldenkrais lessons the patients felt more in control of their speech, were able to control tension during speaking, and had less anxiety, yet minimal change in measurable degree of disfluency. The authors suggest by increasing body awareness through the FM, the patients were provided a choice of action during speaking situations that they did not have previously.

Malmgren-Olsson, Armelius, and Armelius (2001) examined 71 patients with nonspecific musculoskeletal disorders and their response to interventions in conventional physiotherapy (25 females with a mean age of 43.2 and 1 male with a mean age of 42), body awareness therapy (19 females with a mean age of 41.1 and 7 males with a mean age of 43.7), or the FM (20 females with a mean age of 44 and 6 males with a mean age of 47.3). The conventional physiotherapy group was considered a physiologically based intervention, whereas the remaining two treatments were viewed as psychologically and physiologically based. All participants were tested for measures of psychological distress, pain, and self-

image over a 1 year period. In comparison to a control group receiving no intervention, the three treatment groups all improved over the year. Further examination of effect size and mean values indicated that the body awareness therapy fared slightly better than the FM followed by the conventional intervention. The authors suggest that the dual combination of mind and body interventions may have more positive effects on psychological symptoms of distress, pain, and self image than the focused use of physical treatments. As well, the authors note that some of the effects may have been due to improvement over time and the observation that patients were actively treating their own problems in the body awareness therapy and FM compared to the conventional treatment group.

Kirkby (1994) investigated the effects of the FM for 6 weeks using the ATM technique with females between the ages of 18 to 47 who reported severe premenstrual symptoms. Effects of depression and anxiety were measured with no difference shown between the FM and control group in relation to the psychological indicators.

Johnson, Fredrick, Kaufman, and Mountjoy (1999) looked at 15 females and 5 males between the ages of 33 to 54 with multiple sclerosis over an 8-week period using the FM assessing a range of physical and psychological variables. The participants reported lower anxiety and perceived stress levels at the conclusion of the Feldenkrais intervention compared to a non-therapeutic bodywork treatment.

Kerr, Kotynia, and Kolt (2002) examined state anxiety with individuals participating in either a single one hour ATM session or 10 weeks of 1 hour ATM lessons. Participants were classified as either returning students or new students. Forty-five participants volunteered for the 10 week session. Out of those, 10 males and 17 females with a mean age of 51.9 were placed in the returning student category. The new student category was

comprised of 5 males and 13 females for a total of 18 volunteers with a mean age of 33.67. Fifty-five individuals participated in the single session, with 42 (19 males and 23 females) volunteers placed in the returning student group and 13 (5 males and 8 females) volunteers classified as new students. Results indicated that state anxiety scores significantly decreased for both sets of students with a prominent decrease at the end of 10 weeks with new students as compared to experienced students.

Stephens et al. (1999) investigated quality of life through the use of FM for four women between the ages of 29 and 47 suffering from multiple sclerosis. The participants reported an increase in movement awareness, increase in flexibility, improvement in balance and movement control, increase in ease of movement and available energy, recognition of ways to reorganize movement, and improved mental outlook. Three out of the four women had a significant increase on the Index of Well-Being. The authors note that the intervention process utilized self-discovery methods and encouraged a self-paced, nonjudgmental environment. During the one year follow up interview a participant stated:

I am better emotionally and mentally. It's very challenging to do this method. I have found that I could do things that I didn't believe I could do. I could get that little toe to move a little. I could calm down and breathe and just feel the movement. It was very empowering...It has really stimulated my creativity. (p.67)

Ives (2003) points out that most of the studies investigating the FM in which positive psychological effects were concluded have predominately used female participants. He further purports in his critical review of the literature that the findings suggest that the FM shares similarities with self-regulatory theory. More precisely, Ives explains that by increasing personal awareness, people can begin to self-regulate their thoughts, behaviours, and emotions which will assist them in achieving their personal goals.

Bioenergetics. Bioenergetics was developed by Alexander Lowen in the 1950s and has spread throughout the Western world. Lowen's (1975) work was influenced by the notions set forth by the pioneering work of Wilhelm Reich. Reich (1949) purported that repressed emotions are stored as muscular contractions he called "armoring" (p.46). He claimed that by loosening the protective shield made up of muscular spasms, holdings, and tensions, a person could bring into consciousness feelings and memories which had been previously suppressed.

Bioenergetics is understood as a therapeutic technique that reunites people with their body so that they can embrace and enjoy life more fully through their body (Lowen, 1975). Lowen worked to bring the body to wellness through breathing, moving, feeling, and self-expression. He developed techniques that addressed these four areas believing that his approach would heighten body awareness and release body constrictions. Lowen further claimed that the body lives in restriction not because a person wills the self to become limited. It develops "as a means of survival within an environment and culture that denies body values in favor of power, prestige, and possessions" (Lowen, p.43). This process is an unconscious endeavor that people engage in and it becomes their way of living in the world. Thus, most people attend to life with a sense of depletion rather than live life with the fullest intention. Lowen claims that innate energy is related to personality, in that how much energy a person has and how it is used determines and is reflected in personality. For instance, a depressed person has little energy and their movements and energetic functions are minimal, revealing a particular persona. Lowen explains that attending only to depressive negative thought patterns will not lift one's mood, because the energy levels are also depressed. According to Lowen, in order to elevate a person's mood, an increase in energy level and the

release of suppressed emotions is necessary. One of the techniques used in bioenergetics to accomplish this task is the practice of deep breathing. Lowen claims that as oxygen intake increases, a person's body becomes more alive with energy, feelings and early memories surface, and muscular tension releases. Bioenergetic therapy also uses gentle pressure, massage, specific movement exercises, verbal interactions, and encourages self-expression and exploration to help people recover the full potential of their being (Lowen, 1995).

Another important goal of the bioenergetic therapeutic process is to become "grounded" (Lowen, 1975, p.98). People are given the opportunity to explore the self, through the body, as more grounded and less scattered and anxious. Lowen (1975) believes when people are rooted or grounded they are in a position of self-support, security, and stability.

In bioenergetic therapy, enhancing the voice is viewed as essential for self-expression and self growth. Lowen (1995) states that many people suffer from a lack of self-esteem or self-worth because they have lost their voice or felt they did not have the opportunity to speak out. As well, freeing the voice is viewed as another means to mobilize repressed feelings through the act of making sound.

A thorough search of the literature on bioenergetics located some narratives and case studies and no randomized controlled studies. Coven (1985) described using bioenergetics to assist people who are in need of physical rehabilitation counselling. He states that the physical and emotional experiences discovered through bioenergetics facilitate a renewed awareness of being competent, capable, and emotionally feeling people. Coven notes some precautions due to increased breathing, muscle fatigue, and energy movement. People may experience hyperventilation, dizziness, muscle trembling, or body vibrations. He

recommends that counsellors working with bioenergetics inform clients prior to using the techniques of possible responses in order to reduce anxiety reactions. In addition, Coven states that personal boundaries, opposite and same sex issues, and cultural and ethical considerations need to be addressed with clients, particularly if using a hands-on approach. More precisely, counsellors need to thoroughly explain the type of body work that will occur and discuss the client's comfort level as well as obtain permission before touching, holding or supporting the body in any manner. He further notes that the intensity and intimacy of this type of approach may need to be gradually introduced, integrating both verbal and physical techniques. Coven also explains that it is important to share information regarding the effect physical change can have on a person psychologically. He notes that counsellors will need to respect a person's defense mechanisms, particularly as clients attempt to dismantle embedded physical and emotional self-protective systems.

Hadar (2001) discussed his work with a female client in her forties who suffered from chronic psychosomatic illnesses, the most prominent being asthma. He described her as being at a crossroad in her life, unable to make decisions. Through bioenergetic therapy the patient was able to address and release past traumatic events that were stored in her body. Over time, her asthmatic attacks dissipated and the patient felt that she had discovered her true self.

Dance Movement Therapy. Dance movement therapy (DMT) began in the 1940s and 1950s emerging out of the modern dance era as modern dance pioneers discovered the therapeutic qualities inherent in the creative expression of the body through movement (Levy, 2005). In 1966, the American Dance Therapy Association was established which helped to recognize DMT as a profession and further theoretical developments and clinical practice.

The self-discovery process occurs in DMT through movement exploration as the body expresses itself and invariably communicates these nonverbal experiences on a cognitive level, thus giving way to new potentials that may promote change leading to personal growth and healing. Dance therapists typically work with people, individually or in groups, who have emotional, social, cognitive, or physical challenges. DMT utilizes spontaneity, play, and encourages self-expression, helping people to recognize inhibitions, trust their impulses, find the zest for life, and discover new ways of expressing their authenticity (Levy, 2005; Shustik & Thompson, 2001). As well, the use of rhythm, synchronicity, and cohesion are important concepts used, particularly in group therapy, as a way of promoting supportive relationships and a sense of connectedness with others (Schmais, 1985). DMT teaches people a practice that encourages them “to access and understand the messages of their bodies within the larger context of what is happening in their lives” (Halprin, 2003). Therefore, the body itself is an information center, a place to further understand and integrate the self in relation to the landscape in which one lives.

A small number of randomized controlled trials exist indicating the effects of DMT. The majority of existing DMT research is based on case studies and descriptive outcomes of the therapeutic process. In a meta-analysis, Ritter and Low (1996) noted that DMT is used with a variety of populations and disorders. Their review, spanning the years 1974 to 1993, supported the use of DMT in treating anxiety issues and stated that DMT appears to have a positive influence on many developmental and psychiatric disabilities. However, Ritter and Low revealed several shortcomings in the research literature related to lack of randomized controlled studies, adequate sample size, and standardized measures to assess change.

More recently, a few studies have emerged investigating the effects of DMT with adults on issues pertaining to self-esteem, mood states, psychological distress, body image, and healing aspects, along with addressing some of the methodological concerns. Dibbell-Hope (2000) evaluated the use of a 3 hour session of DMT over 6 weeks with 33 women (mean age 54.7) diagnosed with breast cancer compared to a control group waiting to begin DMT. The aim of the research was to determine if DMT would improve psychological adaptation of women with breast cancer and if so, whether improvements would be sustained over time. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were implemented in data collection and analysis. Quantitative pre-tests were administered with posttests completed at 6 weeks, and follow-up 3 weeks after with DMT groups and no treatment groups measuring mood, psychological distress, body-image, and self-esteem. Results indicated no significant support for the use of DMT over the wait list control group using empirical data analysis. However, pretreatment and posttreatment interviews and written evaluations analyzed phenomenologically captured the women's experiences, detailing perceived improvement in all areas assessed. More precisely, the respondents reported feeling more socially supported and positive about their bodies and their sense of self after participating in DMT. The authors stated that the comparative differences between the quantitative and qualitative results may be due to a lack of sensitivity in the instruments used in empirical data analysis.

In a pilot study, Ho (2005) investigated the effects of a 90-minute DMT session over 6 weeks with 22 Chinese cancer patients (mean age 50.18) measuring stress and self-esteem. Sixteen of the respondents completed both pre and posttests and 19 completed the final written evaluation. Results indicated a significant decrease in stress levels and a non-significant trend toward improved self-esteem. Final evaluative comments identified four

themes: relaxation, mind-body interaction, personal growth, and spirituality. Participants indicated they were more confident, felt supported, and were more knowledgeable about their own rehabilitation. The author noted the limited sample size and lack of comparison group. Also gender was not specified in the study.

Koch, Morlinghaus, and Fuchs (2007) investigated the effects of participating in one of three groups: a single session of DMT (movement and music), listening to music (music only), or riding a home trainer bike (movement only) with 31 psychiatric patients (18 men and 13 women with an age range from 21 to 66) with depression. All three conditions demonstrated improvement in the patient's condition; however, those in the DMT group showed significantly less depression than those in the music only and movement only group. As well, immediately after the intervention, the DMT group showed more vitality than the music only group on posttest self-report scales. The authors note limitations include the brevity of the intervention, small sample size, and the understanding that expectancy effects may have influenced the results.

Mills and Daniluk (2002) conducted a phenomenological study using in-depth interviews exploring the experience of DMT for five women ranging in age from 25 to 48 years who had endured childhood sexual abuse. Six themes emerged revealing the women's perceptions of the role DMT had on their psychological healing: sense of spontaneity, permission to play, struggle, freedom, intimate connection, and bodily reconnection. The findings revealed that the participants were able to locate inhibitions and learn to move in less constrained and more authentic ways. They were able to attend to their sensations, feelings, and impulses more readily and become more self-expressive. The authors explained that some of the participants vacillated between feeling vulnerable in a group setting and

feeling deep emotional connection with others, noting the importance of creating a safe and trusting environment for this type of work.

DMT provides a healing modality for people who may not have the capacity to, or struggle with verbalizing their emotions. Through the body's movement, expression, and exploration, the self can begin to actualize and articulate its most inner feelings, sensations, and thoughts, thereby illuminating new ways of being in the world.

DMT, FM, and bioenergetic analysis help people to engage in a meaningful and significant exploration of the self within the environment in which they live, namely the body. I found it intriguing that 35 years ago, Rappaport (1973) stated, "[t]here appears to be a new movement in the psychotherapy field: body therapies" (p. 49). He further questioned if conventional psychotherapies failed to provide people with the fullest possibilities for self-discovery and change. Rappaport answers his own question, explaining that people are rediscovering the meaning for life through the body's wisdom. In turn, they are naturally moving toward new ways of being in the world – in work, leisure, and personal growth, and through embracing therapeutic modalities that honour a holistic approach to the self.

Summary

There is a dearth of literature to draw from on the practice of Nia. However, the research thus far does offer the opportunity to begin to understand the potential benefits Nia might have for women managing midlife. For instance, an increase in mood, a positive perception of the self, heightened awareness of mind and body, and the opportunity for emotional expression may contribute to women's sense of wellness.

Similarly, the literature on body therapies is limited and methodological issues cloud the true effects that they have on the individual. However, there is an understanding that

body-oriented therapeutic modalities are still in their infancy in Western culture. As well, they have not been recognized with the same integrity as the field of psychotherapy (Pribaz & Pini, 2007). Thus, one can speculate that it has been a struggle to find a prominent place in the literature. What can be extracted from the review of the literature is that body therapies support a holistic view and that the mind, body, and emotions are inextricably linked. Thus, challenges in any one aspect affect the other and the healing process involves an integrated approach. To further well-being, body therapies use techniques that incorporate movement, body awareness, expression, and the release of muscular tension. The body therapy literature indicates potential benefits that include an increase in movement control, improved mental outlook, and a reduction in anxiety, stress, and depression.

The literature on women's developmental stages during midlife presents an understanding of diversity. The research indicates that menopause, changes in roles, responsibilities, and relationships, and issues concerning body-image, aging, health, and financial security are some of the challenges women face during midlife. As well, midlife is a time when women reflect and reassess personal values, needs, and wants. These life transitions may be met with varying degrees of emotional upheaval and confusion along with an exhilarating sense of freedom. Knowing how to best help women manage during midlife is complicated by the multitude of experiences and the fact that research from previous generations may not accurately reflect today's needs. Considering this challenge and the potential benefits Nia may offer as a holistic mind and body movement approach, it is conceivable that the practice of Nia may foster personal growth and influence well-being for women during midlife. In addition, transitional periods are times when most people enter counselling (Ivey, Ivey, Myers, & Sweeney, 2004).

The intention of this inquiry was to explore how women manage with midlife transitions as they participate in the mind and body movement of Nia. In addition, its purpose was to gain an understanding of whether or not Nia has an influence on women's perceived well-being, in order to help inform counselling practices. The next chapter is a description of the methodology used in this study designed to meet this need.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences women in midlife have had while integrating the mind and body movement of Nia into their lives. It was also to query whether Nia has an influence on their perceived well-being. The intent was to provide pertinent knowledge regarding this phenomenon to professionals working with women managing midlife issues.

A qualitative inquiry enlists the understanding of the meaning of human action by giving voice to the experience that cannot be measured in quantitative terms. In order to address my research question sufficiently and come to know the lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation, a qualitative approach was deemed necessary. As a research methodology, hermeneutic phenomenology does not hold the assumption of Cartesian dualism, which separates the mind and body, viewing the self and the world as being disengaged from each other (Jones, 1975; Koch, 1995). In contrast, hermeneutic phenomenology holds the assumptions of engagement paramount, whereby the self and the world are interpreted through the lived experience of a phenomenon in an exhaustive manner. As method, hermeneutic phenomenology guides a process to fully understand the experience of being in the world (van Manen, 1997), while simultaneously clarifying and elucidating the conditions in which understanding takes place (Gadamer, 1977).

In order to more fully present hermeneutic phenomenology, I begin by discussing the meaning of hermeneutics, the history of hermeneutics, its relationship to phenomenology, and the origin of hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy. As well, this chapter contains my rationale for choosing hermeneutic phenomenology as a qualitative approach with

attention given to: participant selection, research procedures, data collection and analysis, issues of rigour, limitations, and ethical considerations.

The Meaning of Hermeneutics

The word hermeneutic stems from the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, ‘to interpret’ and the noun *hermeneia*, ‘interpretation’ (Palmer, 1969, p.12,). These words were often associated with the Greek messenger-god Hermes, who was said to have discovered language, writing, and the ability to transmute what was not understood by humans into a form they could grasp. Thus, the word hermeneutics suggests a process of ‘bringing to understanding’ phenomena that are elusive. According to Palmer, interpretation is a three-fold process: to say, to explain, and to translate. This process can be found in oral language and written text. “To say” is represented by the spoken word or the text as it is written. “To explain” is represented by elucidating the situation in which one relies on the presence of a context, or a pre-understanding. “To translate” is represented by the act of merging ones own world of understanding with what is said and explained in the spoken language or text.

The History of Hermeneutics

The earliest use of hermeneutics occurred in the translation of biblical texts in the seventeenth century with the aim to uncover and reconstruct the scriptures in order to establish a “correct” interpretation (Chessick, 1990). Fredrick Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is regarded as the creator of modern hermeneutic theory, espousing the art of understanding to include all worldly texts, legal documents, religious scriptures, and literature (Palmer, 1969). Schleiermacher made two distinct contributions to hermeneutics. First, the introduction of two interacting components involved in understanding texts included: (a) the grammatical, referring to the totality of a spoken language; and (b) the technical (psychological), referring

to the nature of an individual's unique use and embodiment of language (Palmer, 1969). Second, Schleiermacher developed the notion of the hermeneutic circle as a methodological process, enabling the understanding of the whole of a text and its parts as interdependent activities (Schwant, 2001).

In the late 1800s Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) expanded Schleiermacher's views and forged a new model for interpreting human phenomena (Palmer, 1969). It was the self experience and expression of life that Dilthey aimed to understand. Dilthey differentiated between the natural sciences and human sciences with respect to the notion of knowing, by arguing that the natural sciences aim to explain, while the human and social sciences aim to understand (Palmer, 1969). Hermeneutics was Dilthey's attempt to introduce an alternative approach to understanding the human sciences (Chessick, 1990). It became apparent to Dilthey that the act of interpreting was inextricably tied to one's historical background (Chessick, 1990). He protested that all understanding was rooted in the past and that one cannot forego one's history and culture. Thus, historicity became a central tenet in hermeneutics which I will expand upon in the following sections. Although Schleiermacher and Dilthey contributed to the foundations of hermeneutics, so did others, causing hermeneutics to evolve over the years.

Phenomenology

The terms phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology are often interchangeable in the research literature (Dowling, 2004; van Manen, 1997). However, there are distinct differences.

Phenomenology is the study of phenomena and, "it signifies primarily a concept of method. It does not characterize the 'what' of the objects of philosophical research in terms

of their content but the ‘how’ of such research” (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 32). Thus, phenomenological inquiry is concerned with how one “experiences the world” (van Manen, 1997, p. 5). The aim of phenomenology is to construct a text that describes “human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences as we meet them in the lifeworld” (van Manen, 1997, p. 19).

Edmond Husserl (1859-1938) further constructed and expanded the framework of phenomenology (Koch, 1995). Husserl viewed human beings as subjects who come to know objects. Importance was placed on discovering the way people attend, perceive, recall, and think about the world (Lavery, 2003). As Koch (1995) acknowledged, Husserlian phenomenology was a way to answer the question, how do we know what we know? Husserl (1970) viewed the life world as what we experience pre-reflectively before we use language to categorize our thoughts, as the taken for granted knowledge that ultimately uncovers the meaning of phenomena. Husserl’s activity was epistemological in that he strived to understand the nature of knowledge; therefore, in the subject’s description of the experience of the object was the provision for the basis of understanding. Some phenomenologists, such as Husserl, Colaizzi (1978), and Giorgi (1985) use the strategy of “bracketing off” to remove presuppositions or biases about the phenomena which may impede the discovery of true meaning (Osborne, 1994). By putting aside one’s own understandings, judgments, and beliefs, the researcher is more available to see the phenomena as it really is. Other phenomenologists such as Heidegger (1927/1996), Gadamer (1960/1994) and van Manen (1997), claim that presuppositions or biases are embedded in one’s history and culture and cannot be eliminated. Furthermore, Gadamer argued that only by being aware of one’s fore-meaning or biases can one be open to reflect and understand what is new. Koch (1995)

explains this understanding as “being constructed by the world in which we live and at the same time constructing this world from our own experience and background” (p. 831).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Heideggerian

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), initially a student of Husserl, began to view phenomenology differently. Heidegger argued that phenomenology goes beyond description to interpretation with the view that all understanding cannot be explicit (Dreyfus, 1994). Furthermore, Heidegger refers to understanding as the ability “to grasp one’s own possibilities for being, within the context of the lifeworld in which one exists” (Palmer, 1969, p. 131). Dreyfus (1994) notes Heidegger’s belief in the statement, “the subject of phenomenology must be something that does not show itself but can be made to show itself” (p. 32). Heidegger viewed people as being-in-the-world, with the world contributing to our personal existence (Palmer, 1969). He focused on the study of existence, asking, what does it mean to be a person? (Koch, 1995). Throughout Heidegger’s writings, he refers to the German word Dasein. In colloquial German, Dasein means “everyday human existence” (Dreyfus, 1994, p. 13). However, Dreyfus points out that Heidegger’s intention was to encompass humans as beings and embrace a way of being. In this regard, Heidegger refers to Dasein as “being-there” (p.14). Heidegger’s aim was to understand the nature of being human and of being immersed in the world (Palmer, 1969). Heidegger (1927/1996) declared that the process of understanding relies on interpretation and that every encounter involves an interpretation influenced by a person’s background or historicity. To Heidegger, “phenomenology deals with our understanding of being [thus], it must be hermeneutic” (Dreyfus, 1994, p. 22).

As I contemplate interpreting the narratives of my research participants, so will I relate context as foundational to any interpretations by reflecting and drawing out the significance and meaning presented within the text and through participant feedback.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Gadamerian

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) expanded Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology to include language as a way of exploring being (Palmer, 1969). Van Manen (1997) states, "human experience is only possible because we have language" (p. 38). Gadamer believed that interpretation was embedded in one's linguistic, historical, and cultural traditions (Palmer, 1969). The question Gadamer strives to answer is: "how is understanding possible" (Palmer, 1969, p. 164)? According to Gadamer (1960/1994), a conversation, be it spoken or through written text, is a meeting of language immersed in interpretation and understanding; we are never certain what will emerge.

Similar to Heidegger, Gadamer (1960/1994) recognized that preunderstandings are inherent in our way of being situated in our cultural, social, and historical traditions, which cannot be separated from who we are. He uses the term prejudice equivocally with prejudice, challenging the negativity brought forth by the notion of prejudices. Gadamer defines prejudice as "a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined" (p. 270), be it a negative or positive value. He argues that prejudging is a justification for acknowledging the point in which we begin to expand our understanding, encouraging and recognizing the possibility for new understandings. These understandings also may not have been recognized before as emerging, evolving and multiplying (Spence, 2001). In other words, our past experiences enhance our ability to understand. Gadamer also uses the term, "horizon" as a metaphor to represent a person's

culmination of preunderstandings. A researcher approaches a hermeneutic situation within a horizon (Gadamer, 1960/1994). A “fusion of horizons” is the act of merging one’s horizon with that of another person’s through spoken language or written text, resulting in the blending of differing vantage points (Gadamer, 1960/1994, p. 306). Therefore, language provides a common ground for interpretation and understanding to occur within a co-constructed horizon between the subject of the interpretation and the researcher.

Furthermore, through conversations with the text, fusion of the horizons occurs between the interpreters and the texts concurrently (Annells, 1996). It is a process originally set forth by Schleiermacher (1998), and expanded upon by Heidegger (1927/1996) and Gadamer (1960/1994), which was referred to as the hermeneutic circle.

The hermeneutic circle describes a means for interpreting (Gadamer, 1960/1994). It is a back and forth cycle moving between the parts and the whole of texts. The hermeneutic circle as a process guides the researcher to acknowledge their own prejudgments, to maintain an openness to seeing differently (Koch, 1996), and to recognize fore-knowledge as coming from the subject of interpretation rather than personal distractions (Gadamer, 1960/1994).

Rational for My Choice of Methodology

‘Methodology’ refers to the philosophic framework, the fundamental assumptions and characteristics of a human science perspective. It includes the general orientation to life, the view of knowledge, and the sense of what it means to be human which is associated with or implied by a certain research method. We might say that the methodology is the theory behind the method. (van Manen, 1997, p. 27-28)

It is important that researchers identify philosophical assumptions and articulate which approach will guide the study in order to understand how knowledge produced is evaluated and used (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Likewise, Ray (1994) notes the necessity for researchers to explicate the approach taken, be it descriptive, interpretative, or both. It was my intent to

utilize a hermeneutic phenomenological approach that is based on Gadamerian philosophy and grounded in van Manen (1997) inquiry. I used both a descriptive and interpretative approach as set forth by van Manen. Gadamer (1986) outlines two ways of understanding interpretation, “pointing to something” and a “pointing out what something means” (p. 68). Van Manen refers to Gadamer’s distinction of the concept of interpretation as the pointing to something, such as a text, is descriptive and pointing out the meaning of the text is interpretative. Thus, “all description is ultimately interpretation” (van Manen, 1997, p. 25).

It is imperative that as the researcher I embrace the ideals of my chosen methodology. After much consideration, including reading scholarly texts and journals, speaking to experts in the field of hermeneutics, and personal reflection, I came to realize that I agreed wholeheartedly with the concepts presented in hermeneutic phenomenology. In particular, I take the stand that I am a human being that lives within the world and I cannot divorce myself from my past experiences or background. Furthermore, it is through language that I express my being; the place where I am understood and can be understood. It was my desire to better understand the phenomena of Nia as mind and body movement, and in particular, its influence on the lived experiences of midlife women. Therefore, my intent was to *borrow* midlife women’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences so that I could come to know more deeply the meaning and significance of the experience of Nia in their lives (van Manen, 1997).

Procedures

Hermeneutic Guidelines. A ‘how to do’ hermeneutic phenomenology as a prescribed method does not exist. However, there are a set of guidelines and recommendations for inquiry put forth by van Manen (1997) and Fleming, Gaidys, and Robb (2003) that I

followed and kept in the forefront throughout my research process. Van Manen has proposed the following six research activities:

- (1) turning to a phenomenon which interests us and commits us to the world;
- (2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
- (3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
- (4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- (5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
- (6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (p. 30-31).

Similarly, Fleming, Gaidys, and Robb have a set of four steps that support a Gadamerian approach. The steps are essentially the same as van Manen's (1997) activities with the exception of the inclusion of the hermeneutic circle; going from the whole to the parts and back to the whole, and expanding upon the meaning of the whole as well as the parts of the text (Fleming, Gaidys, & Robb, 2003).

Ethics Committee Approval. After writing a proposal and presenting it for review to my thesis committee it was then submitted to and approved by the University of Northern British Columbia's Ethics Review Board in the spring of 2007. I promptly began the process of identifying potential research participants.

Recruitment and Selection Process. I gained permission from a local women's fitness and aerobics centre to recruit volunteers for the study at their facility (Appendix A). I also gained permission from the Nia instructor to attend her class before and after to speak to potential volunteers (Appendix B). The Nia instructor had copies of the information letter (Appendix C) to hand out to potential participants in my absence and she talked to women

who were interested in participating in this study. I also posted an information flyer (Appendix D) on the bulletin board at the fitness centre.

The women's fitness and aerobics centre has offered Nia classes for the past five years. At the time of the study, there were four Nia classes held each week at the fitness centre with approximately 30 committed participants in attendance each session. I recruited volunteers from this centre who considered themselves experts on the mind and body movement of Nia and were able to articulate and reflect on their experiences, providing rich narratives.

I recruited participants by attending before and after Nia classes in order to explain my research and to solicit interest in it. Potential participants provided a contact number in person or they reached me on my cell phone or by e-mail. Within a week, 17 women had shown an interest in taking part in the research study.

Once a potential participant informed me of her interest to volunteer, I arranged a telephone screening interview. During this telephone screening, I interviewed the participant for suitability (Appendix E) and further informed the participant of the intent of the study. If she was willing to proceed, I informed her that I would confirm her selection by phone as soon as possible. A suitable participant was a female between the ages of 45 to 64 who had experienced the phenomenon under study for a minimum of six months in total and over any time frame. As well, suitability was determined by the volunteers' willingness to share their Nia experiences by articulating and reflecting on their thoughts and insights relevant to the phenomenon during face to face interviews and through journal writing. Eight women out of seventeen were selected from the purposeful sample. These eight women met the criteria and had been practicing Nia for the greatest length of time. After participant selection was

completed, I contacted each volunteer and invited her to begin journaling after Nia classes (Appendix F). I also arranged with the participant a convenient time and place to conduct the first in-depth interview.

Participant's Characteristics. The participants for this study were women between 47 to 64 years of age who partook in Nia at a fitness and aerobics centre for women, located in the interior of British Columbia, Canada. All of the women were Caucasian, married – with one participant living as married, and all but one were parents. All of the women had completed high school, four held a university undergraduate degree and one a graduate degree. Five out of the eight women were self-employed and two of those considered themselves semi-retired. Out of the remaining three women, one woman worked a full-time job, one woman worked part-time, and one woman was a homemaker working towards becoming self-employed. All of the women considered themselves to have intermediate or expert experience in Nia, practicing at least once a week over a substantial amount of time ranging from 1 year and 8 months to over 5 years. Four out of the eight women had attended a week long Nia white belt teacher training course. At the time of the study, two out of the four were attending Nia classes and actively teaching. All of the women had engaged in some type of physical activity during their lifetime. In addition to practicing Nia, all of the women walked regularly, and three women jogged and did other various activities (i.e. yoga, volleyball, softball, square dancing).

Journal Writing. Participants were asked to share a written journal that reflected on their experiences incorporating the mind and body movement of Nia into their daily lives. Participants were informed that journal writing was not a requirement; however, it would add to the depth of the study if they were willing to do so. They could follow the guide I provided

or write freely. All of the women submitted journal entries prior to the first interview and at least one more entry during the study. The amount of writing varied with one woman submitting 30 detailed pages while others submitted short phrases and no more than 10 pages. All of the writing added to the depth and richness of the women's descriptions of their experience, substantiating the data collected during the interviews. The questions I suggested to guide participants as they wrote their journals were (Appendix F):

- (1). how did I feel before Nia today?
- (2). how did I feel after Nia today?
- (3). did Nia influence my sense of well-being today, if so, how?
- (4). how was I managing before Nia today?
- (5). how am I managing after Nia today?

For the researcher, the journals provided another form of data that helped to substantiate the results and supported the interview process as researcher and interviewee co-constructed meaning. For the participant, journaling provided time to reflect on the more immediate experiences of Nia, particularly its relevance in one's daily life. Journal writing was encouraged throughout the study. I collected the first journal entry prior to our in-depth interview. All other journal entries were collected at a time and place that was most suitable for the participants.

Interview Process. It was my intent to use a hermeneutic phenomenological approach as outlined by van Manen (1997), taking into account the underpinnings of Gadamerian hermeneutic philosophy. The research interview is a conversation about a person's life world which is then transformed from its oral form to a text to be interpreted (Kvale, 1996). Similarly, van Manen (1997) notes that the hermeneutic interview is used to gather stories

and insights on a lived-experience or to dialogue and reflect on conversations entered into with the interviewee on prior recorded interview transcripts. The conversational interview in hermeneutics functions as a co-collaborative process. Furthermore, Kvale (1996) notes the delicacy with which the researcher must balance the interview as to not be as anonymous as a survey question nor as personal as a therapy session. The hermeneutic researcher keeps the question open and orientated toward the phenomenon being studied (van Manen, 1997). In addition, the purpose of the interviews was two fold: (1) to explore and gather experiential narratives that were rich and thick in detail, supporting a deep understanding; and (2) to develop a relationship with the participant that supported the unearthing of the meaning of the experience (van Manen, 1997).

An in-depth interview was conducted within the first few weeks of the study with two follow-up interviews scheduled thereafter. Each conversational interview I had with the women lasted for approximately 1 to 2 hours. The entire interview process took place over 5 months. The interviews were held either at the counselling lab located at the University of Northern British Columbia or at the participant's home.

At the beginning of our first interview, I provided the participant with an information sheet (Appendix C), an informed consent form (Appendix G), a demographics sheet (Appendix H) and a participant contact form (Appendix I). I established an atmosphere that was safe by building rapport, mutual respect, and engaging in empathic responses so that participants would feel comfortable expressing their feelings and thoughts on their experiences with Nia. I used questions similar to those found in Appendix J; however, the interviews permitted emergence and follow-up probes depended on the statements provided by the participant.

In addition, two follow-up interviews lasting 1 to 2 hours were conducted for further clarification and understanding of the participants' narratives, supporting an exhaustive account of the lived experience while maintaining a shared understanding of the phenomenon. At the start of the first follow-up interview I presented each participant with a summary of her transcription to elicit feedback and suggestions. The remaining time was spent clarifying and conversing further on the experience of the phenomenon being studied. At the start of the second follow-up interview I presented each participant with a diagram that represented a composite of the findings thus far, again eliciting feedback and suggestions and clarifying and conversing further. After each interview, time was allotted for the interviewee and the researcher to debrief. This portion of the interview was not tape recorded. The purpose of the debriefing was to give the participant an opportunity to voice how she felt about the interview process itself.

I did not take notes during the interview; therefore, after each interview I recorded field notes documenting the process, including any outstanding verbal or nonverbal responses. As well, while listening to the audio tapes I recorded any other emergent information such as tonal nuances.

Analyzing the Data

I transcribed each conversational interview verbatim as suggested by Fleming, Gaidys, and Robb (2003), in order "to capture the historical moment and provide a text with which to engage in dialogue" (p. 118). In keeping with the philosophical tenets of hermeneutics, the analysis of the texts facilitated movement from the whole to the part and back to the whole. The hermeneutic circle was enacted by engaging in feedback with each participant during her particular interview and during follow-up discussions. As well, the

analysis was a continuous process interwoven with the data collection. Therefore, each text was analyzed as they occurred. The following represents my analysis process: (1) the text was read in its entirety several times while listening to the audio tapes to gather an understanding of its overall meaning; (2) each sentence or section was attended to, revealing categories or units of meaning made up of events, happenings, or instances relative to the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990); (3) emerging sub-themes were identified that pertained to the unitive meaning (Creswell, 2005); (4) sub-themes were merged into broad themes to reduce redundancy (Creswell, 2005); (5) emerging themes were re-checked for relevance to the parts as well as the meaning of the whole text and discussions and feedback occurred with participants to facilitate a shared meaning; and (6) a representation of the shared meanings between the journal entries, the transcripts, and my understandings were formulated and presented to participants for further feedback.

During the data collection and analysis stage it is imperative that the researcher understand the meaning of the texts gained from the participant, as well as become aware of how personal feelings and experiences affect the research. Therefore, throughout the research process, I kept a personal journal recording my experiences, behaviours, preunderstandings, and interpretations as they emerged to ensure that I maintained objectivity, an openness to the phenomenon as it was presented (Fleming, Gaidys, & Robb, 2003).

Audio-tapes. The process of transcribing the tapes myself, and listening intently to the nuances of the women's voices as I re-read the text enabled me to deeply embody each woman's experience of the phenomenon. Every day I spent time with the data, living and breathing it. I used my computer for all of my analysis process. Four columns were created each with the heading: researcher's words, the participant's words, researcher's reflections,

and themes (Creswell, 2005). Every participant's transcription was colour coded. Each sentence was read for its uniqueness and was recognized as a part of a section that carried meaning as a whole. Sentences and sections that seemed particularly essential to the description of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1997) were copied and pasted from the participant's words column into the researcher's reflections column. These became units of meaning, representing the significance and meaningfulness of each woman's narrative and were the beginning steps to creating sub-themes. Along with this process, under the units of meaning I put words, or phrases in brackets further representing my initial reflections of meaning. I repeated this process with each participant's transcript as they occurred. At the same time, I created a list with sub-themes as they emerged. I re-visited each transcript several times verifying what I had gleaned, taking note of any areas I might have missed, and further reflected on the meaning as a whole. As well, I reflected on the transcriptions as a collection, as they occurred, to further understand the part to the whole. After I had transcribed each participant's second interview, I began to pool together the colour coded units of meaning and place them into sub-themes. The sub-themes were then placed into one of the fundamental lifeworld existentials of time, space, body, or relationship as a means to organizing the data (van Manen, 1997). I then created a diagram that represented the data in this form and shared it with each participant for feedback. After I transcribed the third tape, I followed the same process outlined above. I reviewed and reflected on these sub-themes to better understand their significance and meaning, eliminating redundancies and collapsing them into broad themes that would then further guide the process and create a more exact representation of the essence of the phenomenon. I noted that no new themes emerged after the analysis of the sixth transcription; saturation had been reached (Creswell, 2005).

Journal Entries. I photocopied each of the participant's journal entries returning the originals to them. I worked with the journal entries in much the same manner as the audio-tapes. I underlined or highlighted key words, phrases, or sentences creating units of meaning, noted my reflections and added sub-themes to my list. I typed verbatim (keeping the same colour code as in the audio-tapes) the units of meaning from the journal writings into the designated sub-theme. The journal submissions tended to represent the women's daily life experience with Nia; therefore, when creating the diagram of initial themes, I chose to place those from the journals in the existential of space.

The Writing. The creative process of writing and re-writing the text allowed me to re-visit, reflect, and be sensitive to the subtleties inherent in the women's expression of their lived experiences much in the way that van Manen (1997) explains:

an authentic speaker must be a true listener, able to attune to the deep tonalities of language that normally fall out of our accustomed range of hearing, able to listen to the way the things of the world speak to us. (p. 111)

I began by going back to the part to understand the whole, by reading each participant's words as they related to the themes and then the participant's words as a collective as they reflected the whole. It was as much a thinking process as it was a corporal embodiment in that I carried with me the internal stirrings that were beckoning to be set down in writing. Through this process, I was finding my way to transform the women's lived experiences of Nia during midlife into a written expression that would reveal the apparent as well as the hidden essence in a way that was reflective of the experience and telling of something meaningful (van Manen, 1997). In doing this, I brought forth the women's voices so that all could hear their experience in significant and meaningful ways bringing to light a deeper knowing of the phenomena.

Rigour in Qualitative Research

Philosophical assumptions, purposes, and goals found in the qualitative paradigm differ from those found in a quantitative paradigm. Therefore, qualitative research must rely on qualitative forms for critique and evaluation rather than quantitative forms of reliability and validity (Leininger, 1994). Lincoln and Guba (1985) laid the foundation of trustworthiness in qualitative research that is applicable to a Gadamerian approach (Flemings, Gaidys & Robb, 2003). Scientific merit or rigour of qualitative research is based on credibility, fittingness, and auditability (Beck, 1993). Sandelowski (1986) affirms these standards are necessary, adding Lincoln and Guba's criteria of confirmability. The following section will focus on trustworthiness which includes an understanding of credibility, fittingness, audibility, and confirmability.

Credibility. According to Beck (1993) and Sandelowski (1986), credibility measures internal validity: the vividness and faithfulness of the description of the phenomena. In other words, inquiring into whether the researcher has presented the data in such a manner, so that those who have experienced the phenomena in the same manner would recognize the described data as their own, is an important consideration. Beck (1993) proposes a series of questions that need to be answered related to determining credibility. In attending to answer these questions of credibility I have described my process in detail. Field notes were recorded after each interview describing my observations during the interview process and reflections of my experiences related to the phenomena. I also used this process as I read the participants' journal entries. Through this process, I maintained openness to the participants' descriptions of their experiences while co-constructing meaning through a fusion of horizons enhancing our understanding of the phenomena. In addition, I kept a personal journal,

recording my experiences, behaviours, preunderstandings, and interpretations to ensure that I maintained objectivity, an openness to the phenomenon, as it was presented. I also acknowledged my personal reflections through discussions with my thesis supervisors.

Creswell (2005) suggests the technique of member checking to verify the accuracy of the results. Member checking involves asking participants to comment on the veracity of the researcher's findings either in writing or through an interview. I used the technique of member checking to validate my understandings and interpretations of the phenomena. This process took place throughout the interview as I reflected and summarized some of the key points presented during the interview and asked for verification from the participant. As well, I presented to the women, in writing, during the first follow-up interview, a summary of their transcript and during the second follow-up interview a composite diagram of the initial findings from the data analysis, inviting feedback and suggestions. Finally, after the data collection, analysis and initial writing of the findings were completed, I presented each participant with the four findings chapters. All of the participants provided feedback with only one minor change. The intent of member checking was to inquire whether we were truly speaking the same language by understanding and interpreting a shared meaning, a necessary component in the hermeneutic circle (Fleming, Gaidys, & Robb, 2003).

Triangulation enhances the accuracy of the study by corroborating sources of data (Creswell, 2005). Triangulation was achieved by the use of field notes, researcher's reflective journal, transcribed audio-taped interviews, and participants' journal submissions.

Fittingness. Fittingness measures the likelihood that the study can be transferable to others in comparable situations. "A study meets the criterion of fittingness when its findings can 'fit' into contexts outside the study situation and when its audience views its findings as

meaningful and applicable in terms of their own experiences” (Sandelowski, 1986, p. 32). The findings from this study may be transferable to other women in midlife who are experiencing the phenomenon of Nia in their lives. For persons not involved in Nia, this research may increase understanding and awareness of this particular mind and body movement as it was experienced by eight midlife women. The goal of qualitative research is not to produce generalizations but rather to provide an in-depth understanding of phenomena and its transferability to similar circumstances (Leininger, 1994). The most reliable source for determining fittingness was the rich descriptions and co-created interpretations that were written in the final text of the study. There were three ways I facilitated this process: (1) by building a trusting relationship with the participant to formulate a safe environment for the emergence of thick descriptions of the phenomenon; (2) by examining the data analysis procedures to determine the accuracy of the emerging themes and interpretations revealed in the texts; and (3) by using direct quotes from the data collected that described, explained, and verified the co-constructed understandings gained through the process of a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. Acknowledgement of fittingness occurs through the fusion of horizons between reader (the interpreters) and the research text, with readers determining their own interpretation.

Audibility. Audibility refers to the ability of others to follow the documentation of decisions made by the researcher during the data analysis (Sandelowski, 1986). This includes the process of documentation and the reasoning that led to the conclusions. Beck (1993) stipulates several questions to answer when evaluating audibility. The questions relate to: the use of tape recorders, field notes, descriptions of strategies used to collect and analyze the data; descriptions of characteristics of participants and the recruiting process; verbatim

accounts to substantiate themes along with identified theoretical constructs, as well as social, physical and interpersonal contexts in which the data collection occurred; and verification that the decision trail could be followed.

I have previously described in detail the procedures I implemented regarding participant selection, data collection, and data analysis, including the use of a reflexive journal documenting my understandings and interpretations. As noted earlier, I used direct quotes from the texts to qualify my findings. I verified my documentations, decisions, and my reasoning with my thesis supervisors on a regular basis. My supervisors had the opportunity to contemplate my decisions and provide feedback. I also periodically met with my thesis committee members to discuss the research process and findings and receive feedback.

Confirmability. Confirmability is mastered if credibility, fittingness, and audibility have been recognized as meeting the criterion for the overall quality of the study (Sandelowski, 1986). A study is defined as being trustworthy or having rigour when confirmability is established.

Ethical Considerations

I gained permission from the UNBC Ethical Research Committee to approach potential participants at a women's fitness and aerobics centre located in the interior of British Columbia (Appendix A). I also approached the Nia instructor requesting access to her classes (Appendix B). Participants were informed that the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Time was provided for participants to ask questions and discuss the study throughout the research process. An information sheet (Appendix C) and a consent form (Appendix D) was given to each participant explaining the

voluntary activities involved in the research study, along with information regarding the audio-taped interview process. Included within the informed consent form was a release to allow me to use the data for potential future research purposes, publication, and presentations. Participants were informed that I would transcribe the audio-tapes and that I would photocopy the journal entries. As well, participants were informed that their actual words may be published in written form. At the beginning of each interview session, I verbally reminded participants of their right to anonymity, to withdraw from the study, or to not answer questions. Participants were informed that a summary of the results would be available to them by request. In actuality, the entire thesis will be given to participants in its final form as per their requests.

The names and contact information of the participants were strictly confidential. Only the researcher had access to names and contact information. Pseudonyms replaced the participants' names and were used to protect their identities. There was not any identifiable information on transcripts or journal submissions. Pseudonyms were used during conversations with research supervisors, other persons involved, and in the thesis. Only the researcher and the supervisory committee had access to the tapes and transcripts, and only the researcher and her supervisory committee had access to the journal submissions. I stored materials in a locked cabinet in my office at my residence. All identifying information was kept in a different room at my residence in a locked cabinet. Information I stored electronically was password protected. After seven years, I will destroy collected information by shredding paper documents and deleting electronic files.

All of the participants remained in the study for the full duration and were given a \$20.00 gift certificate at the completion of the study.

Limitations

The limitations were guided by what I perceived as possible occurrences given my choice of methodology and my participant selection. This study was specific to female participants between the ages of 47 to 64. Therefore, the experiences of people that fall outside of these parameters were not included.

The purpose of the study was exploratory and theoretical, designed to provide an interpretative rather than inferential body of data. Therefore, my findings are not generalizable to populations as they did not involve statistical operations. However, qualitative studies emphasize the fittingness of the findings to similar contexts or situations. It is incumbent on the reader to decide if the results are transferable to other people in similar circumstances.

Data collection and analysis procedures involved gathering thick descriptions of lived experiences and collaborating understandings and interpretations with participants. The study did not include volunteers who would have difficulty sharing their experiences in a face to face interview. The study represented the narratives of participants willing to engage in conversational interviews and journal writing. There was the possibility that only the narratives of articulate participants and those comfortable with writing were heard. Certainly, it might be the case that many of the participants were strong advocates for Nia and may have tended to speak about the benefits of Nia. It also could be that participants may not have provided accurate information, or may have lied. In addition, all of the participants were Caucasian; therefore, the study does not lend itself to understanding the experience of Nia within a multi-cultural framework.

Concluding Remarks

The detailed process of meeting ethics board approval, data collection and analysis of texts, and synthesizing and interpreting the lived experiences of the eight women, has been more than an exploration into methodology and method, it has equally been an exploration into my self. Prior to beginning this journey I had briefly been exposed to hermeneutic phenomenology through a graduate course. As I immersed myself in an understanding of it, and through my research process further lived it, I came to know myself differently. I now know more of who I am. I have come to understand that my knowing is an interpretation of my experiences and that through being in and open to a relation with language, a fusing of horizons occurs and a new form of knowing emerges. I am thankful for this embodied knowledge.

In addition, my choice to organize my reflective interpretations across the four lifeworld existentials of time, body, relationship, and space was a notion that spoke to me through my readings of van Manen (1997). Immediately, I was taken by the familiarity they brought as I reflected on my understanding and experience of movement, in that it is through movement that I express my lifeworld revealing who I am through my body, in time and space, and in relationship with my self and other. I was guided by the women's narratives as I listened and reflected deeply on their experience of the practice of Nia as part of their lifeworld. It occurred to me that they, too, were expressing their way of living through time, body, relationship, and space.

The next four chapters explicate the eight women's experiences of the mind and body movement approach of Nia during midlife through the four existentials beginning with Chapter Four, "Connecting the Experience of Nia to Midlife Women through Time". This

chapter reveals a dimension in which past, present, and future may be regarded as a continuous whole, but the existential concept further elucidates the ways in which the women's journey was expressed in reflections through time.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONNECTING THE EXPERIENCE OF NIA TO MIDLIFE WOMEN THROUGH TIME

This chapter begins with a journey through time – past, present, and future – based on the conversational interviews of eight participants. I was honoured to walk with these women in the existential dimension of time as they shared meaningful past moments, connected Nia experiences to moments of the present, and perceived future moments as new opportunities to embrace well-being during midlife. As I listened to each participant's telling, I wandered into my own stories across time. I, too, was enticed to reflect on those influential happenings that have shaped who I am today, on the practice of Nia revealed in present day experiences, and on how it connects to the creation of new life stories for tomorrow.

The conversational interviews of participants who spoke of the lived experience of Nia as a mind and body movement involved reaching back into the past to what had occurred previously, in order to reveal the impact Nia has had on their lives today. This is where I begin, by presenting the findings as they were told to me by the women themselves. The connections of the experience of Nia are situated in reflections through time, initially, within the context of *stories of the past* revealed through childhood, shifting, and tragic stories. Then they move to the present through representations of *living in the moment*. Finally, they focus on the future with reflections of *future glimpses*.

The Imprint

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Stories of the Past: Childhood

Nestled among the women's experiences of Nia were the reflections of their *childhood stories*, their early foundations. These stories tell of the challenges that the women

encountered when they were young. They expose the imprints that have traveled with them through their life journey. These stories, in part, have shaped their identity, and in certain ways express how the women have come to perceive their self-concept today, as reflected from where they have been. It is not their intention to place blame on or judge one's childhood environment, but rather to acknowledge the influences embedded there. It is the shaping of identity as each woman recalls it through meaningful memorable childhood experience that is significant. It makes me think of Oakley's (1984) writing, which emphasizes that reflection is the desire of women to better understand themselves within the framework of their history. As a sociocultural discourse, these reflections came to light as a heightened awareness of the body and deeper appreciation of grief experiences while growing up. Each participant shared the healing aspects they encountered through the practice of Nia. As the women conversed about the experience of healing the body, the mind, the spirit, and the emotions, it became evident that individually they had different childhood experiences, yet collectively commonalities emerged.

All the participants described their upbringing as a time that did not always nurture confidence and self-acceptance, rather, it was a time acknowledged as having no voice. Lily spoke of her experience while growing up, a slight tremor audible as she carefully pronounced her words:

I was to be seen and not heard. I was always standing back wanting to say things but never being able to. I just felt like I was not important enough. And who'd want to listen to what I had to say anyway.

Lily reveals a sense of being invisible, not only through being silenced but also through her body. She states, "I grew up in fear. I grew up in a very abusive family...always afraid...I felt worthless, just wasted space." Lily was not given permission to express her emotions.

She began to hide her feelings deep within her body. In her writing, Snowber (2004) speaks to the notion of being “emotionally handicapped” (p. 124), in that it is the act of carrying our emotions within our body without the awareness of how best to express them. In Lily’s case, the body became a vessel for her fear and not having the means to voice her pain, the body became immobilized.

Participants also expressed that they often felt less than they could be, and spoke of having to prove their self worth to others and ultimately, to themselves. Clair recalled her struggle to be seen and to be accepted, wiping her forehead with her hand. She explained:

It was horrible...I wasn’t good enough. I’ve just always felt over looked in a large family, so my self-esteem was really challenged. I felt myself to be more of an over achiever to get accepted by my peers, my family, by my siblings, proving my self to be worthy... not realizing all along how wonderful I really was. I embodied the belief system in my self. Somewhere the child had a belief system that no body really cared for or loved her as much as someone else. Someone else was always more special or better. I tried harder to match up...and it always seemed to allude me. Thank God that’s over with. Now as I look at my family they absolutely all adore me and love me. We’re all so wonderful and close and different, and yet unique and lovely. And you have to wonder, where does a child get those ideas?

Many of the women spoke of the ways in which they internalized their childhood experiences, thus coming to understand them. Woven among their stories was the experience of loss and the process of grieving, not only for a loved one but also over the loss of their authentic self. The hidden voice, the invisible body, the repressed emotions, and the disconnected spirit were some of the threads that represented the struggle for these women to be in the world. More precisely, to be in the world is articulated as *being in the world*. This phenomenological tenet is regarded as the understanding of one’s existence in the world as it is embedded in experience and sociocultural background. These women strived to find a way to step out into the world, to become expressive beings, and to honour their true selves.

Clair continued to explain:

I think what often happens is that it's the circumstances of your life. My mother experienced a lot of grief...and I felt the imprint of grief. The sensitivities of my being were able to pick up on the grief so I interpreted that in my being. I drew that into me. I had to do a lot of work around grief in this life time, lots of early losses. I feel more worthy now than I did when I was younger...my needs weren't met. I see that my early foundations were interrupted...this person, the being that I am did not get everything she needed in those initial years. The attention of a loving mother, a loving father, although they were loving people my father was sick and dying, and I didn't know it so there was a longing in me. As a child you don't know what you need. All you're doing is whining and that's how my mother probably viewed me, as a very needy child. I would later say to her that I actually just wanted attention from her, the connection, and connectedness with my father. I saw through the psychology of my own upbringing the inability for me to have a healthier adult relationship. It took me a whole journey to understand that that was from my early childhood, right up to the present day.

The challenges that emerged through Clair's childhood story were embodied into her being at a very young age. Some of those challenges were living with grief, living with feeling unworthy, living with low self-esteem, and living disconnected from others. In its own way each challenge created a loss, a void needing to be filled. Clair grew up amidst grieving experiences in her family. The ways in which her family approached grief were not expressed. Shapiro (1994) has stated that grief within the interdependent family involves a crisis of attachment and a crisis of identity. Clair eloquently refers to the influences grief has had on her being – mind, body, emotions, spirit – and on how she struggled to emerge. For Clair, grief became the intruder. She housed the grief that surrounded her; it became a part of her. She carried it with her, in the negating messages she told her self, in her sadness, and in her loss. However, there is a sense that Clair also embodied resilience and knew within her that a different world awaited and that somehow she would find her way out. I liken her experience to the image Bateson (2000) has suggested that “at some very abstract and unconscious level, perhaps, the infant learns that there are both internal and external orders

and it is possible to coordinate them. The beginning, perhaps, of wisdom, at the very dawn of the life cycle” (p. 233). Similarly, Carla described life when she was young amidst the rules and roles of her family:

We were proper English children, seen and not heard. We had to look good, behave, and be a good reflection on the family, the parents. We weren't allowed to misbehave, you know, fidget. We were expected to be good whether it be for five minutes or five hours. We were expected to behave...I don't know how many times I heard, 'quit your fidgeting'. It was a lot of rigidity and that's where it became engrained in me. I had to live by a lot of rules and a lot of expectations. Some were easy to live up to and some were impossible. That's just the way it was, good little English children.

Carla's family rules and expectations dictated the way in which she lived and interacted in her environment. She was wrapped within the influences and bound by the ever-present constraints. Carla became rigid, timid, and fearful. As the eldest among her siblings Carla was assigned the role of the responsible one. Within the prescribed roles given to children gender is often incorporated without much thought. It is simply society's predetermined way in which we perceive girls should act, think, and feel. The feminist movement in the 1970s brought new awareness to the forefront highlighting gender roles and identity and argued for forward reaching changes about women's place in society. However, for Carla growing up in the 1960s in a conservative English home meant that the old standards still applied. Carla conformed to the household rules, roles, and expectations in order to fill her need to be accepted and 'do right' by the family. As Carla continued to reflect, her voice vacillated between irritation and melancholy. She stated:

My parents would go and meet somebody and have their grown up time. We were to be in the background and behave. My voice, I didn't have one when I was a kid. No, our voices did not count. If there was something that we disliked or were unhappy with, we were told from adults, 'I said so'. And as soon as the eyebrows went up we got scarce. That's just the way it was. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing all the time; it's just that this is the rigidity from where I came from. Probably it is where a lot of my feeling timid and fearful came from, too. I was the oldest of three, so I was always

the example setter. I was always responsible if one of the other two didn't behave. I was responsible for their behavior as well as my own. Sometimes that was a lot to put on a kid. It's not that we lived in jail or anything, but I think that's where I got a lot of my sense of having to be responsible and feeling responsible, even if I wasn't. It was fear of trying new things and different things, in case I failed. Fear of failure was huge for me and I did a lot of approval seeking. I grew up in fear of displeasing someone. And my parents used guilt a lot. They never raised their hands but they sure pulled out the guilt card...it worked like a charm on me.

It was within the cocoon of childhood that the participants revealed awareness of a developing identity. The stories echo the images recalled by many of the women in the study. These included their living with rigidity, rules, and expectations; living with feeling shy, responsible, fearful, and unworthy; living with guilt, grief and loss, and wanting for parental connection. The issues reverberated within the women in their body, mind, spirit, and emotions.

The women also spoke of the powerful influences in their childhood lives and the ways in which they evolved through them. As the participants reflected on their childhood experiences, they shared the way in which they have healed through their Nia practice. Katie recalled some of her initial Nia experiences. With a few laughs, a smile, and an ease in her body Katie spoke:

I walked into a Nia class and it just brought it all together. Working with the routines and learning how to make noise. It was okay to be heard and yell if I wanted to, or go, 'whoo' or, 'yes'. It was okay and nobody judged me. If I wanted to just dance around the room and act like a child that was okay. So that helped me grow a lot more in myself and to be more comfortable with myself and allow myself to be heard and to be seen. I didn't have to hide in the corner anymore. I was looking for my self, where I belonged in the world, what my purpose was now that my children were grown...discovering what's inside of me, what I can offer, what I can do for people, really wanting to give out and help and share...I was looking to connect with other people.

As I considered the details in the women's stories, I began to view the emergence of their identities as they perceived them. Many spoke of not having a voice, of being seen and not

heard. It was here that we began to make deeper connections of the notions in childhood stories to a better understanding of how they became engraved into the flesh and blood of their personalities, changes of which surfaced in their shifting and tragic stories.

Discovering What is Inside Me

Stories of the Past: Shifting Stories

Many of the women spoke of times when they absorbed external messages, albeit lessons learned, from the outside-in, either intentionally or by chance. The women regarded the outside as opposed to the inside as any familial, societal, or cultural means of influence. These external messages were often linked to sociocultural expectations, the shoulds and should nots. For instance, some of the women were taught to look outside of themselves for direction and approval because others' perceptions, opinions, and knowledge were more valued. Much has been written about the impact on women's self-concept as it relates to living up to a feminine-beauty standard that views women as objects on display. Early adolescence is a time when girls' developing bodies blossom. However, they are bombarded with messages from the media, magazines, and possibly peers and family members proposing a perfect body type. Pipher (1994) points out that this is a time when many girls begin the cycle of self-criticism. They "scorn their true bodies and work for a false body. They allow the culture to define who they should be" (p. 57). During her teenage years Carla was taught to tuck in her hips and pull back her shoulders in order to look presentable. Now that she's been practicing Nia, Carla feels comfortable in her body. She has also devalued the external pressures. Carla stated:

I used to always be concerned about my tummy hanging out so I'd be sucking it in and up, and I would get so sore. Now my tummy hangs out, so what! I really don't care. Since I've been doing Nia my self image has changed. I'm not being really concerned about what I would perceive other people to think of me. That is such a

huge thing for me because I used to be so concerned how I presented to other people. Likewise, Cassandra talked of growing up in a military family where she was expected to look outside of herself when deciding what to do or even how to be. As Cassandra speaks there is irritation in her voice as she recalls the past expectations and her struggle to release herself from their hold. She recalled:

I was brought up in a military family and if you live in a military family you're taught to live from the outside-in. You always check outside to what people are telling you to do, how you're to do it. So I'm very good at doing that. When I was in my forties I realized that my physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being contributed to my quality of life. If I was unhappy I needed to look inside myself not outside myself. That's what really draws me to Nia. Nia always brings you back to your core, to your inside self...I've always looked outside my self for direction and ultimately approval or deciding what I'm going to do or who I'm going to be, I check outside first. I've really become aware that for the rest of my life I really want to be the other way around. When I'm unsure of who to be, or what to be, or how to be, I want to go into my own body or heart or feelings.

As the women shared their stories it became evident that these outside influences were the catalyst to their *shifting stories*. In their own quietness they began to recognize their internal voice and they began to question. Pat talked about her awareness of an internal shift at a very young age as she recalled living in a devout Catholic family searching for spiritual understanding. Pat explained that when she was ten years old one of her responsibilities was to help clean her grandmother's house. When her work was done she would happily retreat to the floral wallpapered bedroom that was her grandmother's. It was here that she would snuggle on the big comfy bed and read one of the few books that could be found in the house. Pat recollected:

I loved reading that book of Saints, it was full of good stories of good people, but you know things like the Immaculate Conception, I don't get that, and the story of purgatory...I thought how horrible, you talk about heaven, hell, and these poor innocent little babies go to purgatory. I'm sorry, I mean there was no way I could ever accept that, I was a little girl when I heard that story and I thought that makes no sense.

Pat explained that as a child she never voiced her view, it just sat inside her unsettled. Through her journey into adulthood she continued to search for a spiritual connection that would reverberate within her. Finally, Pat discovered a meaningful spiritual affiliation with others that supported her emotional and spiritual needs. It was here that she found a comfortable resting place for her spirituality. Pat equates her time spent with Nia to time spent celebrating her spiritualness.

My whole person, my whole being is responding. It's [Nia] just not an intellectual, it's not just a physical. It's something deeper, something deep and more intense. It doesn't feel superficial or light, it feels powerful. It feels like I'm connected to something bigger than the every day experience...making spirituality part of every day life I used to think about that a lot when we would attend church on Sunday, I loved that feeling. I loved the music but I loved the feeling of the church. It felt different than the rest of the week. It's all about how to bring that special feeling that you sometimes experience in churches or certain times into your every day life so that you feel it more, so that's what Nia's like for me, for life.

Like Pat, many of the women felt their practice of Nia supported their sense of spirituality. Attending Nia was a gift that they gave themselves. It was a time when they could focus on the beauty of life, be thankful for the body's movement, find joy, laugh, shed a tear, and connect with others. Nia replenished their soul and they felt alive.

Many of the women made the comment that "Nia came into their life at just the right time." Katie discovered Nia at a time in her life when she could no longer repress her inner voice. Her body could no longer contain the emotional charges and an undercurrent began to build that would cause a major shift in her way of being. Katie described herself as a shy and withdrawn child except for the years between the ages 9 and 12 when she took dance lessons and performed on stage. As a teenager, her family moved around and she found making friends very difficult. Katie explained that she continued to suppress her voice throughout her adult years by not speaking up or agreeing with people. When she could no longer hold it she

would explode, recollecting, “It was like a volcano bottled up.” And then the shift occurred.

She continued to explain:

There was quite a shift. I think more in my consciousness than my awareness. At that time I was working at a beer store and I found it, kind of, you know, selling beer to people all the time...I didn't want to do that anymore. I didn't feel like I was helping society. I wanted to do something more fulfilling...I was really brought to a place where I thought there was more in life than just working at a job that you're not happy in. It was at that time that I discovered Nia...Through my married life I was too busy with kids and things like that and it got to a point where, I just can't do this anymore. I quit that job [and had the opportunity to take care of my parents]. I spent almost 2 months alone with my parents. I had an awakening. I think it was that I was alone. I went back to reading the books I used to read...I did a lot of healing with my parents on a personal level. It was a wonderful time. I had a whole shift in the way I was. I came home and decided that's it; I'm going to be a different person.

For women, midlife is often marked by a life review. It can be a turning point sparked by changes in roles, responsibilities, and relationships. It is a personal exploration that may or may not cause undue stress. It is not a ‘crisis’ per se, but rather a means for some doors to open and others to close. Managing midlife changes is an individualistic endeavor shaped by historical and sociocultural experiences (Lippert, 1997). By reexamining her past, Katie began to reimagine her future (Bateson, 1994). She was creating new meaning in her life and laying the foundation for the kind of person she would become. The women's *shifting stories* were part of the process of shedding the social and cultural conditioning they experienced. Through these shifts the inner voice had begun to speak. The practice of Nia supported a revisioning of the self at a time when changes in life conditions often precipitated reflection and reevaluation. The women were becoming more confident and self-assured. Yet for two participants, their midlife transition would take a grave turn as *tragic stories* occurred.

The Things That Constrict Me

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Stories of the Past: Tragic Stories

Tragedy is an occurrence that can be devastating and most often involves a mournful loss. These happenings are difficult to go through and have a powerful impact on those involved. As I was exposed to two of the women's *tragic stories*, I heard the ways in which they have dealt with the grief and more specifically, how they found a way to move forward. Through time the wounds began to heal, however, moving beyond the tragedy did not erase the memory stored in the body. These tragic stories capture the continued healing that many of the women expressed was occurring within the body – mind, spirit, and emotions as they experienced Nia.

In Clair's *tragic story*, it's like clock work, she spoke of how the body ached as the remembrance date approached. She had experienced a near death situation when she was in her forties. Clair was in a boating accident and had to swim for 14 hours in freezing water after she watched her partner die. She speaks of the trauma her body has endured and the ways she has tried to heal. Over the years, she has struggled to acknowledge the grief and honour the hurt. As Clair shared her experience her eyes were moist. She spoke softly, clearing the lump in her throat while she held back her tears. She recollected:

This is the anniversary date of all of the things that constrict me emotionally and I think it is also directly related in the body as well, something that I've been working with the last 10 years since the incident in the lake. I had to swim for 14 hours in freezing water after my partner died. So for me, it's a review in the body. The body does its post trauma thing every year. I try to put different things in place to change it. It's almost like I want to change the brain stem so that I can heal it once and for all. Each year it presents itself differently for me. I could say this year is better than last year or the year before, or the year before but I would just now say that it's always there and it's different no matter what I do...I just have to come to accepting that's just what it is each time of the year as much as I want to avoid it, go around it, and make it into something else, it will refuse me. It comes up and says, 'I'm here' and that's when I recognize that I have to honour it. I have to be in that place and it's not

always pleasant that's why I like to run away from it...Even though I have all of these pleasant things going on around me I still experience it. I still have deep sorrow, sadness, grief, pain, all of those things it touched.

The need to escape the intense sweep of emotions that reoccur each year is not only relevant in Clair's story, but is a common theme often present in many mournful losses. Grieving is a lengthy process that can be comforted by finding a tangible form in which to express our inner grief (Snowber, 2004). Snowber reminds us that there is not one sure and fast way to attend to sorrow; rather, discovering what one needs at that moment is most important. After the tragic event, Clair took solace within the spiritual realm. Through mediation and prayer she tried to heal her soul. However, she continued to experience herself as disconnected. For instance, as her spirit began to mend, her emotions would overwhelm her and once again her body would become immobilized. This was a repetitive cycle that Clair experienced. Her sorrow was locked within her body. She tried to heal each part of herself as if they were separate entities, beginning with her spirit. Clair was unable to address the intricate interconnectedness that was held within her body, mind, spirit and emotions. Through Nia, Clair became aware of this interdependence. Her body became the vehicle for her expression. She began to trust her body again. As she rediscovered the strength in her body she was able to support and honour her whole self. Nia helped Clair alter the way she experienced her grief. Clair explained:

Over time it's been easing. Sometimes it brings the emotions and it brings me the visuals and the hearing and seeing and then I'm able to weep a little. It's as if my body is stronger now. I don't have to go into a full blown, curl up in a ball, weakened uncontrolled state...Nia has helped me to embrace what has happened to this body and to be able to transform it into a new kind of energy, like something new... Nia came into my life at the right time because it gave me back that trust in my body. Whereas, I had been totally taken down and debilitated so I had to crawl back up into it again. It gave me that piece again so that I could say, 'yeah, I can do this!'...I think over the years it was always one step forward, ten steps back, that's what it was like for me. It wasn't just the physical; it was the emotional-physical body. It was so

intricately related with the experience of the loss of my loved one, holding my loved one while he died. Taking him with me and having to exert every super normal power to save my own life in freezing water, which is actually pretty impossible to do...I was in double jeopardy for quite some time because the grief self would weaken me so then I had to work on strengthening the body. Once the body was stronger then I had to deal with the emotions. The emotions would come and it would weaken the body. I was in that kind of double jeopardy for quite some time until, all I had was time to heal. With Nia, I was able to all of a sudden, wow! I could move my legs again and feel strong and yet the emotions were there, all of those connections were there. I could bring it to tears. I could think about the lake and the washing over and I could see him dying in my arms. I could do all of those things again, and again.

Clair referred to her ability to now distinguish her whole self. She began to understand that in order to heal, she needed to honour each aspect of her self, separately, yet unified. For Clair, her body housed the connection to the wholeness of her self and it was through her Nia experience that she was able to embrace her healing process. Moving her body in Nia released Clair's grief. Reflecting on Snowber's (2004) understanding of the grieving process, the discovery of Nia became Clair's tangible form from which to express her sorrow. I had the sense from our conversations that Clair is now empowered. She has more control over her response to the grief, and is no longer consumed by it.

Similar to Clair, Lily also experienced tragedy in her life. Lily was not affected by a single incident; rather, she grew up in an abusive environment that perpetuated sorrow and loss. She carried her grief into adulthood and at the age of forty felt very alone in the world. As Lily entered midlife, she was confronted with life events that became too difficult to manage and she spun into a depressive episode. Lily had recently moved to a new city with her husband and children. She was responsible for caring for her two daughters while her husband worked away from the home for months on end. As the years past, raising two teenagers alone took its toll on the family. Her relationship with her daughters and her husband became strained and distant. She struggled to keep the family from falling apart.

Lily felt overwhelmed and helpless, and fell into a deep depression almost ending her life. As Lily unveiled her anguished past she spoke methodically, almost monotone, pausing every few words. Somberness filled the room. She explained:

Severe depression, isolation [she pauses] we moved here about seven years ago. I moved from my family. My husbands out of town all the time and I didn't know anyone here. I just became the mother and didn't know anybody, anything and then [she pauses again] I went into a deep depression...I started drinking and yeah, doing crazy things, I couldn't find my way. I ended up taking an overdose of sleeping pills and I ended up having to go to counselling. I did some group therapies, relaxation, self-esteem, did a lot of that and it didn't really help.

Lily spoke further about faithfully attending verbal therapy and taking her anti-depressants, trying to get her life back on track. However, she still felt empty. It took stepping into a Nia class for Lily to begin her road to recovery. As Lily spoke her voice began to lift and her mood felt bright. She explained:

I'm a doer not a talker. If I'm going to help myself I have to be doing something I can't be talking about it cause that just keeps going on and on in my head. Whereas, if I can do something physical [emphasis on "physical"] to help myself then that's what I want to do. I wasn't getting that in counselling...I found Nia in an article in the newspaper. I walk with this woman every morning. She's in her seventies. She dared me to go with her, so we went and I've been going twice a week ever since. The first day it was like, this is kind of weird. But the second day I got it, it clicked. I felt peace inside, and I felt centered, and worthwhile, all the things that were missing. It's really hard to describe what Nia does for me. I'm just so up after I'm done. My family noticed the difference right off the bat...I was happy again. It only took four times and I was smilin' again. Within four months I was off anti-depressants and within six months I wasn't going to counselling anymore. I've been on my own with Nia ever since...I'm totally not the same person I was a year and half ago.

Lily helped me to understand how her well-being was enhanced by physically moving her body in Nia. She was healing through the movement of Nia as her body danced freely, moved in various martial art forms – kicking and blocking, and worked with body alignment techniques. Lily's body was a participant in her healing process. Her Nia experience was much like Halprin's (2003) description of movement as the language of the body, "Whatever

resides in the body – despair, confusion, anger, joy – will come up when we express ourselves in movement. When made conscious, and when entered into as mindful expression, movement becomes a vehicle for insight and change” (p. 18). Lily further explained:

I’m not walking around with a dark cloud over my head any more. I know where I want to go and what I want to do, I’m happy about it...My sense of well-being is my sense of purposefulness, mental health, Nia has really changed that. I feel I have purpose in life, and strength. I just feel good about myself. For 46 years I never felt good about myself, I do now.

Situated in the past, participants shared *childhood stories, shifting stories, and tragic stories*. In these were revealed the challenges they experienced over time and the ways they had begun to mend through the practice of Nia. Through our conversations, it became evident that the women struggled, although in differing ways, to feel confident, to accept themselves, and to have a voice. They wanted their authentic self to emerge. I now move to an understanding of how living in an integrated way is representative of living in the moment as the women continue to unfold their journey with Nia.

It's My Way of Living Now

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Living in the Moment

For most of us, our daily lives are spent reflecting on the past or planning for the future. It is a rare occurrence to find ourselves in the moment, in the here and now. For myself, there are times in my life I will always remember; however, there are too many moments that I have let slip by unnoticed. Living in the moment would require that I become mindfully aware of what is transpiring within my body, mind, spirit, and emotions as I respond in variety of contexts. The experience of Nia invites the practitioner to be in the here and now and to embrace the whole self in each moment in time. Moreover, the women in the study expressed that in order to do Nia to their fullest potential they needed to be present.

Clair commented on her experience, “The practice of Nia requires that a person be in the here and now focused on the body, the mind, and the emotions. Because when you’re in Nia you can’t be doing anything else but that.” Likewise, Frannie expressed a similar sentiment. For Frannie, focusing on the choreography was the impetus to staying in the here and now:

Every time it’s something different. It’s never like you go and it’s the same routine all the time. The instructor may re-introduce routines but she changes the choreography enough so you’re always focused on what you’re doing. You’re presented with new challenges in terms of routines or choreography and music every time you go. You have to be aware. You can’t do it blindly so it keeps you focused in the moment not what’s going on in the next room or what the person beside you is doing. With Nia, you need to be present and not just in one aspect, not just being there in the physical body you need to be there as a total package.

There was an understanding that as the women experienced themselves being present to the moment they were able to begin living in the moment. They began to reassess the way in which they experienced time in their lives. Through their practice of Nia, they took the time to become more mindful and accepting of where they were in life at this very moment.

Pat talked about honouring her time in Nia:

I really notice that, that’s one hour of the week when I can be very present in the moment, you know people say be in the moment. I’m not thinking about what happened before, I’m not thinking about the future so much, I’m really here, now, and it’s not always easy to do that.

By being present to the moment the women became more aware of themselves as integrated beings. They were bringing together the wholeness of themselves – body, mind, spirit, emotions in an integrated way. Pat’s comment reflected the women’s view, “To me, Nia’s more holistic than playing ball. I play ball and its fun, social, and physical but Nia makes me think more about my emotional health and my physical health and the connection between the two.”

The women also spoke about finding mental clarity and feeling unencumbered with worries or stresses in their life as they stayed focused in the moment. Rose described life, in general, as being very stressful. She affirmed that it is in her personality to take on commitments at work, with her family, and in the community that drive her to feel overwhelmed by the responsibilities she has taken on. Two years ago, Rose developed a tumor and she became very ill. Even though Rose was relieved when she discovered it was benign, she realized the need to re-evaluate her lifestyle. Practicing Nia in the present moment reflects her longing to bring more balance to her life and to recognize the changes she needs to make to reduce the stress. Throughout our conversations, Rose often spoke quickly. In the following transcription she begins to slow down her pace as she described her experience. Rose explained:

I think that when I'm doing Nia I have a chance or the opportunity to try [to stay present]. I'm really focusing on what I'm doing and what it's doing to my body. I'm not making any decisions I'm just trying to learn to be more in tune with my body. I don't know if you're familiar with mindfulness? It's being totally right there so what I'm doing is being mindful of everything. I guess that's what in Nia makes things clear...My heads not doing 15 different things, it's not thinking, 'okay, you're going to do this, this, and this.' So my mind isn't as busy. It's also letting down barriers that have been up trying to ignore something, 'hey, wait a minute, this is causing you a lot of stress and you need to acknowledge this.'

The desire to bring the present moment to the forefront of ones' experience in Nia reverberated with all of the women. They were coming to know the intricacies of the self through their movement experience in the here and now. Moreover, they were shedding the mind of any distractions and recognizing and honouring their inner sensations. As a result, they were finding themselves more equipped to handle life's stresses. Cassandra described her experience:

What I like about Nia is it always brings me back to the present moment because you can get caught up in planning and then you suddenly look at your life in the moment

while you're doing Nia and it just reminds me, 'oh right, now is where I'm living' and then I'm assured of my well-being. It's probably been one of the most valuable things for me. I am a thinker and planning ahead that kind of person. To really benefit you need to be in your body and to be in your body you have to be in the present moment. For me, the big thing is living in the present moment...be willing to move with it, through it, like Nia...through movement we find healing.' It is that combination of giving your mind something to focus on here and now so it can't run away to work on those problems...Nia brings me back to myself and then I'm more able to manage when I'm faced with challenges.

As the women began to live in the moment they became more aware of their internal make-up, the inner workings of their body, mind, emotions, and spirit. They were contemplating the landscape of their authentic self.

Being authentic was distinguished by the women as being who they are in the present moment rather than being who they want to be, as if they were searching for their selves. They acknowledged that they were still evolving into their self yet it was less of a seeking out and more of a becoming. In her writing, Rubin (1979) discussed the notion that women have two selves. One that they have been socially conditioned to become since childhood and one that they are becoming as midlife women. "Such contradictory and confusing expectations in childhood set women up for a lifetime of vacillation and ambivalence about their identity in adulthood" (p. 51). Rubin also pointed out that it takes time for women to "internalize a new self image" (p. 61) particularly as it takes place within a context of social interaction. Moreover, society's influence on how women should be and ought to act has had an impact on women and their identity, and stripping away those layers takes time. Unfortunately, some women are trapped behind the masks they wear in order to appease the cultural expectations. For Katie, her identity was both revealed and hidden by the mask she wore. However, through her experience with Nia Katie began to rid herself of the mask's confinement. She was able to break free and become her authentic self. She explained:

I don't have to have a mask on when I'm in Nia. I can take off my mask. In fact, I don't need to wear one anymore. I've taken off the mask and I can be free to be who I am. I'm comfortable expressing that [who I am] in class. I was able to peel away those layers, the walls built up and the mask each time I went through the different routines. I did feel really reworked. I was transforming again into more of what I wanted to be. I felt like I was blossoming. People said, 'wow, you're coming out of your shell. You're a different person.' Even my own brothers and sisters commented, 'you're coming out of your shell, it's so nice to see you blossoming and coming into your own and being your own person.'

By asking the question who am I, we begin to investigate and uncover. Who am I with family, with friends, at work? What are my beliefs and values? What is meaningful in my life? Who am I in reference to my experiences, past history, future desires? Who am I relative to this very moment? By becoming who we are, we begin *to be* who we are. Who we are is then expressed in our being, as we live and take each breath, we are being. Pat revealed this outlook:

I feel like a being. I feel like a being when I'm at Nia. You know when you have those experiences when you're being, I'm not just thinking, I'm not just doing, I'm being. I'm it, I'm it, I'm being! So that feels wonderful...a clear sense of who I am and where I'm going and why I'm doing what I'm doing...I feel more comfortable with who I am than I think I would be if I didn't do Nia.

Through Nia the women were able to embrace who they are. For Clair, expressing her authentic true self meant that she was open to new possibilities of becoming who she is, at any moment in time. Clair could make choices and decisions based on being true to who she is rather than attempting to be something or someone else. She explained:

When you are being authentically true then all the possibilities begin to open and you have the ability to make choices based on your present moment, accepting who you are, being who you are. Often times I see people being who they want to be. I can't say I'm being who I want to be, I am being...I don't want to be. Clair is just a beautiful unfolding and acceptance of who I am right now, in this juicy moment without recollection of the past or even the future, it's that juicy moment.

The making of ones identity is in Josselson's (1996) words "the ultimate act of creativity – it is what we make of ourselves...identity is never fixed; it continually evolves.

But something in it stays constant; even when we change, we are recognizably who we have always been” (p. 27-29). What is beneath the surface, behind our physical façade, speaks to who we truly are. We are molded from our histories, experiences, cultural influences, values, beliefs, and interactions with others. Like a sculptor we reshape ourselves over and over again. Cassandra touched on the importance of keeping in mind that what we often see at first glance does not define our totality. She recalled:

I particularly remember when I came back from my sister’s funeral. You’re in a different place after something like that...Nia was so helpful in just reminding me that what you’re seeing here in front of you isn’t all there is. There is so much more to me. There’s so much more to our experience that is below the surface.

For the women in the study, their time spent with Nia was time when they could honour their true selves and embrace that they are becoming. It was as if they were *coming home*.

Not only did the women relish the present moment while practicing Nia they also spoke about reflecting on past situations, experiences, and directions for the future. Their time in Nia provided the opportunity for them to reflect as they moved their bodies, opened their hearts, calmed their minds, and let their spirits soar. It was in the aliveness of the moment that the reflection would take place. Pat used her time in Nia as a check-in. She would ponder her life and consider ways she might make changes that would improve her sense of well-being. She stated:

It’s a time for me to think about where I am, how I feel, am I coping, am I really happy or is there something I could do differently so that things would be better?...An opportunity to reflect in a nice physical way.

Similarly, Carla reflected on her past history and parts of her life that she finds challenging. Carla is 47 years old and through her work with Nia, both as a student and a Nia teacher, she has begun to let go of the rigidity that was engrained from childhood. She is becoming more spontaneous enjoying her new sense of freedom. Carla is integrating a new

way of being into her lifeworld. She was embracing her life as it was happening, in the moment, while simultaneously recreating the way she interacts in her world. She explained:

I like to look back on the past...just as memories. I don't like to hang on to anything that doesn't serve me to hang on to. I've done a lot of work with that lately, just letting go, living in the moment. The future, projecting into it, casting into the future but not trying to map it or hang on to it too tightly, just living, just being, just loose plans. I've really been trying to get rid of my rigidity and my need for routine. I don't need to plan out everything. My need for planning is on a daily basis not on a long term basis...Believe it or not I discovered that through Nia not Nia itself but something that Nia led me to where I never would have gone if it had not been for Nia...Nia's great therapy, it really is if you let it be. I guess everybody needs to find their thing that works for them and it seems to be mine.

Carla's experience echoes Edelstein's (1999) writing as she refers to midlife as an age to relinquish the past, reconnect in the present, and refocus for the future. Edelstein describes letting go and mourning as a midlife passage that paves the road for women to begin to reconnect to who they are and prepare for the future. Carla found her Nia experience to be therapeutic. She was able to shed old patterns and practice new ways of becoming.

Likewise, Cassandra's Nia experience enabled her to merge her past within the present. Making it possible for her to reexamine and rework histories leading to new perspectives and the prospect for change. She stated:

I have this insatiable need to understand why. I'm learning as I get older that sometimes there isn't a why, it just is. Be curious about it and the answer will rise up. It's the same thing in Nia. It will be a discussion I've had maybe a week before and, 'oh, I get it' and it shifts me...I may be here right now but still something that happened way last week is suddenly here and gets opened up in a different way and I move on. I'm now a different person and it was just being here at Nia today.

For the women in the study, reflection was an impetus for change. It was the point when living in the present involved reevaluating the past in order to honour who they are, influencing their sense of well-being. All of the women acknowledged that reflection was not viewed as drudgery or something to wallow in; rather, it was a timely visit into the past while

beholding the present. Moreover, practicing Nia gave the participants an opportunity to embrace the moment-body, mind, spirit, and emotions and uncover their authentic selves. Furthermore, living in the present meant that the future was kept at bay. The women were consciously aware of how easily they could begin to push through today and live for tomorrow. Their stories of the future were based on keeping Nia in their lives, growing stronger and healthier, and being inspired by older women. They were future glimpses that were rooted in the here and now yet prepared them for a time that would come.

We Could See Ourselves

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Future Glimpses

As the women glanced into the future they all were adamant that they would continue to incorporate Nia into their lives. Katie spoke for all the women in the study when she said, “I see my self exploring more and more of Nia. It will be in my life forever.” The reasons why it was important that Nia remained a part of the women’s lives was embedded in their present experiences and in their vision of their future. By keeping Nia in their lives they were, in effect, guaranteeing themselves that the gains they were experiencing now would be replicated later, in *future glimpses*. The women envisioned themselves getting stronger and healthier as they continued to practice Nia. They were also inspired by the older women who they participated with wanting to emulate their healthful presence.

There was an obvious commitment to doing Nia that shone through the women’s descriptions of their experience with Nia. They often spoke about the efforts made to arrange their weekly Nia time around other daily events. Attending Nia class was their priority. Their families knew of its importance in their lives. Their work schedules and weekly appointments were planned and adjusted to accommodate their Nia practice. For instance, Rose attends Nia

twice a week during working hours. She has arranged time to leave work midday so that she can participate in Nia class. Rose is 50 years old and has been practicing Nia for several years. She views Nia as a vital part of her well-being. Rose admitted that it took time for her to realize the benefits of Nia. However, she maintains that Nia will forever be in her life.

Rose explained:

There are so many things I like about Nia. I'm more into it. It's never, 'Oh dear, I have to go to Nia today' like I have to go do weights or something [laughing]. I've been doing it for about three or four years now and it's one of those things that I want to do forever... That first year I was quite, I don't want to say judgmental, but I was trying to figure out what kind of physical benefit am I getting from this? Now I know that I am getting that work out and I do feel fit... it's not just the physical release, I mean it's the mental release too... It was important then but it means a lot more to me now.

Like Rose, Clair blocks off time to do Nia within her work day schedule. She is 53 years old and has been practicing Nia diligently for four years. Clair is indebted to her Nia work because of its holistic benefits, healing aspects, and its potential for personal growth. She has taken the white belt training which enables students to become teachers of Nia. Clair has chosen not to teach at this time; however, she appreciates the opportunity to know Nia on a deeper level because of her white belt experience. She spoke about visualizing oneself being healthy as we age, trusting that our bodies will continue to be strong, and connecting our health with movement. She stated:

We could see ourselves 70, 80, 90 years old doing Nia and that's very exciting to know. The trust in the body it comes with the mind connection. You know that you have an innate trust in the body. That which you focus on can be achieved. Not withstanding things that could come about, you don't look at that, because with Nia you are so focused in the positive approach in yourself, and in your life. I want to visualize that, that's the lovely thing about Nia. You can visualize your self doing that, it's all about moving, health through movement, as long as we're moving. So even at 90 years old if I'm in a wheel chair I'm going to be showing them Nia, [demonstrates moving body as an older person with the voice too] 'well, you just move it this way and that way' and you keep a smile on your face.

The sense that the body does change as we age was evident in the women's stories as they discussed their futures. For instance, the women talked about physical challenges that were beginning to creep into their bodies such as, knee, back, or thyroid challenges and changes in energy level. However, all of the women expressed that Nia was an activity that they could see themselves engaging in for a lifetime. The women spoke about Nia being a movement form that embraces the philosophy of *the body's way*. That is, honouring each individual's body for the way it is structured and the beauty of the body's own movement. Pat is 55 years old and has been involved in a variety of physical activities throughout her life. She realizes that as she ages she will most likely need to adjust her activities according to her bodily changes. Pat has been practicing Nia for three years. She is beginning to think about retirement and ways she will sustain her well-being. Nia is a holistic movement activity that Pat foresees in her future. She explained:

I could see when I retire, when I have more time that I would love to have a morning practice. I can already see that I would like to do Nia more. Where as when I get older I might not be able to do the ball playing, volleyball but you know I can see me doing Nia. I can see me doing Nia for life and how many things in our life can we do that with, that's the real beauty...More so than anything else I've ever done in my life its something that I don't ever want to not do.

The fact that all of the women in the study spoke about keeping Nia in their lives demonstrated their dedication to staying healthy as they grow older. Nia is a movement activity that they want to continue to embrace in their lives. They believe that by practicing Nia they will be able to maintain their present state of health with the possibility of becoming even stronger and healthier as they pass into the future.

Most of the women in the study discussed growing older as transitional. They are all between the ages of 47 and 64 and spoke of glimpsing forward into the second half of their lives. Their view, however, was not aging as degenerative rather it was growing as expansive

and flourishing. Katie is approaching fifty years of age. Her children are grown, she is a grandmother and her own parents have recently passed on. Katie is happily married with her beloved dog by her side. She has been practicing Nia for over five years and has taken the white belt teacher training. For Katie, growing older was equated to becoming more of herself. Her description of coming to know herself resonated with all of the women's narratives as they discussed their future. She stated:

I hadn't actually thought about growing older. I never see my self actually growing older. To me, growing is always learning more about myself. Perhaps growing older I think will just become growing more, and more into knowing who I am through the process and through Nia. I think Nia will help me to do that, rather than seeing me growing older, just growing.

For Frannie, preserving her health is fundamental to living a long life. Frannie is 64 years old and has been practicing Nia for three years. In our conversations, she often spoke about the health benefits she gained from participating in Nia. Frannie and her husband spend their leisure time hiking in the summer months. Her remarks reflected the increased stamina she now has, being able to reach the top of the climb without having to stop or gasp for breath. She is proud that she is feeling stronger, more mobile, and more flexible in her body, "For me, it's the joy of being out there, helping to maintain my overall health for a longer period of time through this kind of activity [Nia]" After gardening on a summer's afternoon, a dilemma occurred for Frannie as she glanced in the mirror. She was feeling so vibrant in her body that she was taken back when she saw her reflection in the mirror. Frannie explained:

It's surprising, lots of times what you feel, and then you look in the mirror, they don't match and it's quite amusing, well, at least I find it amusing. I mean, I refuse to let something like that upset me because it's an inevitable progression in life. But there are times when I'm bouncing around outside doing something and I wash my hands and I look in the mirror and I think, 'you are getting to be an older woman' [laughter] but I don't feel it inside here [referring to her body].

It is this strangeness that Apter (1995) affirms midlife women face as they become aware of the discrepancy between the reflection in the mirror and the sense of who they are. It is an image that disguises rather than reveals. As the women in the study age with Nia they are discovering more of themselves. Clair also views her image in the mirror. In her journal writing she wrote:

I look in the mirror these days and I hardly recognize myself. I like who I see as if I'm getting to know myself for the first time...I aspire more deeply to help me recognize my own body's process. I want to revel in my new found freedom, a lull in the womb of formations. Each day I read and keep being inspired by Nia and its beautiful philosophy to guide me.

Clair feels exuberant in her body at this stage of her life. She has been participating in Nia for over four years and she looks forward to living her life to the fullest, growing stronger and healthier. Clair continued:

Especially too, at this turn, this turn of my life at 53, it's like, what do I want to look forward to in the second half of my life? That is to enjoy being in a healthy, energetic body. In a way that I can enjoy all of the wonderful things that I've been designed to do, walking, running, playing, climbing and not making any excuses not to live and enjoy as much as can. It's a beautiful freedom actually to discover...growing older, stronger.

Cassandra is 60 years old and is living with diabetes. She has always been acutely aware of her health and the compounding issues because of her chronic illness. Cassandra highlights the need to stay active both physically and mentally as she ages. She finds the movement in Nia complements her desire to sustain a healthy lifestyle for many years to come. Cassandra stated:

Especially having reached 60, I know it's important to keep moving. Use it or lose it, applies to all parts of your body, your brain, your heart, your legs, your hips, everything. Nia's really good for keeping all those muscle groups [active]. So, if I could do that once I'm 60, I'm sure I'll make it to eighty, that's what I plan. I want to see my granddaughter grow up...I'm hoping I get twenty more years being in the present moment. Because I think if there's anything I worry about aging, it's that I

want my relationship with myself and other to continue to be one that is in the present moment. I don't want to get caught in the past. It's so easy to do as you get older. I see it especially as your health goes. I see it with my husband's parents and I don't want that to happen. I want for life to have interest for my mind and to have things to think about. So my relationship with myself is not to become preoccupied with myself, but one that is curious about life and probably passing on my wisdom to others. I mean that's what happens when you get old, you've lived a long time, but passing it on more in a modeling kind of way.

Cassandra believes that having a relationship with her self that is open and honest is of utmost importance to maintaining a healthy outlook on life. She is unsettled by the rumination on past regrets in her parent's generation and is determined to live wholeheartedly in the present as she moves into her future. Cassandra also makes mention of becoming a role model for others. In the following section, the women further expound on the issue of role models as they age, being inspired by older women in Nia.

The women declared their admiration for the older women attending Nia class. Many were drawn to Nia because of the diverse age range apparent among the participants. Lily is one of the youngest of the women in the study at the age of 47. Being middle-aged she was elated in discovering Nia. She was not the eldest amid a group of women many years younger than herself as she had experienced in the past. In fact, she was surrounded by women of all ages. Before beginning Nia, Lily had attempted suicide, was battling depression, and felt quite isolated. Moving in Nia among women of differing age ranges and abilities inspired Lily to embark on a Nia practice eventually becoming a Nia teacher. Nia provided a new direction in her life. Lily could now envision herself happily growing older:

Another thing that got me on that first day was the range of age in the class. There was twenty something [year olds] and then the oldest lady in the class was 73 years old. Some of those ladies in my class are 50, 60, years old. I think that's what inspired me to go, to keep going, the older ladies, 'wow, I want to be there at 70.' My mom is 70 and she can barely get out of her chair. She's wheezing and on puffers and I'm like, 'Oh God, is that what I have to look forward to?' And then you go to Nia and you see these women and its like [takes a deep breath in, as if in surprise and

realization] I don't have to be like my mom, I can be like those women in the class, they're great examples.

Clair also mentioned the images she held in her mind of previous generations as they aged. She had been taught that growing older meant one would decay, shrivel, and wither away. Clair witnessed elderly people in ill health and wondered if this was the only avenue to pass down as she herself matured. She explained:

In the lieu of our generation ahead of us, it was like, 'oh my gosh, all of these people they're limping around and they're hurting.' Getting older to me was like a down going, that is the race mind of the debilitating factor as one ages so I was always asking, 'where are the inspiring ones, where are the ones that tell me differently?' We have been fed for generations that growing older is a down going with the system when in actuality it's more about we want more models of growing stronger and healthier. I think that's possible, even with all the wrinkles...that's what I want to see and I want to experience and I want to also demonstrate because that's my responsibility too, you know, the ones that are coming next.

As Clair has become inspired by the older women in Nia class she has begun to view herself as a role model for the younger generation. She aspires to share her healthfulness with others in hopes of changing the 'race mind' of aging from debilitating to strong, wise, and able-bodied. Clair shared:

I was actually feeling dismayed about getting older and now I'm not...It's very exciting as we get older. Actually, in fact you get better. I feel better now in my body than I did when I was 30...When people are relating to me they're drawn to me. I'm an attractor for people to see what health looks like at this stage of life, 'hey, getting older is great, it's wonderful, you get to have wisdom now, you get to use all that came before, this is your fertilizer, what's going to grow?'

The future is a time yet unknown to all of us. For the women in the study, the future is rooted in how they live the present moment. They are preparing for a time to come by keeping Nia in their lives with the mindset that what they do today, will be significant for tomorrow. As the women move their bodies in Nia, they are growing stronger and healthier, and being inspired by each other as they live their Nia practice.

Summary

The women's narratives of their experiences of Nia revealed a journey through time that allowed the self to reflect on stories of the past, living in an integrated way, and future glimpses. The past held memories of grief experiences that were housed in childhood, shifting, and tragic stories. The narratives revealed the understanding that many of the women grew up to be seen and not heard amidst a landscape that did not always nurture self-confidence or self-acceptance. Through their shifting stories they began to recognize their inner voices and to question what they had known, seeing new ways of being. Through two women's tragic stories we come to know the struggle to find the way to an integrated way of living.

The women revealed that as they practice Nia they are living mindfully in the moment. In doing so, they are honouring the authentic self and becoming more of who they are in body, mind, spirit, and emotions. The women spoke of being inspired by older women attending Nia, wanting to keep Nia in their lives forever, and recognizing their own possibilities for the future as they grow stronger and healthier.

I now turn to Chapter Five, "Awakening at Midlife Towards a Deeper Understanding: Nia and the Body." Here the women's narratives reveal the experience of Nia in the body through representations of the body's wisdom and the body's movement.

CHAPTER FIVE

AWAKENING AT MIDLIFE TOWARDS A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING:

NIA AND THE BODY

This chapter begins by explicating the experience of Nia with women in midlife through the body based on the conversations with eight participants. Our body is the house for our existence. We live through our body. As I reflect on my own understanding of my body, I recall times when I have taken my body for granted, thinking that it will always be there. I have pushed my body to the extremes, fed it toxins, and deprived it of sleep. I have even told my body that it wasn't beautiful enough. Conversely, I have also learned to honour my body and embrace its uniqueness.

For the women in the study, coming to understand the body with all of its nuances was part of the process of experiencing Nia. In our conversations, the women spoke about the physicality of their body, along with the notion that their body is a vessel through which their being reverberates. By moving the body we unleash our potential to know ourselves on a deeper level. We can descend into our hearts and truly begin to tap into the joy of life, the sustenance of our well-being. Initially, the women's stories begin by awakening the body's wisdom through *body being ~ body listening*. Then they move into the body's movement through *music ~ movement ~ emotions* and *energetic connections ~ spiritual connections*.

When thinking of the body's wisdom I found myself pondering the notion of wisdom in itself. I hold a picture in my mind of an elderly woman who has lived a long life with many adventures and lessons learned ready to share her knowledge. However, in my picture she is hidden in the dense forest among the briars and the brambles, making it difficult to reach her. Likewise, I see the astute owl with wide open eyes and hear her hoot as she

emerges from an aged tree. Her wings spread broadly, gracefully gliding through the air; she too, is out of reach. I think of a long period of time passing and wonder, when is wisdom reached and how can I attain it? Certainly, as we grow older we become more knowledgeable or at least that is what we've been led to believe. It is through learning and experience that we gain understanding yet, it is not a static undertaking. We continuously evolve into more of ourselves as we unearth the unknown and bring it out into the light. In order for this to occur, we must become curious and awaken our selves into awareness. Surprisingly enough, it is within our reach. Katie affirmed this realization when she said "we are in a body and to explore you have to go into that body because the real self is inside that encasement." It is within us, in our body that awareness is set into motion and the seed of wisdom is planted. By being in the body, listening to the body and learning to heal the self, the women in the study were coming to know their body's wisdom.

Awakened Into Awareness

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Body Being ~ Body Listening

It is through being in the body that the women began to re-awaken into themselves. The revelation that a deep connection with the body could be made by becoming more attuned with the body was evident as they re-discovered their bodies in a new light. As they embodied their Nia experience, they began to delve into unseen crevices and emerge enlightened by what they found. I am reminded of Merleau Ponty's (1962) observation that the body is an assemblage of history with a set of possibilities to be continually realized. In that, the body carries within it, its history, along with the realization that not all can yet be known. By re-experiencing the body through Nia, new possibilities were recognized. Coupled with the participants' new found awareness was a sense of awe in the beauty of

coming to know their bodies differently, embracing the body and caring for the body, unconditionally. Clair explained:

Nia is helping me to really come into understanding the body and the way that I am in this body...oh my God, I'm really in my body. I began to understand what it was to have hands and arms and legs and being in your body and feeling it. It was like a whole new adventure. Knowing how to be in the body and not always struggling with it, actually embracing it...I have a great sense of appreciation for the whole body and I really want more than ever to honour it by giving it, its nourishment in the right way...there's a greater sense of loving, loving in ourselves, we're in our bodies totally, that's what I am, I'm in my body and I'm happy to be here.

By being in the body the women were simultaneously becoming more mindful of its wholeness. For some of the women, becoming more aware of their personal breathing patterns through Nia supported this interrelationship. Katie revealed:

With Nia I'm more in my body. I think that the breath work seemed more natural than aerobics. With aerobics you're always panting and listening 1, 2, 3, 4 and I think your breathing tends to start to become part of that whole step, step, step where its not natural you're almost fighting against your breath where with Nia it's integrated in with everything. Through your movement the breath is moving with the movement so it's more natural for me.

Spreads (1986), a practitioner of breath work, suggests that breathing functions either satisfactorily or is disturbed. Spreads further elaborates that breathing affects a person's well-being and determines if one is functioning optimally or at a disadvantage. She also explains that breathing needs are very individual and are related to personal needs in the moment. Letting the breath adjust freely to varying situations supports the functioning of the body, clears the mind, and settles the emotions.

For Cassandra, being in her body begins with becoming aware of her breathing patterns. Her body is a tranquil place when she is attuned to her breath. Her mind is calm and her senses are awake. However, when Cassandra is less aware of her body and more focused

in her head, she tends to not breathe properly, hence, her body responds poorly in a physical symptom such as a headache. Cassandra explained:

Whenever I am stressed I'm not breathing deeply anymore. I'm literally working from my fifth chakra up [from the neck up], and I realize I have no connection with here [indicates the body]. I have to close my eyes and breathe...once I'm operating from my core...then breathing changes, energy changes, what I see and hear changes. For myself, it's very easy to leave that place because I'm a head person but if I'm operating from my core I'm literally in my body...I don't even know what's happening in my body when I'm in my head, my focus is outside of my self. Sometimes after whatever the situation is, I sit down and think 'I've got a splitting headache, when did that come. My goodness I don't think I've been breathing, I didn't even notice that I'd stopped. I'm totally out of my body'...In the past, I wouldn't have noticed that at all whereas, now I'm far more aware. You just have to spend time in your body to be aware of your body.

As Cassandra practices Nia, she is more aware of the changes in her body. Rosas and Rosas (2001) propose that awareness occurs on many levels and that "awareness is coded into the body, we simply need to awaken to, or become aware of what is happening in this moment" (p. 3-7). Coming to know the body was a fairly novel experience for many of the women in the study. Once they began relating to their bodies with greater attention they could then manage life circumstances with more clarity. As they experienced their bodies more fully, they perceived life more positively and were not as easily swallowed by doubt and negativity.

The women revealed how being in their body directly impacted the way in which they were being in the world. Merleau Ponty's (1962) primary claim was that "the body is the vehicle of being in the world" and that "having a body is for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them" (p. 82). In Merleau Ponty's terms the practice of Nia could be considered the participant's committed project. Therefore, Nia enables the body, itself, to be in symbiosis with its surroundings, presenting new potentials.

Being in the body was equated to becoming aware of the body on a deeper level than had been previously realized. The body's wisdom, in part, was coming to understand who I am, in this body. Moreover, awareness led to understanding and once the women understood the ways they were being in their body they began to listen to their bodies more closely.

If attending to the body is the first step in the body's wisdom then listening to the body is the second step. Cassandra wrote in her journal, "the body holds great wisdom and Nia sure helps with the listening to it!" Each of the women gave examples of how they are learning to listen to their body through Nia. Pat explained that during Nia class she realized that her body was telling her that something wasn't quite right. "It made me come right into the body and be very aware and very careful and then it just dissolved and it was good." For some of the women, listening to the body was a challenging task because of past conditioning. They were taught to only listen with their mind and that the mind knows best. For instance, it has been a struggle for Rose to give herself the permission to honour her body and listen to its messages. She tends to push herself to the limits. However, she is taking steps to make a change. Rose explained:

I hadn't run since December and I ran the other day just went out and ran 5 kilometers. My back was telling me the next day, 'Hey, I hate you! Why didn't you go slowly and give yourself permission?' I actually did the next time I ran. I actually did [emphasis on did] give myself some permission and walked awhile and then ran again. I thought, 'okay, you can actually do this, you can give yourself permission.' I think part of that is coming from Nia saying, 'its okay you don't have to push yourself to the maximum, you need to listen more to your body.' That's the other thing that I've learned through Nia which has carried over into other things.

Likewise, Carla spoke about the chatter she hears from her mind and her insistence on letting the body speak its wisdom. Carla stated:

Sometimes my inner voice is really wrong. Sometimes my inner voice takes on that little chatter of what should be. So sometimes I like to not listen to my inner voice and just let my body take over and focus on what feels good because my body knows

what feels good. It knows what's right for it. My inner voice is saying, 'shoulders back, tummy in' and my body is saying, 'no, shoulders down, a little curve, this is how I feel good.' That is where I put the body's wisdom. If I quit trying to analyze it and just be, just allow it to be where it feels good. Use my inner voice and my inner mind for the alignment and then to just let it settle into that and be. That's what I mean by the body's wisdom where the chatters gone and just let the body do what it knows how to do. It's like my body knows how to breathe and as soon as I start telling my body how to breathe I stop breathing properly.

Listening to the body meant that the women were also honouring their bodies. They were learning from Nia to take the time necessary to feel their bodily sensations and move accordingly. They were discovering a new type of power within themselves, the power to heal. Cassandra illustrated the flow of the body's wisdom that the women expressed in our conversations. Cassandra reflected:

I've really learned that the body knows way before my head, there's a body wisdom there really is a body wisdom and I'm just only learning to unlock its communication system...It's also how we heal. I actually do believe that your body is the first to know if some things not right in your life. If you're listening, if you're in your body listening you don't let those little things with your body [creep up] and they can be pains or a tension headache, any of those things... Your body is just a great tool for healing... Your body will know that some thing is not right. If you're actually in your body you catch things so much sooner... Because it's amazing sometimes the body says it loud and clear.

The final layer of the body's wisdom was self-healing. By being in the body and listening to the body one is then empowered to heal the body.

For the women, self-healing took place as a response to imbalances within their body as they attended and listened to their body's wisdom. Each of the women shared their healing story and revealed the many ways in which healing took place. They were healing aches and pains, de-stressing from the day, and cleansing the mind of negativity. Clair began by describing the self-healing process that she has learned through her Nia practice and the white belt teacher training.

Clair explained:

For instance, if you have an ache or a little tightness knowing that I have the power to self-heal, that I can go into that directly and move that my self and shift it...I found that through Nia I have corrected my posture; I have corrected the weaker side, which I was tending to lean on...when I did the white belt I really got it about self-healing. I thought, 'wow that was so amazing'...Before I would go into a mental static around, 'oh my gosh, my knee, my leg, my back'...then it would effect my emotions and then it all was a little ball. Self-healing is... 'Oh, you have a little ache in that lower back, what's going on. Oh yeah, you were out gardening.' I understood the cause, now what are we going to do about that in terms of self-healing it? Sometimes it takes about a day or two to shift it...If I'm going to describe Nia, I would say that Nia is the extra vitamin that the body needed, a big vitamin, the final component in my own healing.

Fontaine (2000) explains that alternative therapy as opposed to the biomedical model has embraced the idea that as individuals an internal self-healing process exists within us. Fontaine also states that in alternative therapeutic circles the human body is viewed as being capable of responding with flexibility and resilience. However, over time "people develop habitual reactions, beliefs and movement patterns that cause physical and mental strain" (p. 321). Re-educating the body through movement is one approach to eliminating these concerns. Like Clair, Carla has also experienced physical changes in her body through Nia. Her back problems have disappeared and she is pain free. She emphasizes the experience of moving her body differently as the catalyst in her healing. Carla revealed:

I had a lot of those aha moments, I still get them. My body shifted through the movements in Nia...I didn't notice the change immediately but then one day I bent over to get something and I stood right up again, 'wow like what happened! ...My body changed...this is strange, my back is not hurting, it was miraculous to me...I thought, 'if just by changing the way that I move my body...if I could get rid of that, I can get rid of any problem that occurs'...it's happening just by the body wisdom and the practice of Nia.

Not only were the women learning ways they could control their physical discomforts, they were also de-stressing through their Nia workout. They were able to anticipate that going to Nia could alleviate the headache and change their mood from irritable to feeling uplifted.

Katie explained:

I think it helps me to be a better person. If you're having a bad day or you're in a bad mood you work that out, you work that through and out of you through movement...it does work things out, it works out those backaches, and your headaches are gone.

Katie also brought forth the notion that memories both good and bad are stored within the body. Her conviction is supported by the work of Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957). Reich postulated that the body, by contracting various muscles, becomes its own armour protecting and defending against emotional trauma, pain, or hurt (Graham, 1999). Reich believed that emotional problems were physically manifested in the body and could be released by techniques that supported appropriate manipulation of the musculature. The use of physical techniques in the healing process suggested by Reich may be likened to Katie's movement experience in Nia. Katie revealed:

My belief is everything that happens in our lives, every trauma; everything is in our memory, in our muscles, our cells. I think through movement we can awaken those and move them out and through different healing techniques. But I think body movement is one of the most important things that people should be doing, body movement with purpose, like Nia. Moving the body, your body's way, not the way somebody tells you to move it. That's something that I'd really like to explore a little more through the Nia and that's why I think everybody should be doing Nia so that they can self heal and find themselves, find what I found.

Pat spoke about a time in her life when she was quite stressed due to work constraints – “things were unraveling.” She was doing her best to handle the situation and made sure she was eating properly, thinking positively, and getting exercise. Pat heard about Nia and decided to attend a class; she recalled her first experience with Nia:

The first night I went home, I mean how perfect because I'd been more stressed than I thought but the teacher kept saying, 'Yes! [Shows her arm going into the air in an upward fashion and shouting] Yes!' and now she said, 'you've had enough' and somehow we were doing, 'No! No!' and then we did, 'Yes!' and I thought, 'Yes!!' It was just yes! It was like a release [said with conviction] and it was connected right through, 100% right through my body...The teacher would say, 'enough' and my arms would go in a certain direction, the release was so powerful...I don't think any

other Nia class has been as powerful as that first one because of my emotional state. I guess at the time, maybe when you're trying, or you're coping, you don't realize all the stress you're under cause you're just coping, 'I got to get up tomorrow' you just do it because you have to...I went home and I smiled all the way. I smiled all throughout the hour and for weeks after that it was just as powerful. It was a beautiful find in my life.

The combination of movement and verbal expression in Nia helped to relieve Pat's stress.

She realized that Nia was an activity she could continue to do to help manage the volatility in her daily life.

Another approach to self-healing through Nia is by experiencing what Rosas and Rosas (2004) call the five developmental stages. It is noted by Rosas and Rosas that the five developmental stages were inspired by the work of Stanley Keleman (1986). They are considered the preverbal stages that humans travel through as they physically develop. The stages are embryonic, creeping, crawling, standing, and walking. Rosas and Rosas contend that this type of movement may awaken emotional content. They urge practitioners to trust and listen to their body, letting instinct and intuition guide them. Lily explained the experience of the five developmental stages during a cool down at the end of a Nia class. Lily said:

At the end of the class we're going through the stages, like embryonic, creeping, crawling and standing. At first, it was hard for me to grasp but the more I do get into it, the more I get into myself... You lay on the floor in like an embryo stage and you just let everything go and you concentrate on your breathing a little bit but you just lay there and listen to the music. Then when you feel like moving a little bit more, you roll over onto your tummy and you start creeping, like a baby. I can't remember what each one of these stages means, where you are in your life but each one has a specific stage where you are in your life. I was having troubles a couple of weeks ago and I was stuck in creeping stage. I just laid there. And then the teacher worked with me a bit in that class... I was stuck because there was a lot of stuff going on in my life that I didn't have any control over. And so I lost my focus and I was just laying there on my stomach on the floor not moving and then the teacher comes over and she goes, 'Lily you just have to own that, you have to own that feeling of frustration'... And she said, 'so creep, creep along, and get it out of your head, let it go, and then move onto the crawling stage and then move from crawling to standing'... When I got

to standing I was finally thinking, 'Okay, well, I'm going to be good today, I was going to be okay.' I remember that, c'est la vie, if I can't do anything about it, I can't do anything about it.

Lily expanded on her experience of Nia to include changes that have occurred in who she has become, now that she is empowered and owning her healing process. Through Nia, Lily has begun to attend to her body's needs. She described herself as being calmer and more accepting of situations that may be out of her control.

Heal means "to make sound or whole" and stems from the root *haelan*, the condition or state of being *hal*, whole (ITP Nelson Canadian Dictionary, 1997). The women in the study were coming into wholeness as they were healing themselves, the final stage in the body's wisdom. The body's wisdom occurred in layers: becoming aware, listening, and self-healing. Intermingled with the body's wisdom is the body's movement. The women were opening up to new discoveries within their body as they were moving with the body's dance.

We Become the Instrument

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Music ~ Movement ~ Emotions

The body is composed of rhythms that naturally occur through the beating of our heart, the flow of our blood, the pattern of our breathing, and the vibration of our internal energy. Our bodies move physically, interacting with our surroundings. We are moved emotionally through tears and laughter. Spirituality is embodied through the inner dance. Movement is constantly whirling among and emanating from our body. *The body's movement* became another facet that deepened the women's exploration and understanding of who they are within their body. Modern dancer Ted Shawn illuminates the inner landscape of the body's dance. He states, "Dance is the only art where we ourselves are the stuff from

which it is made” (Time Magazine, 1955, July 25). For the participants too, Nia became a movement art expressed through the body’s movement.

The women most often spoke about the interconnectedness between the music used in Nia and the movement of Nia. They also explicated specific types of movement that they appreciated experiencing within their body. Learning diverse forms of movement, increasing range of motion, having choices, and feeling joyful and free were some of the elements the women expressed as being important to their experience. Frannie explained:

I like the free dance sections... There are no limits in the free form; it brings a sense of joy and freedom... the controlled movement is another aspect that is really good in Nia because you can move free but you can move controlled, you can blend the both... The instructor talks about Feldenkrais and a few other types of body awareness movements that are purposeful. Sometimes when she comes to class she will say, ‘this day we’re going to be all about joints’ or ‘this day we’re going to be about shoulders’... Over time I think all of us are able to move more freely and have better range of motion than when we did when we started... In Nia... you’ve got the three levels of movement that you can pick from. If you’re feeling really robust today you can try level three and if you’re not feeling so swift you can do one or two... And choice is good... Its just not aerobics it’s a whole blend of techniques from other fields and Nia has a done a beautiful job of bringing things together.

The blending of techniques found in Nia provided the women the opportunity to move their bodies in a new way. There is a sense that through the movement the women were able to explore more of themselves, exposing the freedom in their bodies. The women were purposefully reaching, swaying, swooping, turning, lunging, jumping, and stretching their bodies in a variety of directions, ranges, and heights. They were opening into their own dance, a dance that they referred to as the joy of movement. Carla revealed:

It’s doing something physical and enjoying it, liking it, not forcing myself to do it, wanting to do it. Being able to go and do something physical... feeling my body lapping it up. My body saying, ‘I like this, I want this,’ the moves, the joy really, the joy of movement. I truly felt that.

The women described their bodies becoming entangled with the music as ivy does upon the vine. The music used in Nia was said to be unique and inspiring. As Clair indicated, what Nia does with music is to show us how we become the instrument, stating “I’m hearing music, I’m hearing sounds and then we can move with it.” Pat elaborated on the effect the music has had on her body and elucidated the manner in which the music is interwoven with the movements of Nia. Pat explained:

The music is combined with the movement... the teacher actually takes words from the songs and makes it the movement which I just find so incredible; I think that’s very artful... it just makes your body want to move and your heart and your soul, it just feels like an integrated experience... I think it’s the joy when you realize, ‘oh, my body is responding, I’m not making it, it’s not an effort, it’s just natural.’ When I hear music, I want to move.

The integration of music and movement is embodied in the Nia routines. The routines speak to the effort that is put forth to imbue a holistic movement approach. Many of the women have participated in a variety of physical activities and have chosen to partake in Nia because of its holistic qualities. Katie compares her first Nia experience to her past aerobics experience. She illustrates the response her body has had to the Nia movement. Katie also brought forth the awe expressed by the women as they first began Nia along with the apprehension some of them felt as they moved differently than they had previously experienced. Katie recollected:

I took my socks off and shoes off. Miracle was the routine that we were going to do and I thought, ‘wow, routine, this is interesting’... Then the music started and I connected to it right away. The music was so different than an aerobics class. It was softer; it resonated in my body it was like, ‘wow, I love this.’ The movement was so soft and gentle just completely different than regular aerobics. I felt like, ‘oh, I’m dancing, I’m not working hard, I’m dancing.’ Then we came to parts of the routine that were very primal... I could feel energy moving in my body that I’d never felt before and sensations and emotions and things were coming up and I was like, ‘what is this about?’ It felt really, really good to stomp my feet or to act like a goddess. Then there was some noises being made and I was like, ‘oh, that’s a little’, I wasn’t quite ready for that. But I did breathe a bit differently than I was breathing when I did

regular aerobics. I was more focused on my breath. Then we came to a part where we got into a bundle, and we did this primal move, real masculine and then we went into our goddess. We were dancing around the room doing some free dance and that was another thing that was really, 'whoa, this is really different, what are people going to think of me?' But by the time I was done, I was almost crying, it just felt so freeing, like I had come home. I found my roots again. I'd come back to my roots and it was like poof from then on, I never went back into an aerobics class.

Katie's first Nia experience was cathartic. Her love of movement from childhood had been renewed. Katie's body was invigorated in its own dance and emotionally she was tapping into her roots, a place she refers to as home. Integrating music with movement, Nia helps unleash emotions. The women's narratives speak to these emotional experiences.

Through the practice of Nia the women were tapping into their emotions. They were becoming more aware of their emotions and learning to experience their feelings and sensations within their body. As well, they were discovering a valuable emotional outlet. Several of the women commented on the notion of feeling their emotions rather than thinking their emotions. Lily revealed:

Just getting inside and understanding your feelings and your emotions and that they do come from inside your body... Your body feels, your body is all sensation, or feelings not thoughts. I never could understand feelings until Nia, I thought things to death.

For the women, emotional expression was a corporal experience and by moving their bodies in Nia they were inducing an emotional release. Portions of tapping into the emotions are analogous to self-healing, in particular, the aspect of emotional release. However, the release conceptualized by the women in this section was based within the emergence of the unexpected, from the unconscious made conscious. Whereas, self-healing was seen as an awareness needing to be attended to, such as reducing one's stress level. Through our conversations, it was evident that emotions such as sadness and anger were equally as

prevalent as joy and happiness. As Cassandra reflects, “Nia certainly gives me the opportunity to use whatever feelings are there.”

The multiplicity of movement in Nia provided the women the opportunity to release their emotions in many ways. Clair elaborated on her emotional release during the slow moments of Nia:

I think that Nia with all of its combination of movement and physicality it just actually helps release things that just are bubbling there emotionally, that need, released. I think that comes in the slow aspects of Nia whether we're on the floor moving, or sometimes the song or we're going into a meditation after a whole session. That actually moves me to emotion. I've lain on that floor and I've let the tears fall many times. I saw that as a beautiful connection with the physical-emotional body...I think it just allows us to be...I found in doing Nia on a consistent level I'm more in tune with what's happening with me. I'm not denying any emotions.

As previously mentioned, another key component to the emotional release was the combination of movement and music. The following stories of Carla and Cassandra capture the significance and meaning of the emotional release experienced in the music and movement of Nia. The music used in Nia is matched to specific movement routines. Both of the women had heard the music several times prior to their experiences. Carla lives with her husband and her beloved birds. One of her birds had a traumatic accident and Carla did everything in her power to save its life. Unfortunately, her bird did not make it. A few days later Carla attended Nia class. Carla recalled the memory:

When I heard the music I had envisioned columns big, big columns and floating blossoms and everything light and gossamer, little doves flying. It was just this vision that I got in my head and the moves were levitational and then down to the earth, it reminded me of angel wings...it was a heavenly picture. We were doing this routine and right in the middle of this scene my bird was flying towards me in slow motion...I just couldn't hold it in, I just started crying and crying...it was such a release that I didn't try to hold it in...it was something I needed to do...it allowed a release that I hadn't allowed myself to do...the whole rest of the day I felt so much better, I really did. That was purely a Nia moment...it was the Nia music, it was the Nia movements.

Cassandra also shared her response to the music, an emotional dance that occurred as she moved in Nia. Cassandra had an association with a specific piece of music from the days when her sister had been very ill. She recalls the emotional connection that she felt after attending her sister's funeral:

I found it very comforting after my sister had died, especially the music...There's a piece that the instructor plays and it's amazing how comforting that is. Here I am moving, I'm alive and this music is playing and I'm not alone, my sister's here, moving with me.

As the women honoured their emotions, they began to feel the deepness in their lives. Even through the wash of tears and sadness that sometimes surfaced, they were able to ascend into relief and liberation. Throughout the narratives, there was a sense of an awakening. This was also evident as they spoke about feeling the existence of energy move through their bodies.

The Body and Beyond

Energetic Connection ~ Spiritual Connection

For centuries, the notion of the existence of energy has been recognized. Moreover, energy has been acknowledged as existing in everything in the world (Fontaine, 2000). However, the way in which energy is utilized in the human body is still a controversial topic, particularly between body therapeutic practitioners and the Western scientific community. As was expressed by the women in the study, energy was described as a significant force within the body which interacts with the energy found in the greater universe. They discussed energy as an integral part of their bodily experience with Nia. Clair views her body as a conductor of energy, as well as a receptacle for energy. She speaks to the importance of body alignment to the flow of her energy. Clair also refers to blocked energies, the internal vestibules that become clogged or stuck. Through the practice of Nia, Clair has been able to

release the blocks, allowing the energy current to move more freely in her body. Clair explained:

I'm recognizing in Nia that all we are is an energy conduit and all we have to do is be in alignment. Get that body in correct alignment and you're actually being more of a receptacle for the energy that is already present around us. When we're able to utilize that energy outside, inside, around us in the correct way we become much more efficient, more unblocked. We get blocked through toxins in our environment, through the things we eat, through the things we hear, our thoughts, sounds, everything...I think what Nia does when it's working that energy in and out of the body and we're actually experiencing it we're just become a running awesome machine. I hate to look at myself as a machine but I'm only just recognizing it in myself, what energy is and it's hard to describe. It's like I want to be able to reach out and know that I'm existing on pure energy itself. All I have to do is get out of the way, which means my own blocked energies. Sometimes when I do a Nia class I can actually feel something unblocking and it just frees up that energy and it's just amazing. I see from the time I started to now considering what I've gone through how much I have unblocked and am now free flowing.

Katie described her experience of energy as her life force. She refers to an awakening that occurred during a Nia class which she attributes to the flow of Kundalini energy.

Rosenberg, Rand, and Asay (1985) explain that Kundalini energy is the embodied energy of the universe and by stimulating this energy the Hindus chakra system is ignited. Furthermore, the sensation of Kundalini energy is often a spontaneous release which occurs after the body blockages have been dissolved. Katie revealed:

I think for me it's my life force, like I really sense it through the spine. It's probably the Kundalini energy because I had an experience in the class where I did feel that awaken and move up through my body and through my spine and out and it was just an incredible sensation... We were swaying and it was just a huge experience this energy just came up and through my body. I had never actually felt anything like that before and I've had that connection ever since and from that connection it was like, 'woo-hoo I'm here'...An awakening or like being born, it was another awakening but an awakening through the energy.

Some of the women referred to the chakra system when describing their Nia experience. It is thought that there are seven chakras or energy centers located from the base of the spine to the crown of the head. The teachings of Nia propose, that moving energy through the chakra

system creates a strong body – physically, mentally, and emotionally (Rosas & Rosas, 2004). Many of the women spoke of an awareness of energy centers residing in their body and that the gateway to opening these centers was through their body movement.

Likewise, they shared their thoughts on the body's function at a cellular level. Pat supports the idea that we can not separate mind and body. Therefore, we can influence our body's cells and create change. Similarly, Clair suggested that our cells hold intelligence and through Nia she is waking up, "I think that's what's happening, it's an awakening up to the already intelligence that actually exists in our bodies." Clair further explained:

I think for me what this [Nia] has done is it's waking up my cells. It's actually allowing them to be open, they're just like a mini city in there, 'I'm awake, I'm alive' [says this as if speaking from her cells, moving her arms in a hurrah fashion]. They're just vibrating with all this incredible energy. All I have to do is just focus on how I want to use that energy and be more efficient with it. It's not scattered that's the thing, the go no where energy, it's like you can achieve much more.

Clair spoke to the notion that an efficient energetic body is synonymous to being able to accomplish more in life. Her experience is reflected in the understanding that a person whose energy is flowing – body, mind, spirit, and emotions is in a state of optimal wellness and is balanced, grounded, and centered (Fontaine, 2000). Therefore, managing well in life, feeling stable and secure suggests a sense of empowerment enabling one to live a more productive life.

Another concept Clair presented was that of a cellular wash. She experienced her body cleansing it self as the cells washed away the waste. Again, there is a sense of freedom and release in the body as this occurs. Clair revealed:

It's a cellular wash, just haaaa [makes a sound indicating washing away and cleansing]...I like that because it really gives you a beautiful visual that you are involved in your own cleansing...the cellular wash its more of a clearing away of the debris so that the light can come through so its dancing more. Its like cells are dancing and that's what radiation is in my mind is when the cells are happy and really

dancing and everything is feeling [makes a happy, dancing sound] all integrated and there's nothing constricting or weighing.

Many of the women also commented on a connection made in Nia to the energy of the earth and the heavens above. Lily echoed the women's views of energy felt in the body while highlighting the element of belonging to the greater universe. Lily explained:

Before Nia, energy was like, 'ooh, I've got a lot of energy today or not.' Now I'm connecting energy into how I feel as opposed to how much energy I have to do something. Energy is part of how I feel. It's changed its definition on me. I can't remember what routine it is in, you're plucking the chi out of the ground, the energy out of the ground and if you're really concentrating you can almost feel it...I feel heat when I'm concentrating and working...I feel light, and a really big sense of belonging. It's belonging to the big picture of life. You can feel the energy going through your body, you can feel it moving and that comes from the earth and all around you. All of your little cells and things are moving around and the healing, we're taught to imagine the movement of the energy and how it works and you just feel like I'm tapping into the energy of the earth so I must belong here...[The energy] stays in me all the rest of the day. I think that's part of the uplifting feeling.

The Kundalini energy and the chakra systems are regarded as Eastern ways of thinking, which views the realms of the spiritual and the physical as closely intertwined (Rosenberg, Rand, & Asay, 1985). Some of the participants spoke of this connection between energy felt in the body and Eastern philosophies of spirituality. While others spoke of their experience of Nia and spiritual connection in different terms, such as, the healing aspects of nature and an inner sense of peace as being spiritual.

Spiritual connections took place within the union of the body and beyond. Some of the women referred to themselves as spiritual beings, meaning that they felt a spiritual sense within their body. Other women spoke of connecting spiritually from beyond, in nature, in their daily surroundings, in interactions with others, and in the seeking of spiritual meaningfulness. However, for all of the women there was a sense that being spiritually connected was a shared creation between the body and the universe. Hence, as the women

spoke of feeling spiritual within their body, they were making connections to something beyond, and as they referenced connections to beyond their body, they embraced within, their experience of spirituality.

For the women, spirituality, itself, is an ongoing journey and Nia has become part of its path. Each person's manifestation of spirituality has been influenced through their Nia experience in varying ways. Lily's understanding of spirituality has changed since she began her Nia practice. Lily explained:

Spirit isn't like, God, believing in God or anything. Spirit to me is like believing in your self because we're all spiritual beings...I feel spiritual...Spiritual is like the self worth feeling that I'm feeling now that I didn't feel before and how I can contribute and how I can make somebody else's life better...because before I always thought it [spiritual] was church and I don't go to church...My definition of spiritual is a lot different now than it was two years ago.

Cassandra expands on the notion of embodied spirituality. She explains that by being in the body and moving with the body in Nia, she is making spiritual connections. Cassandra revealed:

I just want to spend more time in the body because really it's amazing, the church has always taught that God's out here, like separate and apart. And what Nia's helped me see is that God is, I mean, I believe this anyway, but Nia's confirmed God's within everything. That spiritual energy is within everything and to stay in touch with it you do need to move...You need to be in your body to even be a spiritual being. I need to be in my body not thinking about my body, not praying about my body, but do it from the, I can only describe it as, from the inside-out.

As well, Cassandra brought forth the idea that spirituality surrounds us and interacts with us yet it is an entity we can not hold. She further elaborates on how significant spirituality has become in her life and the manner in which Nia invites her to explore her spirituality.

Cassandra further explained:

I'm definitely a spiritual person, that's what seeking is about, a spiritual seeking. For me, Nia's definitely [a part of that]...I am a church person too; I mean I go to church...But spirit is what life is and yet you can't see it all. See there's a lot

happening at Nia just like there's a lot happening to one's spirit but you can't actually grab hold of it. The instructor in her words says lots of things that remind me about God, I chose to call it that, God, but it doesn't need to be called that...the instructor doesn't call it God; she does talk more about the divine or the one...but there is a divine energy present all the time. Nia makes you be present to the largeness of life.

Cassandra called attention to the words that the instructor used in class which roused her spiritual explorations. Likewise, others commented on the metaphors present in Nia and the spiritual images they conjured. For instance, "connect with the earth, connect to your self and connect to the universe", "open your arms like wings of a bird", and "look beyond the horizon for what you need and bring it into you." Interestingly, some of these images were also mentioned in reference to energy felt in the body, however, they were perceived differently. Rose's spiritual journey has been fused with elements in nature and the use of metaphors has been comforting. Rose reflected:

Nia fits into that whole spirituality aspect that I'm trying to figure out...to me it's the Mother Nature, mother earth...I've just been reading a book called Circle of Life which is the native spirituality and I had read Black Elk Speaks and I'm finding that I like that very much...it seems to have that connection with the moon and the sun and earth...that's what Nia has that kind of connection with the earth and the community and yourself.

I am reminded of Snowber's (2004) writing, that it is through symbol, metaphor, and ritual that we make visible the invisible. The women spoke of spiritual connections happening within the body and all around the body. Their narratives illustrate an understanding that these connections occur at the point when the invisible becomes visible. Through the experience of Nia, the women are sensing the connection to the earth, to the body, and beyond. They are making connections through their body to knowing the self more deeply.

Summary

Moving with the body in Nia gave the women the opportunity to further experience themselves. As they began to embrace their body's wisdom they became more aware of the

body's nuances, sensations, and hidden gifts. The women expressed an appreciation of being in their bodies, holistically, as they were unveiling new self-discoveries. They began to attend to and empower their self-healing process. The significance of the body's movement in relation to the women's emotional release also contributed to their well-being. They moved in their bodies' energy and rejoiced in who they are. Thus, Nia has helped the women create the space for spirituality to be explored and become visible within the body. As well, the body's movement has given meaningful form to the experience of Nia as it pulsed through the rhythm of music and movement, the release of emotions, and the flow of energy.

I now turn to Chapter Six "Midlife Women Transforming through the Experience of Nia: The Interpretations of Relationship." Here the women's narratives reveal an understanding of their experience through transforming relationship with the self and other.

CHAPTER SIX

MIDLIFE WOMEN TRANSFORMING THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF NIA: THE INTERPRETATION OF RELATIONSHIP

This chapter begins by exploring the transformation of self with women in midlife through the experience of Nia based on conversations with eight participants. To truly come to know who we are, is to understand our history and experiences that create the underpinnings of our present day self-perceptions. I liken this to Merleau-Ponty's (1964) notion that "perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us" (p. 25). Included in this understanding are shifts the participants and researcher made as they journeyed along a life path and reshaped themselves while in relationship with others. Josselson (1996) speaks to the notion of how revisioning the self takes place and how women take hold of owning the authoring of self, as "in an interpersonal world that responds to her understanding of who she is by taking her to be that person she feels herself to be" (p. 239). She suggests that revisioning identity is fashioned amidst past experiences and present realities, along with our yearning, self-empowerment, and self-expression. As individuals, we set along this course differently, in our own time and particular sequence.

I am reminded of my own transformation of the self – a journey of being in the world that ebbed and flowed. At a very young age I began to write poetry. My words felt like parts of me placed onto paper, expressing an inner dialogue. My writings were embraced and savoured by those around me. Every year on my birthday, my mother would give me a special blank journal for my writing. And I recall how a book of my poems was created by a fifth grade teacher and placed in the school library. I grew up knowing my self as a poet. Yet

somewhere along the way the poet inside me became muddled and lost. I did not write for many years and did not regard myself as a poet any longer. Recently, I was in a book shop and happened to browse through the writings of a local artist. It was in reading her words that I began to reawaken. Within a few months, I had written a poem that originated from my being and revealed my identity for all to see. I felt as if I had resurrected myself as a poet and had found my self in that part I had lost.

In the study, the relationship the women spoke of was most often about themselves. It was a relationship with the self that was exploring who they were, in part, as understood through the Nia experience. Some of the women spoke of finding 'new avenues to travel' while others began to 'revisit old territories'. For the participants, transformation was a process of re-forming. Their experience was akin to the metamorphosis of a butterfly. They spoke of transforming in profound ways.

The women's experiences of midlife was embedded in the changes that were occurring to them. Midlife, as a transition itself, was perceived as an act of exploration. In our conversations there was an understanding that through the Nia practice the women were reconnecting to the self, revealing an inner authenticity, and finding the confidence to be themselves. As they embraced a deeper relationship with themselves, they revealed how differently they were interacting with others. The women's journey through the experience of Nia began with transforming relationships through *self-discovery ~ self-acceptance and self-expression ~ self-care*. They then went deeper into an understanding of the self that included others through *compassionate responses*. The transforming self took on new significance and meaning for all of the women. The following is a poem the researcher wrote from the words of a participant, representing the self in transformation.

A Relationship with Myself

~

Self-Discovery ~ Self-Acceptance

~

The body of woman
 Not skinny – fuller figured
 Foot flicked up – arms spread.
 Butterfly wings
 Spiraling coils
 Upward energy
 Metamorphosis.
 I marked it on my self permanently,
 Inked it.
 A part of me that's pictured there
 The change – the journey through
 Moving upward and onward.

~

Self-discovery was an unforeseen by-product of the Nia experience. The women were revealing the self through movement, through integrating the body, mind, spirit, and emotions, and through embracing exploration in Nia. Aspects of the self were being explored that they had overlooked, pushed aside, or never had the opportunity to develop. Much of what was discussed by the women pertained to the Nia class experience. However, four of the participants had taken the white belt Nia teacher training. For these women, the experience of self-discovery included a week long intensive practice where they embodied Nia. Prior to the study, two of the participants had made the choice to teach Nia. Carla had been practicing Nia for over five years before she embarked on the adventure of becoming a Nia teacher. It was a sight she once thought was too far out of her reach. Carla recalled:

White belt was such a life changing experience for me [participant becomes teary eyed]. It was just the fact that I went down there and did it for one thing, that was really huge for me. And that it was fitness...because I'm a couch potato, always have been. Fitness to me has always been something I've had to force myself to do. There was a lot of self exploration, it wasn't all physical. Along with the physical there were lots of emotional changes...when you're doing something physical quite often you unexpectedly tap into something emotional, intellectually letting go of a few things, thinking things through. But letting go of a few intellectual barriers that of course

were self imposed. And I had a sense of my own spirit. I discovered a lot of that. The combination was very life changing for me.

How do we truly know ourselves and our potential to become, without exploration?

Bateson (1994) writes that often what we learn on our own accord is not celebrated in the same light as what we are taught to learn through formal education. Moreover, much is missed along the way that validates what we know, leaving us feeling inadequate. These inadequacies can become embedded in our view of ourselves. Frannie, for instance, had known herself as a person who struggled to learn patterns and sequences. Her initial feeling of inadequacy stemmed from her experience in learning mathematics. She felt intimidated along side others who could grasp the concepts easily. Later in life, old feelings of failure surfaced when Frannie attended a sacred dance workshop where she was expected to learn a specific set of steps. Later, when Frannie was asked by a friend to try Nia she was very reluctant, and afraid that she would not be able to do the choreography or keep up with others in the group. To Frannie's surprise, her Nia experience was encouragement to explore within movement. She was given the space to celebrate what she inherently knew about herself and the time to discover more. Frannie began to transform the view of herself into a story that highlighted her competence rather than her ineptness. Frannie explained:

It was a personal challenge to go but I found that there was no expectation placed by the instructor to do everything exactly her way and that you could modify certain segments to suit what your body movements were. If you had an ache or a pain somewhere you could slow it down quite a bit and do it at your own pace...The instructor totally respects where everybody comes from, it's a good feeling. For me, being able to conquer some of the choreography, it's not as big an issue anymore if I don't get it, I don't get it, I just keep moving anyway. And sometimes things fall into place and you just work your feet and let your hands come in later or vice versa. The instructor's got that unique talent and I would say that initially it was the instructor that kept me going and then it became the joy of movement...Every time I go I can accomplish a particular choreography. Maybe it's been a little bit difficult, but it feels really good and it feels good inside...it's just nice to know I can figure it out myself, so it's just neat to feel that way.

Like Frannie, many of the women commented on the role of the Nia instructor. It is the instructor who is responsible for inspiring and emanating the philosophy of Nia within the class. The Nia teacher training manual (Rosas & Rosas, 2001) speaks to the importance of maintaining the integrity of Nia while encouraging personal freedom in each instructor. The manual also specifies that Nia is “a movement and fitness practice with personal growth opportunities that lead to lifestyle change” (p. 7-45). It would be appropriate for an instructor to promote exploration and respect each individual’s learning process in order to authentically represent the Nia technique. Through the instructor’s deliverance, the philosophical intent of Nia was recognizably present in the women’s experiences. Moreover, by fostering exploration, doors were opening to the self. Katie described the phenomena of emerging into the self as tears began to flow. She revealed:

Really starting a relationship with myself that I probably wasn’t doing before, I was just living and moving along not really knowing myself. It’s like finding myself again and beginning a new relationship with me...I think Nia is about learning to love yourself, *Now I Am* (NIA) in love.

Like Katie, the women were creating a new loving relationship with the self, accepting the self in all of its beauty.

Many women spend time in judgment of themselves. They engage in negative thought patterns that weaken their confidence, stall their personal growth, and close doors on their potential. There is a sense that as individuals, we are not permitted to accept ourselves simply as we are meant to be. We must list our faults and always strive to do better. The women in the study shared past experiences that did not always nurture confidence and self acceptance. They spoke of looking outwardly for approval to validate their self-worth, amid the emergence of an inner dialogue of self doubt and uncertainties. Their stories, however,

also revealed the relief they came to experience in Nia, as they gave themselves permission to accept the self, unconditionally. Rose explained:

There's no judgment, is the other thing. I'm extremely judgmental of myself and I don't judge myself in Nia... one of the other things that appeals to me is there's no right or wrong way of doing it, everybody does it right. I like that whole concept that everybody does it right. What is right for you is right. I don't think there are a lot of things like that in the world.

All of the women spoke of their experience in Nia as having no right or wrong way, a concept that had previously been foreign to them. As they learned to embrace and celebrate their uniqueness, their inner dialogue of self doubt dwindled. Clair revealed:

With Nia I can honestly say to you that self acceptance is the glory, it's the flag 'yes, I got it, I'm in my body, I love being here, I love who I am without complaint' that's true self acceptance, and that's where I'm at. There are times when I can creep into self doubt and again I can check that back out and realize my true state is one of self acceptance.

Likewise, Frannie echoed the women's experiences in Nia as she spoke of dismantling her negative self-talk. She is practicing self-acceptance by setting personal boundaries that bring balance to her life, while making choices that bring her joy and happiness. Frannie explained:

I've often had a lot of self talk that says 'no, you can't.' I've learned that I can in Nia with things I wasn't sure I could do. All of sudden 'yes, I can do this, this is no problem.' I also knew that I could say 'its time to stop'...I think part of this process... especially when you've done it for a number of months or a year or more is that you learn... to accept certain aspects of yourself more wholly, even joyfully when maybe before it was a negative. I think that's one thing I've noticed... that it's okay to be happy with who you are and how you are, because you're the one that makes the choices that can make the changes even though you think you don't have that power, you do.

As the women continued their Nia practice, they were becoming more confident. They were thinking more positively and changing their attitude towards their body's image.

Carla explained:

Ten years ago you would never in a million years have caught me in the gym in anything that wasn't baggy. My preference is for the stretchy clothes which tend to be form fitting. They're just more comfortable to workout in... and I really don't care what anybody thinks. I see so many girls going by a mirror and watching themselves and checking themselves all the way. I watch people's body language. I see them standing a little taller and tucking everything in... I used to be like that all the time... That changed probably over the last four or five years and especially more so over the last two or three. I attribute that to doing Nia, I really do... my self-confidence has really blossomed. I've never really before been a self-confident person. I always had a lot of self doubt.

The women were honouring their power from within and making changes that supported self-acceptance and encouraged self-expression. As a young girl, Katie danced with confidence in front of an audience. She wasn't shy and loved being seen. As an adult, she used alcohol to numb her inhibitions in order to feel comfortable in front of others, a dependence she refers to as "false courage." Katie wrote in her journal:

After our interview today, I remembered something I wanted to share with you. I wanted to mention that before discovering Nia, the only way I could dance at a social event was if I had a few drinks under my belt to give me courage. I would have to be half cut before getting on the dance floor. Now when we go to a Christmas party I don't need a drink to get up and dance and be silly and have fun and express myself in front of others. I also have compassion for those that are afraid to get up and dance. You can see how much they want to but just can't allow themselves the freedom to just relax and be in their body with dance. I feel like telling them to just let go and let your self be free of self judgments and illusions. If you get up and dance you will find you truly are a unique individual and that each of us has our own dance and our own expression. Discover yours without the false courage that we all seem to depend on. Instead rely on our own power within us. When experiencing free dance for the first time and for awhile after, I used to say I'd have to be drunk to do that!!! Now I can express myself freely through the movement of free dance at Nia and at social events and feel the same excitement and courage that I did when I used alcohol. Now I can dance drunk without the booze!!!!

During one of our conversations, Katie emphatically stated, "judgment doesn't belong in the world!" I view Katie's statement as one that all of the women would applaud. Their journey to self-acceptance has meant letting go of the inner critic and rejecting old worries of

not being good enough. Lily expressed her transformation as having “the freedom to be me and not being afraid to be who I am.” All of the women have begun to speak their own truth through an inner voice that is welcoming them as they are, beautiful and lovely.

My Movement ~ My Voice

~

Self-Expression ~ Self-Care

In his work with bioenergetics, Lowen (1975) describes self expression as the free, natural, and spontaneous activities of the body. He states that we are expressing ourselves all the time; however, our self-expression may become inhibited by our own self consciousness. Because the women were practicing self-acceptance and did not feel judged by others, they felt free to be expressive. They were discovering their own *comfort zone* as they participated in Nia. By exploring through the body’s movement and the sound of the voice, they were finding different ways to express their inner self.

Many of the women spoke of revealing the dancer within the self during the free dance portion in Nia. Lily explained that “free dance means anything goes...free to do whatever you want.” Some participants were surprised when they were first introduced to the free dance, because it was an experience that they had not found in other fitness approaches. However, they soon embraced the form as another opportunity to explore their creativity.

Rose explained:

I’m somebody who doesn’t feel I’m ever very creative... In Nia I have the freedom to be as creative as I want to be...I think gee, maybe twenty years ago I really could have been a dancer.

Lowen (1975) believes that spontaneity is the essential quality of self-expression. He also notes that spontaneity, without giving conscious thought to the expression, is very pleasurable and is often observed in children’s play. Revealed in many of the women’s

stories was the sense of reclaiming childhood through self-expression. Katie has rediscovered her inner child in Nia. She is exploring through play. Katie explained:

It's like taking out your inner child and playing with her for an hour, that's what it was like for me. Its bringing out that little girl in there that's been waiting to come back out and skip around the play ground, or dance freely, or yell, and laugh, and cry, and just be the innocence of being a child again where you don't care what people think, just accept yourself ...it really brings you into the child within. We all need to do that at any age, but I think in middle age we need to go back and find that inner child again and bring her out.

Throughout the women's narratives there was an understanding that the more time they spent practicing Nia, the more they were transforming the self. As they continued to practice Nia, they reflected on past ways of being while exploring the significance on the self, today. Often they were trading old patterns and restrictive rules for changes that embraced freedom and empowerment. Many of the women were discovering their voice in Nia as a means to self-expression. Katie recalled the rules she learned while growing up and the influence they had on her sense of freedom to voice herself:

As I kept going to Nia I was able to express myself more and more. I was able to peel away those layers, the walls built up, and the mask. I was able to peel those away each time through doing the different routines and the willingness to find my voice...As children we're told 'shh, be quiet, speak when you're spoken to', and that stays with you all your life. It's not acceptable to be loud and it's not acceptable to express what you really want to express, because you may offend someone or someone may disagree with you. We tend to choke ourselves off...with Nia it was okay to be heard. I had something to say even if it was just a yell, or a yes, or a no. In Nia you use yes, and you use no, and me, and I, and we, and different words that can be very empowering. How often can you just yell no, and throw your arms in the air!...The voice in Nia is a very powerful tool.

Katie's description speaks to Brown and Gilligan's (1992) understanding of women's development of voice through relationship. It is a paradoxical situation in which relationship with others is valued, yet the voice is silenced, and the self is abandoned for the sake of becoming a good woman and being in noncontentious relationships. Through their

experience with Nia, the women were awakening their voice, embracing the self, and reconstructing relationships. Clair explained:

Those people in my closest network are now saying that I speak my mind. I say what I am thinking and feeling even though sometimes the other person doesn't want to hear it...I think it's imperative that I do this, not to hurt others, but to be able to have expression.

Through her work in Nia, Clair has activated her voice and, in turn, is meeting her emotional and personal needs, as well as expressing her newly recognized authentic self.

Revealed within the participants' conversations, the women spoke of dancing with their bodies and igniting their voice in self-expression. Through self-transformation, they have been inspired to commit to caring for themselves and to enhancing well-being.

Attending Nia was viewed as an important first step in the participants' self-care. Once they began to experience the benefits of Nia, they perceived it as a means to maintaining their well-being. Moreover, the women were committing to the practice of Nia, making self-care a priority in their lives. Cassandra explained:

It's a priority now. I actually walk to the class and then walk home. It takes most of my morning and somebody said, 'that's a lot of time to give', and I said 'for me, it's just the gift I give myself.'

Along with doing Nia, many of the women engaged in other sport and recreational activities. Some of the benefits these programs provided overlapped with Nia. However, the women emphasized the uniqueness of Nia practice and the significance to their self-care. For instance, they revealed that Nia provides a holistic framework in which to view a variety of ways to become fit, and in particular, the time to purposefully focus on the self. In the past, Rose would pound out her stress by running and doing aerobics. Over the years, she realized her approach to stress reduction was not very helpful. Rose wanted to find something that would fulfill her need for self-care:

Nia helped with finding something that was for me and it's very much for me. I'm pretty good about making sure I get there and do it, because it's important to me. So part of it is... realizing that I need to take some time for me and that it's okay to take time for me.

Integral to caring for the self, is discovering effective ways to manage stress and bring balance to one's life. In today's society, women are juggling many responsibilities with work and family. Carving out time to focus on the self can be a challenge. Pat revealed:

I need to balance work with exercise, and not just exercise because I do love playing softball and volleyball and I forget about myself. In Nia, I don't really forget about myself, I actually focus on myself...that hour a week with Nia is just my time for my self.

Prior to Nia, many of the women thought of their own self-care as secondary to others' needs as they cared for children, family, friends, and even acquaintances. Clair explained:

I think in our conditioning we were always taught the opposite, care about others before your self. The old saying was 'think of others before you think of yourself'... Therefore, our self wasn't as important...Nia offered to me a way of being self-nourishing...Its about the beautiful care of this being so that I can do my work much more effectively. I'm not going to debilitate myself because I'm pouring all of that out there and forgetting myself.

Lily reflected on the notion that women are viewed as being self-centered when they take time for self-care. Through Nia, Lily has learned to nurture herself without feeling guilty, a common thread among the women's stories. Lily revealed:

I've got to take care of this fantastic machine so that it can take care of me. I was doing everything for everybody else. Through Nia, I found that I could focus on myself. If I don't take care of me I can't take care of anyone...I am someone's mother and I am someone's wife but I'm me first now. And it's not being selfish and greedy like I thought it was, its being giving. The more I give to me the more I can give to them...it's my time out of the house, my time away from everything.

The women were coming to understand the importance of looking after the self in relation to looking after others. By honouring the self, they were more able to wholeheartedly provide care, encouragement, and inspiration to others.

Another facet to self-care was the setting of personal boundaries. Several of the women described the changes they had made as they created stronger boundaries for themselves. They were actively setting limits to ensure their privacy and personal respect. No longer were they allowing themselves to be swept up in other's requests for their time, space, and energy without thinking of their own self-care. Clair recalled:

With Nia my sense of boundaries has become a lot stronger. It's a very important thing for me for what I've experienced. Being a nice person, I've allowed people to be around me all the time, to cross over my boundaries continuously just to appease other people, now I don't do that...In Nia, the Aikido is the one that pulls you around and does a swift block [shows with her body an arm movement that sets a special boundary]. I am then true to what I am thinking and feeling inside. I'm able to [set boundaries] [demonstrates with her body a move that creates a boundary]. If it doesn't feel good 'no' and I don't want that 'no' [continues to demonstrate with her body and arms the boundary she creates in the Aikido movements]. I'm able to actually do it with movement...so I'm working with boundaries on that level now...I'm standing firm around things that I don't wish to have crossed over...I can see where the process of Nia has helped me reach that level. To say now, I'm this strong, not just physically- mentally and emotionally too. 'No, I'm not allowing you to walk over me, or to insult me, or to tell me that I'm not right or I'm doing things wrong and you want me to do it this way and that way' I'm not conceding as much, I'm staying true to myself...I have a greater understanding of my own boundary system now than I've ever had before.

Creating healthy boundaries is necessary to bring order to our lives, to define us as separate from others, and to empower us to ward off harm. Keeping ourselves safe is integral to self-care. Similar to Clair, Frannie shared how she incorporates the concepts learned in Nia to set personal boundaries. She is creating a safety net as she ventures into the world. Frannie explained:

Particularly with the martial arts and when you're blocking, and you make sounds and you're asserting your self, you're claiming your space, which is a good thing to know

how to do...powerful and in control. When I'm in large crowds like a mall or at a ball game, I know I can create my own space because people will instinctively move away. You create that little zone of safety for yourself.

For the participants, Nia has become an essential ingredient in their self-care. They are taking charge of expressing their needs, wants, values, and boundaries amid the cultural norm for women to be caretakers before caring for them selves. The women have a renewed respect for the self, realizing the link between self-care and caring for others. Handling life's challenges has become more manageable for them, because they are taking the time to nourish the self and enhance well-being.

A Different Place to Live Life

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Compassionate Responses

Being in a healthy relationship with the self influenced the women's relationship with others. As they strengthened their inner resources and became more aware of their body's reaction to others, they were able to respond with less judgment and with more compassion. The women's desire to preserve meaningful relationships with others reminds me of Josselson's (1996) description of the interconnection between self and other. Josselson explains that women look to form multifaceted relationships that "allow for self-expression in a responsive exchange where both self and other are contained, recognized, empowered, valued, and enriched" (p. 210). The self-transformations that were occurring for the women through Nia were now reaching into understanding the self with others.

By acknowledging the beauty in the self and changing the inner language from self-doubt to self-acceptance, the women began to think, feel, speak, and relate with others in the same manner. Cassandra explained, "Nia keeps me in touch with myself and what's going on with me and that definitely effects my relationships with people...if you're more accepting of

yourself you're more accepting of others." How we respond is often connected to our emotions. If we feel pleasure we may respond with a smile. Conversely, if we feel pressured we may withdraw or lash out in anger. Sometimes how we respond initially is not in our best interest or other people's best interest. Many of the women in the study spoke of the changes they had made when responding to others, now that the walls of inner judgment had come down. They were using their inner voice of acceptance and reflecting on the significance and meaning of the interaction before they responded. Katie revealed:

I try not to judge others and I accept people for the way they are and who they are, accept their feelings...I have more compassion now for most everything rather than be judgmental. I really try to stay away from the judgmental; I think we're all very guilty of that...I pull myself back out of that way of thinking and reacting. I try to integrate things first before I react. I used to react right away, from an emotional stand point. Then I'd have to go back and do damage control. Now I listen to what is being said and I'll let it integrate into myself first and think about it, then come back with a reaction...I've learned a lot through the Nia teachings.

Like Katie, Carla has embraced her self-discoveries and is changing how she interacts with others. She is reflecting on past thought patterns that initiated negative reactions. Carla is clearing out the debris of judgment and replacing it with love. Carla explained:

Nia is taught with a lot of positive emotions, a lot of love. I find that I look at things a lot more with love. I deal with people with love and react more with love...if somebody was really snappy and nasty and miserable I'd get testy. My first reaction was to want to snap right back. Now I tend to let go of a lot of things. I tend to let a lot of things slide off my back. I ask myself, 'is this worth getting upset over, is this worth getting angry over, why is this hurting my feelings, does it have to hurt my feelings, does it matter?'...In my every day life, I'm finding that I can sort that out a little better. I can drop a lot of things that used to be instant reactions for me, that weren't necessarily productive or helpful to myself or anybody for that matter. I can shake that off a lot faster.

Many of the women shared stories that illustrated their self-understanding through Nia and the manner in which they are interacting with others, differently. Being aware of their thoughts and feelings in the present moment also influenced their responses. Every week,

Cassandra spends cherished time with her granddaughter. On the day of our interview, she recalled her response to feeling irritated:

Today, my granddaughter was a cranky two and a half year old...I could feel my irritation but I don't feel it from observing it, I'm really present to it. And I realize, 'oh yeah, I have a cranky two and half year old in me too.' I'm able to be more compassionate, or patient with her. I don't think I was with my own children when they were two and a half. Our wills would lock up and it was like I'm going to win this. Now I know that there's no winner in something like that. In terms of my every day life, I'm quicker to be in touch with actually what's going on in me and without as much judgment...I feel compassion for her [granddaughter] and for me and that's a different place to live your life from.

Beginning to live life differently was exactly what the women were doing. Clair explained, "we're responding, not over reacting, or impulsing. What I'm seeing is there are old patterns being cut at the root. Nia is doing that in a subtle way but in a most assured way." By dismantling judgment the women were forging sincere and genuine connections with others. Frannie's words expressed a sense of global compassion as she spoke of becoming more aware of the human condition through her Nia experience. Frannie revealed:

We don't walk in each other's shoes and we can't know what other people are feeling and experiencing. Sometimes their behaviours may not seem appropriate but that's the only way they know to express themselves...I'm a lot more humble about the human condition in general and certainly Nia has reinforced that.

Through the practice of Nia the women have come to recognize their self-transformations as empowering. They are stronger and more confident people. They are valuing the self and filling their hearts with love and compassion. In turn, these changes are influencing the way they are relating to others, and enriching their connections.

For the women in the study, Nia is inspirational. The benefits they are experiencing from their Nia practice are life changing and they want to share their joy with others. Katie explained:

I think it becomes a passion. It becomes a passion so much in you that you want to take that passion and you want to do more with it. You want to share that and you want to give it and you want to see other people embrace that passion.

The women's desire to share their passion for Nia has initiated a ripple effect. Pat explained that she tells "anyone who is looking for something in their life." Similarly, Carla helps spread the word of Nia; however, she acknowledges that Nia may not appeal to everyone.

Carla explained, "I always encourage people to find a class and try it... I believe that there's something in Nia for everybody. For some people it's not necessarily for them and others are like 'wow'".

The women who have taken the white belt teacher training reflected on the populace they think would benefit from Nia. They are interested in seeing Nia reach the younger generations, promoting self-esteem. Lily explained:

I want to bring it to the elementary school... Nia should be taught in schools from grade one on just so people will understand that it's okay to be me, it's okay to be a little bit different... And to those girls that need the self-esteem because it's a harsh world out there for some young girls. I figure if you can catch them at that age before things are really set in there ways that would be a really good thing... It's become a passion. I might as well use it, determination to help other people... I think my purpose is to spread the word about Nia.

Likewise, Clair views Nia as a holistic movement approach that can work in prevention.

Along with the pre-adolescent age group, Clair would like to encourage women between the ages of 20 to 30 years old to try Nia. She emphasized:

I've been noticing more women in there 20's and 30's are beginning to catch it, up to this point it's usually women in our age group [midlife]. I would love to see the younger women do it more as a preventative. I think Nia actually encourages you to stay focused around what it takes to stay healthy through your lifestyle.

Each participant has been touched by Nia and genuinely wants to share its magic with everyone they meet. Rose described the thoughtfulness that all of the women have shared as they express their experience of Nia to others in their lives. There is a sense of happiness in

her voice as she shared her experience, knowing that her friend has recently discovered Nia.

Rose revealed:

A friend of mine who is retired, I tried to get her to go to Nia and she just said ‘oh, Rose I can’t’. She has some heart issues, ‘I can’t do it for that long’ and I said, ‘sure you can, you come to those blues dances, you dance.’ But she said, ‘yeah, but I don’t go crazy like you’ and I said, ‘you don’t have to go crazy like me.’ I was visiting her and she showed me her gym and she said, ‘I go to Nia here’ and I said, ‘what! I thought I tried to get you into that, I thought you didn’t think you could.’ She said, ‘no, you’re right, I can do it and it’s great.’

In our conversations, there were times when the women would say, “Nia is hard to describe to others.” Even as they shared their Nia experiences with me, they would move their bodies to further explain. It became clear to me, that in order to come to know the experience of Nia and the influence it can have on one’s life, one has to move with it. By spreading the word of Nia, the women were inviting others to experience, through their body, the treasure they have found.

Throughout this chapter, the women have been transforming the self. They are discovering their hidden potentials and taking ownership of authoring the self as they explore through Nia, an integrated mind and body movement. Self-acceptance is replacing self-doubt and judgment. They are summoning their voice and being heard. Confidence is being expressed through their creativity. They are honouring the self by making self-care a priority. The changes the women have embraced are influencing their relationships with others. They are creating more harmonious interactions as they engage in thoughtful compassionate responses rather than unthoughtful reactions. The women’s passion for Nia is self-transcending, nurturing self-love that is shared in new meaningful and significant ways with others.

I now turn to Chapter Seven “The Experience of Nia with Midlife Women: A Sense of Space.” Here the women’s narratives reveal an understanding of the experience of Nia as lived in midlife spaces.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE EXPERIENCE OF NIA WITH MIDLIFE WOMEN: A SENSE OF SPACE

Based on conversations with eight participants, this chapter explains the experience of Nia with women in midlife within the physical space where Nia occurs, and as it is integrated into the women's lives. As we enter any place, we inhabit the space as the space inhabits us. We use our senses to see our surroundings, to hear the sounds, to feel our comfort level, and to smell and taste the scent in the air. It is a back and forth fusion that our bodies continuously shift through as we experience space as a lived entity. In the words of van Manen (1997), "we may say that we become the space we are in" (p. 102). I recall a time when I was walking with a friend. She inhaled deeply and remarked how she had missed the scent of fresh cut wood during the years when she had lived away from her home town. It was a smell that immediately placed her in a familiar space, her "signature of intimacy" (Bachelard, 1958, p. 15), in that the space inhabited her being as a place she recalled as home. This recollection resonates within me an understanding that exploring place may replicate the sensation of home and that any inhabited space may bear its essence. Through this lens, it is my understanding that the body, itself, is a representation of home. The body houses our sensations, experiences, and memories that we continuously carry with us. There is the understanding that feeling at home in the body is equated to feeling content with the self. For the women in the study, the experience of Nia is a place where they feel at home as they share their experiences with others. Clair explained that "Nia allows us to be in our own space and yet we're all doing it together." The experience of coming together is revealed in Katie's words:

Everybody that comes to Nia is like family. [Before class begins] everybody is chatting and discussing and talking like the closest of friends. It's one big family.

When you leave, its like we've been together and we've spent this time at a party.
And then you leave and feel great...it's a very social connection.

Relating to others is valued among women, and the desire to continue to share leads women to seek connections throughout life (Edelstein, 1999). The women's narratives revealed a sense of home with the self as they experienced Nia as living well-being in midlife spaces. The women described the experience of being in the Nia space as *a welcoming and safe space*. It was a place where they were *making connections with other women*. In addition, the Nia experience was carried beyond the physical space of a room with four walls. It was *well-being in midlife ~ lived as a lifestyle*.

Welcome Home

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A Welcoming and Safe Space

Most of us know of or have observed the experience of walking into a place where others are gathered and a sudden hush falls over the space. There is an awkward sense that an interruption or disturbance has occurred and all are not welcome. I remember growing up in a metropolitan city in the United States where Jews and Negroes were not permitted in several private swimming clubs. It was not a safe place for everyone. These experiences are the extremes to which Nia is the antithesis. Revealed in the women's narratives was the sense that upon entering the Nia space, all are invited. Pat explained that the Nia teacher, "connects with you, you feel wonderful. She always greets you every week...she makes you feel very welcomed, 'glad you're here.'" Similarly, Lily revealed how she came to feel comfortable moving toward the front of the class where previously she had cautiously stayed in the back of the room:

I usually bring up the rear, take things cautiously, not taking any chances. The instructor helped me feel comfortable...she is encouraging and supportive and she

knows everybody's name in the class. If you're new, she comes right up to you, right off the bat and talks to you and asks you your name.

Not only is the Nia teacher helping to create a welcoming atmosphere, the women themselves are glad to share the space with others. Cassandra stated that, "there is one woman that likes to save my place for me. I didn't know I had a place. She's taken on that role. I've gotten to know her, and she's a lovely person." There is a sense that everyone has a place in Nia and that everyone belongs.

In our conversations, the women spoke of Nia as a safe space. They described the movement components of Nia as being structured, yet within the choreography, they felt safe to explore their personal freedom and creativity. Pat explained:

It's controlled freedom, there is a framework within which you can be creative and just be your self ...I think that's what we like as human beings. I think we like to know what the limits are and then there's safety within that...I feel very safe in Nia class.

The sense of safety stemmed from the notion that Nia is a place without judgment. The women viewed the Nia instructor as a role model, such that, the instructor sets the tone for the class and 'leads by example.' The women are sharing the Nia space with each other and embracing the Nia philosophies through the instructor's guidance. They are practicing self-acceptance and acceptance of others. As a group of women moving together, they are creating a safe space that feels comfortable for everyone. Katie revealed:

I was just thinking the other day... 'what is it that Nia does that makes people so comfortable and friendly?' ...I think it's the togetherness and the community that Nia creates. The freedom in the movements, we all may be making silly noises together, we may all be dancing around making silly shapes, we might sing, we might all be hollering, and so I think it's a space that creates freedom and it's very comfortable. We all know it's nonjudgmental...It comes from the teacher to begin with. A teacher teaches by example. If you're observing the teacher and she's doing silly things then it's safe for you to do silly things. If I want to make this silly shape, it's okay for you to make a silly shape. Right away you can tell this is a safe place. If you want to

express emotions through these movements you know there's no safer place than right here, in this room, and no one's going to judge you.

The women revealed that they feel at ease in Nia. It is place where they can safely 'let down their guard' and express a more intimate side of themselves. For Cassandra, Nia provided a place for her to explore her body's sensuality. Cassandra explained:

Things build up because you don't express them and Nia is a pretty safe place to do that. The one that I'm starting to just notice is whenever we're encouraged to be a diva or more sexual, intentionally sexual. I've never cultivated that at all. I'm pretty sure that too comes from my strict household where we didn't even say the word and nothing about our bodies was ever public, it was just very private...The discomfort indicates that some part of me thinks I ought to be able to relax about that and not be uncomfortable. Another part of me says, 'oh, that's inevitable, look how old you are and that's how you've lived your life as a very private, good girl' but still I'm curious about that. Nia gives me an opportunity to see what parts of my body I might be able to move more sexually and then I come home and talk to my husband about it.

Like Cassandra, other women sometimes felt discomfort and awkwardness while practicing Nia. There was a sense of safety, however, in knowing they have permission to participate differently, than what is suggested by the instructor, without judgment. Rose described an activity that occasionally occurs at the end of her Nia class. The instructor puts forth an incomplete sentence and asks for those who would like to participate, to suggest an ending. Rose explained her response:

I don't want to walk in going 'oh, I didn't think of a good sentence', it's that judgmental part of myself but I also couldn't see the value in it. For me, by the end of Nia I feel different than I did when I came in, I feel calmer, and I feel more focused, more relaxed so this whole finish the sentence thing was a stressor for me...If I decide that I don't want to participate then that's okay. One thing about Nia is, I feel its okay to make my own choices because I'm doing it for me.

A ripple effect is created in the welcoming and safe space of the Nia experience. As each woman enters the Nia space they feel welcomed by the instructor and, in turn, they begin to welcome others. It is a place where judgment is suspended and people can safely

explore, express, and discover more of themselves. Nia encourages the understanding that each person is there for themselves and yet it is also a shared experience.

A Community Within A Community

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Making Connections With Other Women

The realization that we live in connection with others begins at a very early age as we depend on others for our basic needs. We learn to adapt and respond to others in order to maintain relationships. We link our lives together through our interconnections. In her writing, Josselson (1992) points out that, “there are many ways in which we reach through the space that separates us to make connections – ways that vary throughout life – and motives that impel us to do so” (p. 5). The women in the study spoke of making connections with each other as they shared the Nia space. In an understanding gleaned from Josselson’s notions, the women began to experience companionship, a form of mutuality. As they moved in harmony, side by side, they created a bond – “an emergent *we* in the space” (p. 7). The women were orienting their own experience with others in the room, joining together, as they engaged in the same activity at the same moment. Clair revealed:

It’s not an isolated thing. I think that’s the jewel of Nia, it’s to be shared. In that sense, we’ve raised our ability to self-care, in a more unifying way. I’ve noticed when we’ve had our sessions, each session immediately after, people just automatically want to share, they want to share themselves, look at me, look at all this beauty that I am, that I feel, that I’m experiencing, that for me is so exciting... We support each other. We raise each other by our movements and some of the phrases or the music. Everyone is so individual yet it’s very unifying and that’s very exciting to me to feel that oneness, no distinction... After class, it’s like we all look around at each other and we see all of these beautiful bright faces. It’s like we know that something has happened for each of us, and there is a certain celebration around that. And you can walk away and feel good about yourself and each other.

There is an understanding that the Nia experience happens within a communion, a mutual exchange between self and other. As Clair has explained, everyone has a place in Nia

because it is not done in isolation but within a group. Josselson (1992) refers to this sense of belonging as being embedded. She asserts that people within a social network are embedded when they feel included, share commonalities, are the same as, and relinquish a part of their individuality to be interconnected. Katie expressed this notion when she said, “its being able to do it with a group of other people, not doing it alone, and being accepted as part of the group.” As well, Katie referred to Nia participants as being “like minded.” She has noticed they often have similar interests and views when they have had time to talk before or after class.

In addition, the women revealed that Nia is a place where people care. It is a place where they are making connections through the sharing of personal stories. Cassandra explained, “Nia is a caring community, it’s quite wonderful.” Cassandra has been struggling with the notion of retirement. By sharing her dilemma with others she feels a sense of companionship rather than facing her challenge alone. In her journal writing, Cassandra recalled:

Had a great conversation with a couple of retired Nia gals, they feel as I do and I found comfort in that...In just a few minutes, she shared what a struggle she is having with life. We had a real honest, meaningful conversation, a connection!

Likewise, Lily revealed the positive connections she is making with other women through her Nia experience. She said:

Everybody knows everybody’s name and if they’ve got kids or if they’ve got grandkids and what they do for a living...How often do you find that in a fitness class? I don’t make friends that easy and the ones that I have right now drink a lot, I don’t want to be around them...I’ve made some fantastic friends at Nia. They’re friends that care. We all care about each other...it feels good to be part of a group that’s so energetic and happy....When I was feeling down a week or so ago, one of them came up to me and said, ‘come on we’re going to have, a “we” day.’ I’d never had that before...if you go into Nia and you’re feeling blah, somebody always picks up on that and tries to bring you out of it. And if you see someone that’s feeling blah you do the same.

For Lily, Nia is a place where she is cultivating caring friendships. Moreover, by coming together in the Nia space, the women are feeling the support of each other and, in turn, are feeling empowered and self-assured as individuals. Surrey (1991) postulates that relationships are often minimally regarded as meeting the need for support, affection and contact and not viewed as possibilities for action and growth. She challenges this notion by suggesting a relational empowerment exists within the connection, in that, the relationship, itself, invites the opportunity for change. Surrey's understanding reverberates in Clair's words as she explained, "Nia, it's not a solo act, it's a synergistic act, and it's something that we inspire in a group together."

Synergy is defined as "the interaction of two or more agents or forces so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effects" (ITP Nelson Canadian Dictionary, 1997). The word stems from the root *synergos* meaning "working together". This definition aptly reflects the women's description of the creation of group energy in Nia. Clair commented that the participants in Nia "are a shared conglomerate of energy" which is experienced by Carla as "being part of the magic of Nia." As the women moved together, rhythmically, they began to generate a synergistic flow of energy. Rose stated, "I think you definitely feed off other people's energy, that's why I couldn't see doing it by yourself...it is the being with others and their energy". The women felt energy being generated within themselves, as a group, and as an entity reaching beyond into the universe. Lily revealed her experience:

I feel light, and a really big sense of belonging...It's belonging to the big picture of life...Some days the energy level is just 'wow.' When everybody is all in sync you can almost feel it going through you, it's energizing.

Many of the women spoke of the synergetic energy produced in the Nia group as they moved in synchronicity. It was as if, by coming together, they created a place for the energy to exist and permeate beyond the Nia space. Clair explained:

I think class is so vital. I enter into this state where I really feel such connectedness it's like a synergy of energy that there is no one anymore, its just energy. We do different techniques to assist synchronicity. The instructor will pull us all, [into a circle] and we all go in and say 'whoo.' Or there's times when we are all moving in one big wave and you can feel the energy. We all notice it after class we say, 'wow, wasn't that something special.' We know that we've all managed to come together in that synchronicity to aid that energetic movement.

For all of the women, it was difficult to clearly express their experience of the synergetic energy in Nia. It was an abstract experience to speak of yet a very real and tangible experience to embody. Pat helped to further the understanding as she shared her belief of a universal energy existing in the world, and how through Nia she is connecting to this greater power. She described the image of walking into a room and sensing the energy as being heavy, sad, or light because of an experience that has occurred in that space. This image elucidated her understanding of the effect energy can have on a person. Pat provided the reminder that not all connections are healthy. She invites reflection on the quality of our relationships with others and the ways we may contribute to their development. Pat revealed:

A lot of the exercises will involve bringing in or up the energy from the earth and that make's me think 'oh, okay, I am connected to everybody here [on earth] and how is that connection being developed, is it healthy?'...If you can feel it, then you know its flowing, and it's flowing between us...It extends beyond me to everyone there...it just seems like it's going further than me and beyond just us and going out into the world, into the universe.

One definition of energy is "usable power" (ITP Nelson Canadian Dictionary, 1997). This explanation parallels the women's experience of the group energy in Nia. Together, they are generating a synergistic force within the Nia space that supports connections, creates an uplifting feeling, and heightens awareness of the world around them.

Nia is a place where the women feel at home. Their experience occurs within an environment where they feel welcomed and safe. They have the freedom to explore, to express and to participate at their own level without judgment. Connections are being made between the women through the synchronized movement of Nia. The women's descriptions of belonging to the group remind me of Schmais's (1985) writing on the healing aspects of group dance/movement therapy. Schmais explains that as people move together in time and space they begin to identify with each other, creating a sense of solidarity. By coming together in a shared space, the women embodied the power of the group. As they walk out of the Nia space their experience is carried with them, and is being lived as a lifestyle.

Tools I Carry Around With Me All the Time

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Well-Being in Midlife ~ Lived as a Lifestyle

The experience of midlife was reflected in the narratives as being different for each of the women. Life events and personal situations that occurred in this stage revolved around significant and meaningful change. In our conversations, the women shared their midlife stories and I came to understand their life at this time. The midlife shifts that were occurring in the women's lives were revealed throughout our conversations in relation to Nia. Many of the women viewed midlife as a transitional space of its own. It is a challenge to synthesize the details because the experiences were quite varied. Some of the women spoke of managing menopause, caring for aging parents, being an older parent, forging forward as children leave home, and retiring. Their Nia practice did not necessarily, directly influence all of these issues, however, their experience with Nia helped to manage them. For example, Clair explained how her Nia practice has aided her menopausal experiences:

Menopause that was huge...Nia really helps women going through menopause. It's such a challenging time for women of our age group. They really need to have the

strength and the power to be able to work with the hormonal shift...I chose not to take any alternatives to prescription to menopause accept this [referring to Nia] and taking care of my body in more preventative ways. I believe Nia has helped me tremendously. To me, that was the greatest gift to myself.

Many of the participants wished they had “met with Nia” earlier in their life now that they had come to know its influence on their well-being.

To me, well-being is the experience of feeling the joy in every moment. It is the notion that if I am well, then I am content and happy in life. I recall at a time when I was frustrated with my job placement. My personal values clashed with my employer’s philosophies and I was becoming more agitated and unhappy every day. A dear friend was kind enough to lend a bit of advice which I have held onto ever since, she said, “Put yourself in more places that make you feel good than bad.” I did not change my work situation at that time. However, I began to put myself in spaces either alone or with others where I felt happy. The women in the study revealed that the experience of Nia opened a space for them to enhance their well-being. Clair explained, “We begin to see the immediate benefits in our life...Nia helps me feel complete, happy, and healthy. Since I met Nia, my life has turned completely around.” Likewise Carla revealed:

I really attribute my well-being to Nia because it goes much deeper than other exercise programs. It’s definitely intellectual, mental, emotional and spiritual...I see well-being as a place of feeling good inside myself, comfortable inside myself and happy. It’s not that I felt bad about myself before my experience with Nia it’s just that I feel happier now. I’m finding new levels of what it means to feel good, happy, comfortable, serene, and calm.

The women’s Nia experience helped them discover new spaces for happiness in their lives such that when they were unable to attend Nia classes they noticeably missed the benefits. Rose explained, “I didn’t do much Nia the last two weeks and my body really felt it...It’s when you don’t do it and then you go back to it and think, ‘wow, I realize how much I miss

this, I just feel great.” Likewise, Frannie said, “there are days when I don’t take Nia and I get up and the whole day is slower, it just doesn’t have the same momentum.” Carla echoed Frannie’s sense of discontent in her journal when she wrote, “If I hadn’t gone to Nia today, I think I would be going through my day with no real enthusiasm, just going through the motions.” As well, when Frannie was unable to attend Nia for a few weeks, she wrote in her journal, “missed the connection” referring to the other women in the class. Enhancing well-being involves spending the time to nurture the self in places where we feel happy. For the women in the study, Nia is a gift they are giving themselves. It is a place where they are fostering personal fulfillment and connecting with others.

Within the chapters presented thus far, the women’s narratives have been represented most often through our conversational interviews, rather than their journal writings. In the following sections, it is my intent to intermingle the participant’s journal entries with their spoken word. I made the decision to place the majority of the journal writings in this section based on the women’s written descriptions of their Nia experience. I provided the participants with five questions as a guide to help them respond in their journals. The questions were: 1) how did I feel prior to Nia; 2) how did I feel after Nia; 3) how was I managing before Nia; 4) how am I managing after Nia; and 5) what was Nia’s influence on my sense of well-being? Most often, the women chose to follow the suggested questions. Therefore, their journal descriptions reveal their experience of Nia in the space of their daily life. They are represented by a healthy body, managing stress, finding balance, feeling calm, feeling re-energized, gaining confidence, discovering opportunities, and being happy. These descriptions elucidate the significance Nia has come to be, for all of the women, as they continue to care for the self every day of their lives.

The women spoke of a *healthy body* in terms of their physical, mental, and emotional states. Their comments supported a variety of changes. Before Nia class, the participants described their body in varying states of discomfort and tension. After Nia, they felt better on all levels – physically, mentally, and emotionally. The following is an excerpt from Frannie's journal writings describing her experience:

Moved through the routine without any knee pain...Great to move all of me. Being physically active increases my sense of well-being...I have an increased awareness and appreciation of my body; recognizing and working within my abilities. I have increased my level of mobility and flexibility.

The participants explained that after their Nia practice they were better able to *manage stress* in their life. In her writing Carla explained that within a month's time she had several challenges she was coping with. She was trying to repair the motor on her car, assist a friend through a difficult situation, manage hormonal shifts, and care for family members who were ill. She wrote:

I'm definitely changed after Nia class today!! The best way to describe it would be more buoyant, lighter, and carefree...I worked off a few yaya's in class, really threw myself into the Tae-Kwan-Do moves...I felt physically looser and mentally calmer, with an attitude of 'I've done what I can, everything else is out of my control and what will happen rather than how can I fix everything?'...It's going to be stressful, but at this moment, I feel fully able to cope, keep my sanity, and keep a sense of humor and well-being...Went back to work and again just was...My mood was lighter and not so volatile. I was more accepting of the 'the hormones are flying so just ride with it' instead of trying to control how my body was feeling...I went to class almost out of desperation looking for something calm and sure and dependable. Nia is reassuring. It helps me tap into my spirit and focus on me. Once I can find that place, then I can go about my day in a more peaceful way. The feeling of being overwhelmed was gone.

Many of the women spoke of their Nia experience as a catalyst for managing challenges. Finding the space for joy among the difficulties they were facing was, in part, related to finding a balance in their life.

When the women spoke of *finding balance* in their life they often spoke of becoming more grounded and centered. These terms were frequently used together as they described their Nia experience both in their interviews and in their writing. For the women, balance is made up of two concepts: balance in the self – body, mind, spirit, and emotions and balance as they interact within their environment through different roles and responsibilities. Many of the women described themselves as out of balance and scattered mentally and emotionally prior to their first encounter with Nia. Their experience with Nia enabled them to find a ‘middle ground’ where they could balance work, play, family, and friends.

Clair explained in her interview that her work is very demanding. After a Nia session she wrote in her journal, “My work flowed easily and there was no rushing inside or out. I am balanced.” Clair also commented that her Nia experience encourages her to do resting meditations and to bring fun and laughter into her life. Finding a balance between work and leisure was mentioned in several of the women’s narratives as a means to enhancing wellness.

The Nia experience resulted in the women feeling *calm* and relaxed. Carla revealed this sensation in her journal entries:

I felt peaceful and serene...The familiarity of the routine and the moves had a calming effect on me in many ways. Its like everything inside me was in a big jumble and then it all sifted into some sort of ordering or layering...I felt a lot mellower after class...Nia calms me, I can go about my day in a more peaceful way.

Along with feeling calm the women often feel refreshed and energized after their Nia practice.

All of the women explained in their journals and in conversations of *feeling re-energized* as they led busy lives. Their Nia experience supports the daily demands they face. Clair wrote in her journal, “There is more energy left at the end of the day. I am becoming

more energy efficient.” By rejuvenating themselves through Nia, the women are prepared for what the day may offer. In her journal, Cassandra explained her experience:

Feeling noticeably lighter and more energetic...definitely energized me – cleared the fog and lethargy – I felt more willing to approach the day...A driving energy rather than a driven energy was present...I am recharged and that always gives the energy to enter into life.

Likewise, during our conversation, Frannie shared the effect her Nia practice has on her mood during the winter months.

There are short periods of time, mostly in the winter where there’s a bit of depression and what happens when I go to Nia is that it wakes me up, it makes me focus...I just come out of there feeling loaded up with energy for the day...It’s not the kind of exercise where I want to come home and flop on the couch. It gets me going; it gives me incentive to go.

Practicing Nia helps to shift the participant’s energy level. There is a sense that they are more motivated to accomplish the day’s tasks with a positive frame of mind.

The women articulated how they were *gaining confidence* as they practiced Nia. Clair believes that society has conditioned women to feel less confident. She explained that through Nia women are relearning to self-nurture and, in turn, they now say, “Look at you, look at each individual, look at how wonderful you are, you are all so great.” Clair further stated, “Nia allows us to achieve and become everything that we’re designed to become, a wonderful divine being with lots of confidence.” In her journal she wrote, “Nia sparks my enthusiasm, making my body and mind think it is capable of whatever I give thought to...My optimism is a direct influence of Nia. I can be challenged and feel confident to handle a lot.” Similarly, when Lily describes her Nia experience to others she often explains:

Your self-esteem is going to go so high that you’re not going to believe it...You feel strong you feel like your invincible...That strength, I want to say empowering, it makes you feel empowered...I just feel strong, mentally and physically strong.

All of the participants have become more confident people because of their Nia practice.

Rose summed it up when she said, “I feel more confident about my ability to take the right path.”

With renewed energy and confidence, the women were *discovering opportunities* that fully embraced their skills and talents helping them to branch out into new areas of life. Clair explained in her journal, “After a day with Nia I am inspired to be creative anywhere in my life. Everyday is seen as an experience to stretch myself.” Clair further revealed in our conversation:

Nia is something that inspires me to explore my world with all of the things that I’m interested in. Once you’re feeling great in yourself, in your body, in your mind, my gosh, there’s a world to explore and to see. I can go back to school, I can study Nia and I can do other things. It’s a beautiful investigation of the nature of our lives and I’m happy to be in it.

Likewise, Carla revealed the opportunities she has been exposed to through her Nia experience:

Nia has allowed me to look at other areas of my life where I can make changes...As far as exercise and fitness, if there was ever any area that I did not see my self growing in, that was it...I allowed more doors to be opened because of it [Nia], the doors were always there but I wouldn’t go through them.

Four of the women in the study have taken the Nia white belt teacher training. Nia, itself, has opened doors for these women, as they embark on teaching Nia to others. Lily explained:

The last day of Nia white belt we we’re standing around... and I just blurted out ‘I’m so proud of myself, I could just... explode’ I completed a week of something I never thought I’d do. And it’s going to hopefully be my new career.

The women are refining their skills through their Nia practice. They are feeling more self-assured and taking what they’ve learned in class out into their daily life. Frannie explained:

The whole thing of being able to expand what I do in the physical realm like the canoeing or going on a more strenuous hike or playing a game of golf maybe in some ways I checked some of those things off as not being in my ball park anymore and

they're very much in my ball park and so it [the experience of Nia] will encourage me to try more things.

The women are becoming more engaged in lifetime activities and enriching their lives.

The participants explained how *being happy* was an emotional state that consistently followed the practice of Nia. Lily revealed:

I'm happy...You feel so wonderful because you're doing the best that you can do for you...happy to learn how to enjoy life, learn that...it doesn't have to be a hard road...I tend to be in a better mood and my spirits are lifted, I'm basically a really happy person when I'm finished with Nia.

Likewise, Pat wrote in her journal, "the movements and the music made me feel happy...made me want to move and dance...we were all smiles...happy smiling women in the class." Through their Nia experience the women are filling their life with joy and happiness.

The women are at home with Nia as they embrace midlife. They are making supportive connections with each other and sensing the power of the group synergy. They are moving and exploring in the Nia space engraving the experience into the signature of their bodies. A place is being created for their Nia experience to exist and be expressed through their body and in their daily lives. The women are celebrating their wellness in midlife through positive changes, becoming healthy, confident, and happy individuals.

The practice of Nia is integrated into each of the women's lives. Sometimes, the women are consciously aware of how Nia is incorporated into their daily lives by the adjustments they make as they support the self in body, mind, spirit, and emotions. Other times, the experience of Nia has merged into their lifestyle in that the practice of Nia is embodied in their lives without the need of conscious awareness. Carla explained:

Its one thing to do the hour long routine and then go back to life as it goes but...the moves are designed to be incorporated into life after doing them in class. It's very

hard not to start using them in everyday life. Like learning how to properly position the feet to walk properly, or learning how to walk with the spine more erect. In class, you're striving to move within the body's own proper alignment. I don't go into class and do Nia and come back out using sloppy body habits again, I incorporate what I've learned, what I've done in class, back into life...I don't stop my practice of Nia, there isn't an on or off switch, it becomes something that blends into everyday life.

Similarly, Katie commented on her Nia experience, "Now, it's always with me all the time...its part of my life." After experiencing the Nia white belt teacher training, Katie recalled taking home some of the philosophies Nia embraces. In particular, she described how she has rid herself of the negative thought patterns of self-blame. Katie stated:

I try to speak with impeccability, do the best that I can, and don't take anything personally...I took that home with me and then having to go back to regular life was 'whoa, now how do I incorporate this into my life?'...It was a big change for me because I was a people pleaser. I wanted everybody to be happy and everything to be perfect. If things didn't go right or things did go wrong, well, it had to be my fault, that whole self blame thing...Now, I don't take anything personally. If something doesn't work out or someone's angry at me or upset, it's like, 'well, let's figure this out.' I don't take it personally and have a big fight, or hold a grudge. I don't do that anymore. I try to always do my best, your best is all you can do, you can't do anymore.

Likewise, Cassandra revealed an aspect of Nia that she has transferred from her practice into her daily life. She described a concept presented during Nia class called RAW which is an acronym for relaxed, alert, and waiting. Cassandra explained:

RAW – relaxed, and alert and waiting...they almost seem like they work against [each other], how can you be relaxed and alert, how can those exist [together] and how can you also be waiting not rushing into the next step? Immediately I think, 'oh yeah, those are good reminders for life' relax, but alert. You're present. To be alert you have to be present and waiting, why rush, wait until you hear the beat of the music, and wait until you've got your step firmly planted before you try lifting up the other foot, otherwise you do fall over. I immediately see, it's just this simple routine that we're doing this RAW. but it really is a bigger reminder for what's been nattering in my mind, 'oh right, you just need to be relaxed, alert, and waiting for what comes next.'

Many of the women expressed surprise at the times when they would attend Nia class with an issue on their mind, or a body ache, or feeling emotionally stressed, and the practice would seem to be perfectly planned to address their personal need. Rose explained:

What really seems to be amazing is that almost every time I go, I think, ‘wow,... she knew exactly what I needed today’ I’m thinking, ‘how does she do that?’...It’s not necessarily that the instructor picks the [right] routine [for us] but we pick what we need out of it....It’s not the instructor doing it for us; it’s us doing it for ourselves.

The notion that the women are getting exactly what they need from their Nia experience was echoed throughout their descriptions. They spoke of Nia as a philosophy and as a lifestyle.

For Cassandra, Nia reflected her approach to life when she explained that, “Nia is like a little microcosm of life.” She stated:

I see metaphor or symbol [in Nia]. Like when I walk on the outside edges [of my feet], ‘do I walk on the outside edges of experience?’...Between the instructor’s words, which I just love, it’s amazing to me that sometimes what’s preoccupying me, she right away says something that really addresses [the issue] for me, that’s how I interpret it. Often it lightens me up, ‘oh, yeah’ or ‘there’s something else to think about’ but not in a serious, ‘I have to figure this out way’ but in an exploring, curious kind of way... ‘Cassandra you know it’s a microcosm of life, you can’t figure out life, just do what you can do. It doesn’t matter quote, ‘what you’re suppose to be doing.’” Nia mirrors myself back to me; it also mirrors life back to me. Like life does have beautiful music, it has its harsh moments. It has its opportunities for you to make choices about how you’re going to be or what you’re going to do. Some of those choices are harder to make than others, they don’t come easily...like some ordinary problem, just go back to the words from Nia, even that can be applied to a lot of situations.

The women’s narratives reflected the presence of Nia in their daily lives. They are thankful for the gentle reminders Nia provides, for the experience of Nia during midlife, and for the coherent spaces that propel them to ‘dance through life.’

I now turn to Chapter Eight, the interpretative – analytic synthesis and discussion based on the women’s narratives presented in the findings chapters.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ENHANCING WELL-BEING DURING MIDLIFE THROUGH NIA: REVISIONING SELF-IDENTITY

Presented in this last chapter is my interpretative-analytic synthesis and discussion based on the preceding four chapters. My intention is to further elucidate how the revisioning of self-identity of midlife women practicing Nia may lead to a sense of wellness through reconstructions of the reflective self, the connected self, the authentic self, and the contextualized self that surfaced through the narratives and the researcher's dialogue with the text. These interpretations are followed by a section that addresses a) aligning social identity theory with well-being, b) the researcher's experience as participant, c) informing counselling practice, and d) future research considerations.

Creating a Sense of Wellness

I begin with the overarching interpretation from the research findings that resides in the understanding that *nurturing self-identity brings forth many possibilities for revisioning to occur within the self. This revisioning occurs by giving oneself permission to accept all that they are, without judgment, through the reflective self, the connected self, the authentic self, and the contextualized self.* First, it is important to address the understandings of self-identity for women in midlife. Identity formation is fluid and evolves over a lifetime as a person changes, shifts, and grows through social contexts (Josselson, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2003). In today's society, Ryan and Deci explain that the problem of identity is more pronounced in light of the range of possibilities available and the leeway given for consideration. They further point out that in the past, individual identities were set through familial, religious, or social affiliations and that presently there is more freedom and choice.

However, this leaves a person with less direction and with the influences of media, social marketing strategies, and technology, the process of adopting an identity is further complicated. Erickson (1968) states the dilemma of identity is at its peak during adolescence, as a person struggles to define oneself in an adult world. This stage is known as ego identity versus role confusion, a time when adolescents ponder the question, who am I? As well, Erickson (1962) proclaims that adults can view their lives both reflectively and prospectively. The work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) articulates the occurrence of reflection in adulthood that Erickson speaks of, while questioning Erickson's stage of identity confusion for females as being regulated distinctively to adolescence. Belenky et al. revealed that many women begin to shift during midlife into an autonomous personality as they release themselves of the external perspectives of knowing to a subjective understanding that embraces their own inner resources. In other words, some women are stripping social definitions and owning their self-identity much later than is expected by popular developmental theorists. Could it be that some women are laden with expectations and outside influences that re-present an identity struggle during midlife in a similar manner as in adolescence? Rubin (1979) states that identity formation occurs by internalizing the external. In her research with midlife women, Rubin further explained that being a powerful woman was internalized as a characteristic that was to be avoided, leaving the powerful role to men. It is a socially constructed concept which reinforces that women with power are caustic, dangerous, and devouring. Similarly, through her work as a feminist therapist, Greenspan (1993) revealed that women equate feeling good with feeling powerful. Yet to feel powerful, means not feeling womanly, which Greenspan suggests becomes a threat to a

woman's identity. Rubin has stated that it takes time, possibly years, to develop and internalize a new self image. How much has changed over the years? Josselson (1996) states:

Identity in women cannot be simply named, for it resides in the pattern that emerges as a woman stitches together an array of aspects of herself and her investments in others...A woman is how she weaves it all into a whole, articulating herself in the world with others and simultaneously making private sense of it. (p. 9)

The notion that women are making private sense of their lives as they emerge through an internalized identity amidst social contexts is as fundamental today as it was three decades ago. These attempts of self-transformation speak to the challenges women in midlife encounter as they empower themselves to answer the question, who am I?

Situated in a space of non-judgment, where possibilities are limitless, the women's experience of Nia is supporting the revision of self-identity in midlife. Through their practice, the women are giving themselves the permission to honour their reflective self, their connected self, their authentic self, and their contextualized self, and in turn, they are becoming more of who they are.

The Reflective Self

Recurrent thoughts about oneself are certainly the most significant elements in the stream of consciousness. Thoughts of past experiences, memories, personal aspirations, hopes, desires, and regrets are all enveloped in broad generalizations, minute detail, and in varying degrees of positive and negative messaging. Gadamer (1960/1994) postulates that it is through the questions we ask that we find truth. Aylesworth (1991) further explains Gadamer's view that it is the past situated in a cultural heritage that constitutes understanding in the present or future. Likewise, Widdershoven (1993) relates Gadamer's view to the understanding that hermeneutics is the storied interpretation of human life such that it is through finding the meaning in our past experiences and applying it to our present situation

that represents our worldview. Furthermore, the fusion of one's past life story with one's present experience creates new meaning or a new interpretation and through this 'mutual communication', change occurs.

Within the four findings chapter's, reflexivity was nestled among the participant's life stories and woven throughout the existential understandings of time, space, body, and relationship. The interpretation inherent in this section may be best described as: *nurturing the reflective self brings greater personal awareness to the self and a sense of wholeness to body, mind, spirit, and emotions. And through this inner wisdom, the self is empowered to heal.* Reflection is born out of a need to respond to past histories and experiences, changes in present life circumstances, future planning, and the voice of internal stirrings. The eight women's narratives revealed that midlife is a significant time for deep and insightful reflection to occur, and for previous understandings of life situations to begin to converge and shift.

The participants' reflections speak of becoming more self-aware through the practice of Nia as they reflect on cognitive and behavioral patterns, emotional distresses, spirituality, health issues, belief systems, connections with others, and views of the self. As the women engage in a life review, they are actively re-examining the self in a way that encourages reconnecting in the present and envisioning the future differently. In the work of Belenky et al. (1986) a similar understanding is presented:

During the process of self-examination, women feel a heightened consciousness and sense of choice about 'how I want to think' and 'how I want to be.' They develop a narrative sense of self, past [present] and future. They do not want to dismiss former ways of knowing so much as they want to stay alert to the fact that different perspectives and different points in time produce different answers. They begin to express an interest in personal history and in the history of ideas. (p. 136)

The women's reflections embrace personal explorations as they move their bodies in Nia while answering the question, what is significant and meaningful in my life? By listening to the body and unfurling their own inner wisdom, the women are honouring the self in deeper ways. In the past, they felt trapped in the role of caretaker, such that they were deemed by society's standards as 'selfish' if other's needs did not take priority over their own. In contrast, they are now empowering themselves to be significant in the world, as they give themselves permission to care for the self – physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. The women no longer regard other's needs, desires, and wants as more important than their own.

Reflection brought the opportunity to heal the self through releasing grief and loss, managing life stresses, soothing bodily discomforts, and reworking self-doubt into self-assuredness. Through the interconnection of the rhythm of the music and the movement of Nia the women's bodies are pulsating, tapping into their inner power, and discovering ways to self-heal. They are cleansing the body holistically, layer by layer, and each cell dances a new freedom. Clandinin and Connelly (1991) speak of reflection as the method "by which one's life and the stories of it, are restoried for purposes of reliving" (p. 264). By thoughtfully looking back, the women are able to discard the unnecessary, take hold of the keepsake, and move forward into renewal.

Reflection can be a gateway to self-acceptance. Glancing in the past provides the opportunity to look more truthfully at one's experiences and come to a greater understanding of the self. The women in the study are unleashing their past and embracing the present moment. They are acknowledging more fully their own experiences and are learning to accept the self without judgment, coming to know the self from a new perspective. The

women's experience of Nia teaches us about the influence their practice has had on their well-being during midlife, as they reflect, reframe, and heal their life story into a revisioned self identity.

The Connected Self

People's lives are intertwined with others and the importance of these connections is the center of women's psychology. Traditional psychoanalytic theories in Western society have been based on patriarchal ideals that postulate self-sufficient individuality as the goal for human psychological development. This mindset has disregarded the importance that surfaces in the intricacies of interconnection that occurs between self and other. Moreover, the desire to maintain and embrace affiliations with others as a process of identity formation has been devalued, because it is viewed as promoting dependency rather than independency. It is a pretense at best, given that people can never achieve total independence from others or their environment. Gilligan (1982), Miller (1986), and Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, and Surrey (1991) have illuminated the understanding of relationships in the lives of women as being a critical concept to fostering growth and well-being. Central to these understandings is the sense of self that is developed by the experience of being in connection with others through mutual understanding and mutual empowerment. Moreover, a person's self-worth, competence, and sense of power as inner resources are enlarged through relationship with others. Edelstein (1999) articulates that during midlife, women continue to embrace relationships as they always have, while their desire for autonomy increases. She explains further that balancing connections and separateness can be challenging during midlife as women re-examine and rework relationships as life situations change. Midlife women are

renewing their connections with family, friends, work, and community as their roles and responsibilities begin to shift, reconnecting with oneself and others in new ways.

Throughout the findings chapters was the understanding that connectivity was experienced through sharing time, space, body, and relationship, as the women honoured their individuality while they joined together in their practice of Nia. The interpretation revealed in this section may be best described as: *nurturing the connected self brings forth the power inherent in 'being together'. And by balancing this synergistic act, mutual and self-empowerment can flourish, creating the potential to effect change in the self, in relationships, and in the world.*

A sense of safety is a prerequisite to engaging in connection. The women's descriptions revealed that their experience of Nia took place in a welcoming and safe space. The environment is inviting and encourages connection by honouring each person as they enter the space, first through the instructor as a role model, and then through each other as they embody the sense of belonging to a community. Part of this experience of belonging nurtures past histories, in particular, the need to be seen and feel valued and worthwhile as people. Recognizing each person as important is essential to building healthy connections. Miller (1986) exclaims that finally, women are coming together with a new sense of themselves. The initial connections made through the Nia experience set the stage for further connections to occur.

The participants spoke of a synergistic connection. Through their movement in Nia they are mutually creating and exchanging energy that leaves them feeling uplifted and rejuvenated. This union of energy is a felt-sense that is carried within their bodies and within the space itself. As well, many participants felt the energetic connection spreading beyond,

into the universe. Being in connection with the world means that the women belong in ways they had previously not known. Their connections are helping them envision themselves as worthy contributors in the world. The sense of being in connection with others through the practice of Nia is empowering the women to value themselves more. As people, they feel they have a place in Nia, and together they are making connections, creating a community where all are invited, and affecting greater good in the world.

The women explained that their Nia practice is most potent when it is shared, rather than practiced in isolation. Connections are being made between the women that are nurturing, meaningful encounters. There is a sense of support as the women move together in synchronicity and through this organized rhythm they create a feeling of solidarity. It is a connection that imparts mutual understanding and empathy, such that all involved are participating in each other's experience, each recognizing the experience, honouring it and contributing to it (Josselson, 1992). Surrey (1991) attributes the experience of 'being seen' and seeing another to a connection that empowers psychological growth. The women are acknowledging each person as being seen and as having an impact on their connection. The experience is embodied as being significant and meaningful and is carried out into their daily lives. They are enacting the five components of mutual empowerment as defined by Miller and Stiver (1997) "zest, action, knowledge, worth, and a desire for more connection" (p. 30). These components can be equated to the women's descriptions of their experience in Nia when they speak of feeling rejuvenated and transformed while discovering inner wisdom, self-worth, and connection. It is the mutual exchange with another person and the feelings elicited through being in connection that spawns mutual empowerment.

As well, the women revealed that they spend time conversing before and after Nia class ‘checking-in’ and sharing life celebrations and challenges. Through these brief interchanges the women are maintaining empathic relationships with the self and others. They are considering their needs while finding themselves more compassionate toward others in their lives. They are embracing the healing aspects of being together in Nia and replicating those feelings in their daily interactions. Within the Nia community they feel supported and are discovering companionship and friendship. They are participating in what Miller and Stiver (1997) refer to as “growth-fostering relationships” (p. 16). The women are actively helping each other develop their inner strengths through being in connection, cultivating a sense of wellness for everyone involved.

In addition, the women spoke of expanding the Nia community as they know it to others who have yet to experience the benefits. They are making connections by sharing their knowledge of Nia with family, friends, and those they meet by chance. The women expressed a strong desire to reach out and share their Nia experience with women of all ages. It became evident, however, as the women reflected on their own life experiences prior to and during midlife, that connecting with the younger generations was very important to instilling self-confidence, self-worth, a strong female identity, and empowering young women to manage life challenges more effectively. Surrey’s (1991) notion of relational empowerment eloquently articulates the understanding I’ve come to know through the women’s descriptions of being in connection through the practice of Nia.

When the process of relational empowerment works in a group, the context is sustained and participants internalize the process as an increase in energy, power or ‘zest’, and a sense of effectiveness based on their ability to contribute to everyone’s greater awareness and understanding (Miller, 1986). A heightened sense of reality and a feeling of moving forward together occur. In this process each participant’s voice is acknowledged, so that he or she experiences a heightened sense of personal

clarity and feels affirmed and empowered as a relational being. The joining of visions and voices creates something new, an enlarged vision; the individual participants feel enlarged. Thus the sense of connection and participation in something larger than oneself does not diminish but rather heightens the sense of personal power and understanding. (p. 172)

The interpretation of the concept of the connected self recognizes the interplay of being linked to the self and with others. Affiliations are made through the practice of Nia that enhance and support midlife women's personal awareness and power. Through their connections with others, a greater sense of well-being is realized and a new creation of self identity, revisioned.

The Authentic Self

Authenticity is synonymous with the words real, genuine, true, dependable, and reliable. When viewing an artist's original work, such as a Rembrandt, Van Gogh, or O'Keeffe, there is a sense of awe as we stand in the presence of the masterpiece. A blanket of silence fills the space as we consider the authentic expression of the artist's inner world. By being authentic, I am expressing my true self. Like the artist's masterpiece, my expressions have evolved through the influences of history, experience, and relationship. Over time, the artist's work may shift and change; we may recognize patterns and see new images emerge. The artist's authenticity remains constant such that the artist is the creator; however, how it is expressed may vary. I believe that it is possible for people to express authentically their behaviours, thoughts, and feelings in the time and space in which they occur. Women, however, have often felt bound by sociocultural conditions and the politics of gender, staying hidden behind unrecognized potential.

Rubin (1979) suggests that midlife marks a time when women struggle to release and claim the parts of the self that they have either denied, pushed aside, or avoided in order to

accommodate social definitions of womanhood and femininity. Waskel and Phelps (1995) explain that for many women, life transitions occur during the middle years that include loss of family members and friends, and changes in the self, careers, and relationships with intimate partners and children. Karpiak (1999) points out that during midlife, not all transitions arrive in one fell swoop; rather, gradually change may become apparent as one notices feeling or behaving differently. For instance, a person may take up a new interest or find a new residence, not realizing the impact the transition has had on them.

As women reflect on these types of life changes, their attitude, values, personality, and behaviours begin to shift. New experiences are inviting new insights and opportunities for change. Women are transforming into more of who they are as they re-form and re-narrate the self during midlife. Gadamer (1960/1994) supports this view when he states, “the dialect of experience has its own perfection [*Vollendung*] not in closed knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself” (p. 355). Furthermore, Lawlor (1991) understands Gadamer’s view of authentic experience as being tangible in the moment along with the recognition of the possibilities for the future. Van Manen (1997) discusses the notion of art, in all of its forms, as having an expressive language that is revealing in itself, “[b]ecause artists are involved in giving shape to their lived experience, the products of art are, in a sense, lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations” (p. 74). The question remains how does a woman become more of who she is and how does she authenticate her masterpiece, rearticulating herself for all to see? The interpretation revealed in this section may be described as: *nurturing the authentic self unleashes the potential to know the self differently and to express, truly, the self in its deepest form*. During midlife, women begin to make space for new growth and self-creation. They

extract the missing pieces they have left behind, develop new possibilities, and embrace their sense of wholeness in becoming the authentic self.

As the women practice Nia, their authentic self is becoming visible through self-expression. They are reconfiguring the self, becoming the artist as their bodies strike the canvas in movement while the colours resonate in their song. For some, the process is a reawakening from past journeys and for others it is the dawning of a new day. Foremost, is that the women's experience of practicing Nia in the here and now, and in an accepting and nonjudgmental environment, is allowing them to honour the self differently. The narratives reveal a sense of freedom as they dance with their bodies, ignite their voices, set new boundaries, and explore their creativity. Within the time and space of practicing Nia, the women are tapping into the feeling of being themselves in their truest form. Lomas (1998) articulates this experience in the movement form of dance which is an integral part of the Nia practice:

Dance, like all art activities, offers the individual the opportunity to organize experience, make sense of self, problem-solve and represent self-expression in metaphor. It can afford self-directed and increasingly self-mastering experiences. In dance one is in the world of the nonlinear, the felt rather than the thought experience, the soul and the spirit; individuals in this world are informed by their authentic self instead of their wholly adapted self. (p. 153)

As they practice Nia the women are discovering the truth that lay within. They are honouring their expressiveness making sense of where they are presently in relation to where they have been. Karpiak (1999) explains that midlife transformations become known through our creative acts, in that creativity provides us the opportunity to move beyond merely adapting to our circumstances.

Through Nia, the women are opening up to new perspectives and honouring their inner voice as they express their authenticity. They are embodying affirmations and

envisioning themselves as powerful, as they shout out the words “yes” and “no”. They are releasing the inner tensions from who they *were* to more of who they *are* as they enact the self in its revisioning. They are turning to their buried voice and finding the courage to respond. The participants’ narratives reveal an increase in self-confidence and, in turn, they are empowered to instill personal boundaries that respect individuation and self-care. The women are voicing their desires, wants, needs, beliefs, and values as they interact with others in their daily lives. They are untying themselves from past restrictions and reviewing choices they made or that were made for them, while integrating those parts they deem more significant and meaningful to knowing the self as whole (Edelstein, 1999).

The philosophical tenets of Nia guide the instructor to encourage people to move their body in its own way, respect their body’s rhythm, and honour inner sensations. This is in line with van Manen’s (1997) view that in order to nurture the uniqueness present in each individual, it is necessary to engage in pedagogy of being within and with one in experience. With this understanding, the women along with the instructor are ‘collectively holding’ a space for personal exploration and self-expression. They are ‘trying on’ their personal vision in the space of Nia and in turn they are carrying it out into the world (Miller, 1986).

Creativity is another aspect of self-expression evident in the women’s narratives. It is experienced as two fold: 1) as a gateway to freedom and play, and 2) as an extension to furthering creative opportunities. It is my experience that it is not so much that we have to regress into childhood to find play, but merely by entering a space of creativity we open ourselves to participate. Gadamer (1960/1994) explains that play is a movement, a to and fro, with its own spontaneity and rhythm. He further writes that play “produces and brings to light what is otherwise constantly hidden and withdrawn” (p. 112). During Nia, the women

are exploring sequenced movement patterns and moving their bodies to the rhythm of free dance. The interchange between movement, music, and the body allows for spontaneity, freedom, and joy to emerge. Dance movement therapist Joan Chodorow (1991) discusses the importance of play in people's lives and the interchange between play, imagination, and affect. She explains that play emerges from joy and that through the process of play emotional distress can be transformed. Through play, the participants are releasing their body, mind, spirit, and emotions from rigid and conforming ways of being. They are extracting their creative abilities from within and entering the space of their daily lives feeling revitalized and confident to create.

Bepko and Krestan (1993) remind us that women have lived under sociocultural constraints that do not foster their creativity. Throughout history, women's creativity and self-expression has been considered less valued and has been relegated to areas that tend to others' needs. Bepko and Krestan further explain that when women do take hold of their creativity they often feel fractured, not feeling entitled to embrace their creativity or the freedom to express it, thus forming a division in their identity. They continue to explain that this division stems from women's adoption of a polarized understanding that creativity does not align with relationship; rather, they sit at opposite ends such that women inevitably give up creativity for relationship or relationship for creativity. In their study with 300 women, Bepko and Krestan aimed to understand the dichotomy women experience between relationship and creativity in today's society. Their findings speak of a transformation in progress. They note that changes are occurring, in part, because there is some small recognition within sociocultural communities toward valuing women as expressive creators. Taking this in consideration, many women are still struggling to find a balance between their

relationships and their creative expression; however, some women are successfully integrating both passions. Bepko and Krestan suggest that as women strive to overcome social constraints and neutralize the polarizations between love and creativity, they will develop new forms of creative expression transcending these divisions, both privately and publicly. Furthermore, Bepko and Krestan espouse that:

[W]e need to find better access to the power to create, to share our vision, to feel deeply... We need to reclaim our early loves, to find the continuity and through-line of our lives. We need to pick up the violin again and play, to find the chord that resonates in our hearts and sing. (p. 255)

Through their Nia practice the women are releasing their creativity for all to see. They are dancing with their bodies in new ways, listening to their body's rhythm and honouring their creative energy. Many of the women spoke of the changes they are making in their lives in relation to creative opportunities. The practice of Nia, itself, is a creative process. Four of the women have opened the door on a new career path by taking the Nia white belt teacher training. As well, the women are enhancing present careers with new ideas, enrolling in art classes, taking workshops that engage the voice, and are taking the time to live their lives more creatively. Through their Nia practice, they are feeling more alive as they discover the depth and power of their creative expression.

The women are giving new meaning to the self during midlife as they experience their self-expression and live authentically. They are furthering their development, gaining more options and emerging wiser and whole. The women are becoming more of who they are and, in turn are moving into a more spacious dwelling with room to create change in the world – a revisioned self.

The Contextualized Self

How we understand ourselves is a multi-layered conglomerate of our history, situations, preferences, traditions, private events, and abilities. These understandings may shift and transform through differing experiences we encounter with the self and with others. The body is a knowledge vessel, the place from which our mind, spirit, sensations, and emotions can speak. By honouring and listening to these “knowing-systems” (Guenette, 2002, p. 127) we come to understand the self in significant and meaningful ways. Guenette describes the body as an “information processor” (p. 128) and explains that by paying attention to the body’s messages we can discern the truth. It is my understanding that our body’s truths are moments when we have the opportunity to realize the balances and imbalances in our lives, thus, truths become opportunities for change.

As a dance educator, Shapiro (1998) proposes that the body offers us an emotional map of who we are and how we have been shaped by society. She speaks of the need to embrace a feminist pedagogy that recognizes an understanding of the self within these sociocultural constructs. Shapiro explains that the body is the medium for understanding “oppression, resistance, and liberation” (p.15). She further states that through exploration, body memories and feelings can be extracted, examined, and understood in terms of what has been lived in the woman’s body. As women experience midlife transitions, their reflections on the self invite an understanding of their place in the world. Josselson explains that, “[i]n order to declare ‘I am,’ one must simultaneously state ‘I am *not that*’” (p. 246). The interpretation revealed in this section may be described as: *nurturing the contextualized self affords opportunities to create new stories of self-representation. And through the body and its movement clarification of causal constructions of what is not working is revealed.*

Our body is not a mere abstraction, it is embedded in the immediacies of everyday, lived experience and our reality is composed of how we perceive ourselves within these experiences (Davis, 1997). Griffiths (1995) states that women have experienced oppressive structures; some are readily visible through overt discrimination and others are “habits of mind” (p. 76). She further explains that these habits become embedded within the female self and manifest as lack of confidence, a de-valuing of needs and wants, or even a lack of recognition of needs and desires. Through their Nia practice, the women are allowing themselves to transcend preconceived inhibitions and limitations set within past structural constraints. They are refuting the external messages they received that imparted notions of worthlessness, standards of perfection, fear, guilt, and obligation. They are liberating stifling internalizations and replacing them with concepts that support the revisioning of self-identity. The contextualized self is revealed through the women’s narratives as: coming to know the body as home, feeling worthy, and being empowered as midlife women.

The women in the study view their bodies as a place they have come to know as home. Through their Nia practice they are discovering how to *be* in their bodies. They are dissolving misconceptions, self-doubt, and insecurities, embracing and accepting the body in its entirety. The women are listening to the inner wisdom of the body. Prior to their Nia practice, many of the women had not fully experienced a balance between the body, mind, spirit, sensation, and emotion. They primarily recognized the use of their analytical processes; therefore, they were only partially engaged. They are learning that the body holds answers to their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual pains, as well as discomforts and misunderstandings. Through their Nia practice, the women are giving themselves permission to make necessary changes that honour the body by responding with the intention to self-care

and self-heal. They are moving their bodies in a natural way, without force or judgment. By working with the body rather than against the body, the women are more equipped to manage life's stressors and respond more compassionately to the self and others. They are at home in their bodies, feeling tranquil, calm, and rejuvenated.

As the women move their bodies in Nia with self-acceptance they feel worthy and empowered as midlife women. It is in the act of exploring through movement that the women are opening to the realization that they are capable and strong. They are recognizing the body's movement as a creative outlet that is transferable to new opportunities. The form of movement supports the development of inner knowledge and truth that the women can depend on, and the wisdom to empower themselves in many ways of knowing. Through their Nia practice, the women are creating a new reality out of their own bodies, out of their own understanding of the self, out of their own understanding of the self with others, and as midlife women in today's society. Rose (1999) proposes that women create a new cultural identity that names, identifies, and is constructed from their way of being and their way of expressing their embodiment that actually gives meaning and shape to their lives. Through the practice of Nia the women are reconstructing their self-identity as they uncover new understandings of the midlife self and discover new ways to move, voice, create, and express their way of being in the world. Griffiths (1995) explains that "[t]he individual can only exist through the various communities of which she is a member and, indeed, is continually in a process of construction by those communities" (p. 93). The women in the study have developed a collective Nia community. Many of the women have formed supportive relationships with each other lending advice, sharing accomplishments, or comforting each other during challenging times. They spoke of 'feeding off' each others energy during their

Nia practice, of having admiration for the older women in the group, and of seeing each woman as being beautiful in her own right. The women explained that in the past they viewed midlife as a downward slide as they reflected on societal messages of aging and the role models that had come before them. Not knowing any different, the women were relieved to find older vivacious women practicing Nia. These women became their role models, dismissing old claims of degeneration for future possibilities and potential. In the same vane, Edelstein (1999) states that midlife is a time to honour the experiences of women who have come before us – their victories and defeats, yet at the same time let our own voices guide our decisions as we honour the realities of our own lives. For the women in the study, the body and its movement became the context for their voices, a place from which to begin relinquishing what is not working in their lives. As the women continue to practice Nia they are embracing their power to re-shape their lives and to foster a new cultural identity. Josselson (1996) speaks to this notion in that, “[i]dentity, then is not just a private, individual matter. Instead, it is a complex negotiation between the person and a society” (p. 31). Thus, our contextual make-up consists of relationships, society being one of them in the revisioning of self.

Aligning Social Identity with Well-Being

Society is an assemblage of groups of people and it is within society that the people come to know their identity in socially defined terms. Social identity theory claims that in order to understand the social world, people need to evaluate the self in relation to other individuals and assess the similarities and differences between social groups (Tajfel, 1981). Tajfel and Turner (1979) explain that through comparison, people can identify those who share a similar group membership to themselves and differentiate from those who are

dissimilar to themselves. This process is motivated by the need for individuals to attain a positive social identity. They further postulate that the central principle of social identity theory is that individuals derive aspects of their identity from their membership of particular social groups. The social groups we belong to influence how others view us and how we view ourselves shaping our attitudes, values, belief systems, behaviours, decisions, and choices that we make. The internalized group characteristics or prototypes (Hogg, 2003) are called social identities.

Social identity theory according to Hogg (2003) is a theory of the self that encapsulates the collective self (defined as 'us') and the individual self (defined as personal traits). His interpretation rests on the notion that the individual self may gain meaning and significance within the parameters of the collective self.

Social identity theory provides a framework from which to understand the nature of women's group identifications and an understanding of what it means to be a woman in contemporary social contexts (Skevington & Baker, 1989). Skevington and Baker explain that social identity theory is multifaceted; particularly as it relates to the rising questions of how women think, feel, and live their lives today.

The women who participate in Nia are creating a shared identity through their group membership. Through their Nia practice, individually and collectively, they are walking a new journey, re-constructing their present story as midlife women. They have come to know each other as like-minded people striving for the betterment of the self, each other, and the world around them. They actively encourage non-members to join their efforts in bringing a sense of wholeness to the self through the synergistic interaction of practicing Nia together.

Historically, women have been subjected to a dominate discourse that socializes women in judgment through various forms of media and through patriarchal constructs of power-over, status, and competition. This type of oppression can lead to self denigration, isolation, and fragmentation. According to social identity theory, members of lower-status groups (most often women) strive to move upward into a higher-status position (most often held by men) (Tajfel, 1981). Breakwell (1979) understands the notion of comparison of women to men differently than traditional theorists. She proposes that social identity for women is difficult to establish because of the many facets associated with being a woman. Breakwell proposes that women belong to a heterogeneous social group rather than being classified as a homogenous social group. She suggests that women may feel marginalized not because they are comparing their status to men but because they struggle to honour their feelings to be who they are (heterogeneous) compared to what society says they should be (homogeneous).

Hogg (2003) speaks of prototypes as representations or features that capture the attitudes, feelings, and behaviours of group membership. Prototypes are the social identities that define groups as distinct entities. Hogg further explains that prototypes are embodied, stored in memory, and are context dependent. The notion that prototypes are learned and shared through group membership and are embedded in one's social identity is further understood in this study through the women's statement that "Nia is a lifestyle". One of the most prominent collective features revealed by the women was the development of a non-judgmental attitude. The women are learning that there isn't a wrong or right way in Nia. They are replacing previously restrictive prototypes learned through socio-cultural memberships that espouse women to *do more, act differently, stay silent, and feel less*, with

new prototypes embodied through their Nia group membership that encourage acceptance and permission to *just be*. It is my view that the experience of Nia has aided the women in coming to know the power held within and ways to activate it. Women practicing Nia are challenging society's constructs of women and women in midlife and taking the opportunity to explore their authentic self more deeply. They are coming to know their expressive voice and taking a stand for themselves as multifaceted women. They are embracing a new social identity that empowers rather than restricts their inner being.

Brewer (2003) postulates that people choose membership in groups that honour individuality as well as foster a sense of belonging. She further explains that people have come to rely on cooperation and trust for long-term survival within group membership. Mutual trust is then bounded within group communities and extended to all group members promoting security and positive affiliation. Brewer understands the role of social identities as a means to collectively maintaining a stable self-concept and enhancing self-worth. She believes that through a shared identity, group members thrive as individuals. Brewer states:

The function of the personal self is to monitor and maintain individual integrity and continuity; the function of the collective self is to monitor and maintain connectedness to social groups and security. Both are necessary to, and neither is sufficient for, survival and well-being. (p. 489)

From a healing and wellness perspective, the women are enhancing their self-concept and feeling a sense of worthiness through their interactions with others in the Nia space. Revealed in the women's narratives is a sense of belonging among the women as they share in conversation, movement, and energy. Skevington (1989) suggests that social identity theory supports the notion that women value relationships and that affiliation with others is one way women identify socially. Through Nia, the women are locating themselves in a network of social relationships that describe and prescribe ways of being with others. In

social identity terms, the women are making social comparisons between their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, and those of others (Hogg, 1992). These comparisons are helping to solidify the women's way of being in the world through the prototypes they embody, securing a positive social identity.

Midlife can be a time of searching, a season of uncertainty. Social identity provides one with a self-definition that is evaluated through one's self-concept in relation to group membership. The transformation that occurs through adopting group prototypes enhances certainty which "renders existence meaningful and confers confidence in how to behave and what to expect from the physical and social environment within which one finds oneself" (Hogg, 2003, p. 473). Considering this view, it can be surmised that midlife women practicing Nia are conforming to a conceptualized self through their group membership that clarifies who they are by knowing that I am *not that*. As midlife women practicing Nia, their narratives speak to who they have become. They have embodied a social identity that represents the self during midlife – accepting, patient, confident, powerful, vivacious, balanced, healthy, responsive, attentive, expressive, creative, positive, energetic, revitalized, calm, serene, compassionate, joyful, grounded, healing, caring, worthy, valued, and happy.

Myself as the Researcher

I am the researcher; however, I have not walked this journey alone. I have listened intently and deeply to the women's voices and have been touched by the words they have shared. There were times when their stories overlapped with stories that I have lived, and in my memories of my past, ponderings of my present life emerged. My experience as a researcher has been an interlaced collage of the participants' life stories and my own journey, each piece placed for its meaningfulness and significance. It is in this space that I walked

among the women's experience of Nia during midlife and embraced what I had not known previously. This speaks to Gadamer's (1960/1994) understanding that merging one's reflections with the research is of value to the research itself. Through the reflective analytic process, I became acutely aware of the meaning of connection, my midlife perceptions, and Nia as a philosophy to live by.

As a result of my research process, I found myself reflecting on the importance connections play in people's lives and in my own life. I have come to understand that it is through connection that people discover more of themselves. It is a realization that surfaced through my interactions with the participants as we conversed together and as I listened attentively to their voice in the research text. Through our relatedness, I was discovering new aspects of myself that permeated beyond the inquiry. I began to reflect on the influence relationships have had on my present sense of being in the world and the ways that I have been shaped through connection. It has made me realize more deeply my desire to be connected, in some way, with others.

I have also come to recognize how in need we are for ways to build, strengthen, and maintain connections as a means to creating fulfilling and productive lives for ourselves. These new understandings have made me realize how important my role is in the world – to help to create meaningful connections as parent, friend, neighbour, educator, and counsellor. And at the same time recognize the significance these connections are to my own self-discoveries.

Before I began my inquiry, I had not given much thought to what my midlife experience might be as I approached the age of 45. I recall, however, a special conversation with my mother at the age of 12 on the subject of menstruation and the changes that would

occur in my body. She shared her own coming of age stories and the significance of blossoming. However, not once had anyone taken me aside to speak of midlife, share their experiences, or tell me what I could expect. To be certain, I haven't been oblivious to the concept of menopause, I even experienced a few hot flashes; however, this all seemed trivial to the 'midlife crisis' – that I had *overheard* this time to be.

It was through reviewing the literature, my personal reflections, and listening to the participants' transitional stories that I began to understand the diverse experiences women encounter during midlife. I came to realize that midlife is self-defined and that it is not an anomaly to be avoided or hidden, rather it is a celebratory journey into more of who we are. I am still unsure of what my midlife experience will be, yet I am now open to the many possibilities I may encounter. It is my hope as women embrace and share with others their experiences that our daughters will come to know midlife as a personal metamorphosis, a flight of renewal.

My personal practice of Nia brought me to a place of curiosity and out of my wonderings this research thesis was born. I wanted to know how other women embodied the experience of Nia. Through my inquiry, I came to know that the participants embrace the holistic movement practice of Nia as a philosophy to live by. It made me thoughtfully aware of the healing powers this type of movement practice holds. I came to realize that once women are introduced to moving naturally, to their own rhythm, they begin to honour their bodies differently. It is as if a window to the soul is opened and through this awakening all other possibilities can emerge. This understanding has led me to recognize the importance that *all* women have access to Nia and the opportunity to choose to participate. This ideal would entail that governments, health professionals, schools, hospitals, places of

employment, community and sport centers, and recreational parks invest in the care of women. A shift in how people think about and approach health and wellness for women would need to occur. I have this mental image of thousands of women practicing Nia throughout the world on any given day, the potential for personal and collective change would be immeasurable.

Informing Counselling Practice

This inquiry informs counselling practice through explicating an understanding of women's experiences during midlife as they participate in the mind and body movement approach of Nia. Through their experience of Nia, the women are revisioning their self-identity during midlife and changing their way of being in the world. The findings in this thesis provide a base from which to understand the possible benefits women in midlife may gain by practicing Nia and it sets a foundation to working with midlife women who choose to participate in Nia. Furthermore, this inquiry informs counselling practice by considering how the experience of Nia nurtures midlife women's revisioned self through *reflections through time, the body's wisdom ~ the body's movement, transforming relationships, and living well-being in midlife spaces*.

First, the thesis informs counselling practice by considering how the experience of Nia nurtures midlife women's revisioned self through *reflections through time*. The women revealed that their Nia practice provided them time to become aware of past choices, present beliefs, and to query what may be available to them in the future. The inquiry reveals the potential benefits of integrating the practice of Nia into the lives of women during midlife and illuminates one way to further reflect on past experiences and thought patterns, begin to reframe needs, wants, desires, and discover new ways of being, and refocus the future in

possibilities and healthful directions. This supports Degges-White and Myers (2006) finding that women adopt an inner focus during midlife. It is further suggested that introspection at midlife may motivate significant life changes; thus, women seek counselling during this time of their life. Therefore, the practice of Nia is one adjunctive therapeutic approach counsellors may want to suggest to midlife women who are struggling to make decisions and need time to reflect on where they've been and where they are going. This would include those who are looking for clarity and direction in their lives and to further personal growth.

Second, the thesis informs counselling practice by considering how the experience of Nia nurtures midlife women's revisioned self through *the body's wisdom ~ the body's movement*. The inquiry provides a deeper knowing that through movement we can become aware of, and attend to, the hidden wisdom of our selves, awakening into our potentials. The women's narratives reveal that they felt free to be expressive – physically, vocally, and creatively – as they moved their body in its own natural way. Therefore, counsellors may want to suggest the practice of Nia to midlife women who are struggling to access their creativity and expressiveness. This may include midlife women who feel a loss after a change in roles and responsibilities or those who may have put aside careers, special interests, or artistic endeavors in order to meet familial needs. It may also include midlife women who find it difficult to voice themselves with family, at work, or in daily interactions. As well, Nia may be beneficial for midlife women who have found movement difficult in the past because it was structured and regimented rather than natural, free flowing, and expressive.

The women explained that they were able to connect to their emotions as a unique experience when compared to the experience of other movement forms. The Nia movement

along with the music helped them to *work through* challenges and release emotional stressors often eliciting a response of tears, joy, or relief. As well, they revealed that through their movement experiences, images, metaphors, or symbols would emerge giving them a new vision of themselves as stronger, healthier women. And sometimes through the images, past memories would surface that would then take on new significance and meaning in the present moment.

The narratives revealed that some of the women felt spiritually connected to the self, while moving in Nia, while others felt an energetic sense within the body. Both of these occurrences elicited an understanding of belonging to something greater than the space that they were in. The inquiry reveals that through the practice of Nia midlife women have more awareness of the self in body, mind, spirit, and emotions, supporting their confidence and empowering them to make desired changes in their life. Therefore, counsellors may want to suggest the practice of Nia to midlife women who are struggling in the areas of body awareness, confidence, and personal power.

Dance/movement therapy has been found to be effective with midlife women managing with cancer through improving mood, self-esteem (Dibbell-Hope, 2000; Ho, 2005), and body-image (Dibbell-Hope, 2000). Ho explains that cancer patients need to reinstate a sense of control over their bodies and integrate psyche with the body because of the traumatic invasion of cancer. It is possible that midlife women who have been diagnosed with cancer or other debilitating diseases may benefit from practicing Nia. In addition, midlife women who are finding it difficult to express their emotions or release daily stressors may find Nia helpful. As well, Nia incorporates a variety of music, and midlife women who enjoy music and connect emotionally with music may also find Nia beneficial.

To further the revisioning of self-identity, this inquiry provides support for considering journal writing as a viable means to integrating the experience of Nia with midlife women. The women in the study acknowledged the influence their practice had on their well-being in their journal writings. Counsellors might suggest journal writing as a means to share and explore the significance and meaning of the experience of Nia for midlife women. In addition, counsellors can assist the transformative process by offering their clients the opportunity to integrate their movement practice of Nia with verbal or talk therapy. For instance, counsellors may want to propose questions during a session that would invite women to discover more of the self through the body. They might ask, “When you did Nia this week what feelings emerged for you? Where were the feelings located in your body? What thoughts were associated with those feelings? What did you find significant and meaningful about your experience? What memories or images emerged for you?” Questions such as these may help people who participate in Nia to more fully integrate their bodily experiences and honour their revisioning of self-identity.

Third, the thesis informs counselling practice by considering how the experience of Nia nurtures midlife women’s revisioned self through *transforming relationships*. It reveals the opportunity the practice of Nia provides for midlife women to explore and discover a deeper relationship with the self. For many of the women, attending Nia was the first step in self-care and with continued practice they began to set personal boundaries and attend to their needs more readily. The women in the study explained how important self-care was to the relationship they have with the self and others. They illuminated this notion with the understanding that the more they cared for and empowered the self the more they were able to give to and be with others in significant and meaningful ways. These findings are

consistent with Banister's (1999) results where she reports the significance self-care is to women's value of themselves during midlife as they take responsibility for their own well-being physically, mentally, and spiritually amidst inadequate forms of health care. Therefore, counsellors may want to suggest the practice of Nia to midlife women who are looking for holistic alternatives to health care and who are struggling to balance their own needs with meeting the needs of others in their lives. As well, Nia may be beneficial to midlife women who have difficulty saying "no" and find themselves in situations in which they feel overwhelmed or vulnerable.

The inquiry reveals the challenge midlife women endure to release themselves from self-judgment, sociocultural judgment, and familial judgment. The stories the women shared explained that they had internalized many of the external messages of shoulds and should nots they received while growing up, feeling a lack of confidence, unworthy, and disempowered.

The women revealed however, that in Nia there is no wrong or right way. This became a mantra to live by, filtering into an understanding that there is no wrong or right way to be, to act, to feel, to think, and to believe, everyone is accepted for who they are. Stepping into a landscape of acceptance was a catalyst for the women's personal process of letting go of critical judgments they had embodied. Therefore, counsellors may want to suggest the practice of Nia to midlife women who are managing with issues of self-acceptance, body image, and self-esteem. As well, the practice of Nia may benefit midlife women who tend to have negative thinking patterns or are managing with oppressive situations. In addition, counsellors could provide a positive role model to midlife women by practicing their own self-acceptance and self-care.

Fourth, the thesis informs counselling practice through considering how the experience of Nia nurtures midlife women's revisioned self through new understandings of *living well-being in midlife spaces*. The inquiry provides a deeper knowing of the diverse ways in which women embody, manage, and support transformative change during midlife. It discusses the understanding that midlife as a transition is not without its trials yet it is equally a time for reflecting, reframing, and rejoicing. It provides an understanding of the language used by women to describe midlife transitions. The women in the study did not use language that specifically targeted 'a midlife crisis' nor did they indicate that they were unraveling in such a way to warrant a crisis. Even though some women had experienced challenges and tragic events during their lives they spoke of these as issues, events, and happenings that they were managing at this time. This understanding concurs with findings that midlife women experience a wide range of transitions, over several contexts, and each manage differently (Arnold, 2005; Degges-White & Myers, 2006; Lippert, 1997). The inquiry informs counselling practice by revealing the need for an understanding that midlife is not a stereotypical experience and that fostering perspectives for a more global understanding is necessary when working with women during midlife. There are several authors who provide a more holistic view of women at midlife (Apter, 1995; Belenky et al., 1986; Edelstein, 1999; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan et al., 1991; Josselson, 1996; Miller, 1986; Rubin, 1979).

In addition, the inquiry reveals the understanding that the safe, welcoming, and accepting space of Nia was vital to the women's well-being. All of the women in the study acknowledged the significance the nonjudgmental space of Nia was to their experience of it. They felt at ease in the Nia space with others. Many of the women were building meaningful

connections by sharing the synergistic space as they moved together and by sharing supportive conversations before and after class. The inquiry reveals that the practice of Nia supports mutual respect, and fosters connections between midlife women as well as explains that midlife women can be inspired by other women who have or are experiencing midlife. It is evident throughout the narratives that the women appreciated the interactions they had with others and the many representations of healthfulness they found in Nia. It helped them to acknowledge that beauty and wellness was inherent in each of them. Recent studies by Wray (2007) and Villaverde-Gutierrez (2006) reported that social interactions during group exercise were valued by midlife women significantly contributing to their sense of well-being. Therefore, counsellors may want to suggest the practice of Nia to midlife women who are looking for a supportive community of women. As well, counsellors may want to consider suggesting the practice of Nia to midlife women as a place that provides wellness through group synergy, cohesion, and synchronicity, further supporting a deeper understanding of self-identity, social identity, and the possibilities for change.

As well, the women's narratives revealed the ways in which Nia is lived as a lifestyle. They explained that what they experienced in class stayed with them as they moved through their day often incorporating what they learned through Nia into other areas of their lives. The inquiry provides an understanding that the practice of Nia opens midlife spaces for women to become healthy in body, manage stress, find balance, be attentive, feel calm and re-energized, discover opportunities, share with others, and be happy. All of the women acknowledge that through their Nia practice they were enriching their lives and living in well-being during midlife.

The inquiry informs counselling practice when working with midlife women in a variety of ways. In addition to the suggestions already put forth for counsellor consideration there are populations relative to midlife women that may benefit from Nia in any one of the areas previously mention. Wittchen (2002) determined that generalized anxiety disorder affects women more often than men and is most prevalent in women during midlife. Women managing with depression showed significant improvement in symptoms with the intervention of exercise (Craft, Freund, Culpepper, & Perna, 2007). As well, women suffering from chronic illness such as fibromyalgia have significantly improved their depressive symptoms and bodily pain after engaging in physical activity (Bircan, Karasel, Akgun, El, & Alper, 2008). Dance/movement therapy has been an effective therapeutic modality in reducing depression and increasing vitality (Koch, Morlinghaus, & Fuchs, 2007), increasing psychological and physical function for women managing with fibromyalgia (Bojner-Horwitz, 2004), and facilitating psychological healing for women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse (Mills & Daniluk, 2002). Therefore, it is conceivable that midlife women managing with depression, anxiety, chronic illness, or those who have experienced abusive situations may benefit from the holistic movement approach that the practice of Nia provides. As well, midlife women who have chronic physical conditions may find Nia beneficial, particularly if they need a non-judgmental environment and a place where they can make adaptations by moving at their own level and in their own body's way.

The inquiry informs counselling practice by providing an in-depth look into eight midlife women's experiences of the mind and body movement approach of Nia. The women's narratives affirm the understanding that through their experience of Nia they are revisioning self-identity and emerging with a new sense of confidence, power, and freedom.

They are celebrating their self-discoveries and opening the door to new ways of being in the world. Nia, as a practice, honours women for who they are and provides the opportunity during midlife for women to explore and realize their possibilities. Mills and Daniluk (2002) profess that counsellors need to be aware of the ways in which women embody experience. They further encourage counsellors to find ways to include the body in their clinical work with women. This inquiry suggests counsellors consider recommending the practice of Nia for the midlife women they work with as a means to integrating the body as an integral part of their self-healing and the counselling process.

Future Research Considerations

This hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry served to expand our understanding of midlife women's experiences of the mind and body movement approach of Nia. My inquiry was situated within a particular time and place with Caucasian women between certain ages. There are many additional considerations for future research. Some research options are: 1) the experience of Nia with midlife women from other places, cultures, and different ages; 2) the experience of Nia with women who are managing with an eating disorder, substance misuse, self-injury, or with those who find self-care a challenge; 3) the experience of Nia with women managing depression or anxiety issues; 4) the experience of Nia exploring social relationship quality and its influence on well-being; 5) the experience of Nia with men; 6) the experience of Nia using quantitative methodologies measuring quality of life and well-being; 7) the experience of Nia using grounded theory analysis to establish a structured foundation about the why and how of the experience of Nia; and 8) the experience of Nia over time to better understand exercise adherence and its possibilities as a means of prevention.

As well, future research may want to consider the background knowledge and experience the researcher brings to the inquiry. There were times during the interviews when participants would use their body, or language specific to Nia to demonstrate and describe the significance and meaning of their experience. Because I had also practiced Nia, I could relate the participants' experiences to my body experience enabling me to engage in and embody more deeply their experience. This follows a hermeneutic understanding that researchers need to constantly reference their own situatedness from "within a horizon of already granted meanings and intentions" (Palmer, 1969, p. 24) while staying open to the other. Gadamer (1960/1994) professes that we must "transpose ourselves" (p. 305), put ourselves in their shoes, so that we may understand from their vantage point. But Gadamer hastens that we not disregard ourselves, rather we bring ourselves to the situation deepening our understanding. He further explains that "it is always reciprocal" (p. 305) in that participant and researcher co-construct a new knowing through fusing their horizons. As this thesis is grounded in a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry it does provide a framework that illuminates the researcher's role for counselling research in the human sciences.

Considerations for future research in these areas are worth exploring so that we can further inform counselling practice and counsellor education in regards to the experience of Nia and the possible benefits for other populations. This inquiry has presented eight midlife women's experiences with the practice of Nia revealing its influence on their sense of well-being. Research endeavors that continue to explore the practice of Nia will be contributing to the much needed understanding of mind and body movement approaches and the possibilities that body therapies hold as a therapeutic means to greater wellness.

Conclusion

Women in Midlife: Experiences of the Mind and Body Movement of Nia was a research project that came to fruition in response to my personal wonderings about midlife women's experiences of the practice of Nia, as well as the possibilities the practice may hold as a therapeutic adjunct to counselling. Its purpose was to understand midlife women's experience of Nia as well as query if Nia influenced their sense of well-being, and if so, how.

I immersed myself within a hermeneutic phenomenological approach grounded in Gadamerian philosophy and van Manen inquiry and found a space from which I looked, meaningfully, at the eight women's experiences of their practice of Nia during midlife. This type of qualitative research presented opportunities for a deeply authentic kind of learning. Through the collaborative conversations, fusing horizons, data analysis, synthesis, writing and re-writing, and interpretation process, my understanding has deepened and developed layers that were otherwise unavailable to me. I have come to understand the influence the practice of Nia can have on women during midlife in ways that were not imagined previously. I have come to value my own preunderstandings and self-reflections as important to any research endeavor. I was honoured and in awe that the women shared so genuinely their stories with me. They taught me more about being with others in mutual conversation and finding meaning in the recognized spaces and in-between spaces. The journey I have traveled in coming to know the eight women's experience with Nia has been life altering. I am touched by Josselson's (1996) words as she explains poignantly what I have come to embody as the women's voyage of midlife through the experience of Nia:

As a woman creates her life, she may reach back for old threads or search for new ones. She may integrate some aspects of the past and give it new meaning, thus transforming both the past and the emerging present. She weaves together both her desires and her capacity to respond to the unforeseen twists, knots, and breaks in the

yarn that come her way. She can overstretch what is already there, rework an old pattern, or create, sometimes by accident, something original. Revision is always possible. (p. 258)

Let us continue to dance through life, together, embracing each woman's journey to wholeness and well-being.

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Appendix A

Facility Access Request

Dear _____,

I am a graduate student in the Masters of Education (Counselling) program at UNBC. I am presently working on my thesis to complete my degree requirements. My research will explore and describe Nia as experienced with women in midlife.

I am writing to request permission to approach women between the ages of 45-64 years at your facility who partake in Nia classes to participate in my study. I will request 10 minutes before and/or after Nia classes to explain my research and invite women who participate in Nia to volunteer. Potential participants may sign up to volunteer at that time or they may contact me on my cell phone at their convenience. In addition, I would like to place a poster (8 ½ X 11) advertising my research and request for volunteers on two bulletin boards located inside [this information was removed for confidentiality purposes following the writing of the thesis]. I would like to identify women who are interested in being interviewed about their experiences with the mind and body movement of Nia. All of the interviews will be tape recorded, will be conducted at the participant's convenience (location & time) and will occur outside of [this information was removed for confidentiality purposes following the writing of the thesis]. Participants will be invited to journal after Nia class at their convenience.

Participation will be strictly voluntary. Participants will be assured that all information will be kept confidential. Anonymity will be maintained by assigning pseudonyms to tapes, transcripts and journal entries. The participants will be free to discontinue their participation at any stage of the research project. Informed consent will be sought from the individual women prior to the interview process.

A \$20.00 incentive will be offered to all participants as an acknowledgement of their contributions toward this research project, regardless of whether or not they withdraw from the study before it ends. Participants will be offered a brief written summary of the findings from this study. If desired, a copy of the results will be presented to [this information was removed for confidentiality purposes following the writing of the thesis]. following the completion of my thesis.

If you have any further questions you may contact me at [personal information was removed for the purpose of the written thesis] or one of my thesis supervisors, Dr. Corinne Koehn at (250) 960-6264 or Dr. Sylvia Barton, at (250) 960-6631; both are located at UNBC.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Lynn Switzman, B.S., M.Ed (counselling) in progress
University of Northern British Columbia

Appendix B

Instructor Access Request

Dear _____,

I am a graduate student in the Masters of Education (Counselling) program at UNBC. I am presently working on my thesis to complete my degree requirements. My research will explore and describe Nia as experienced with women in midlife. I am writing to request permission to approach women between the ages of 45-64 years in your Nia class to participate in my study. I will request 10 minutes before and/or after Nia classes to explain my research and invite women who participate in Nia to volunteer. Potential participants may sign up to volunteer at that time or they may contact me on my cell phone at their convenience. I would also like to request your assistance by referring potential participants to contact me regarding my study. I would provide you with an information sheet to pass on to any participant that may show an interest in my research and they can contact me at their convenience. As well, posters advertising my research and request for volunteers will be placed on bulletin boards at [this information was removed for confidentiality purposes following the writing of the thesis]. I would like to identify women who are interested in being interviewed about their experiences of the mind and body movement of Nia. All of the interviews will be tape recorded, will be conducted at the participant's convenience (location & time) and will occur outside of your class and [this information was removed for confidentiality purposes following the writing of the thesis]. Participants will be invited to journal after Nia class at their convenience.

Participation will be strictly voluntary. Participants will be assured that all information will be kept confidential. Anonymity will be maintained by assigning pseudonyms to tapes, transcripts, and journal entries. The participants will be free to discontinue their participation at any stage of the research project. Informed consent will be sought from the individual women prior to the interview process.

A \$20.00 incentive will be offered to all participants as an acknowledgement of their contributions toward this research project, regardless of whether or not they withdraw from the study before it ends. Participants will be offered a brief written summary of the findings from this study.

If desired, a copy of the results will be presented to you following the completion of my thesis.

If you have any further questions you may contact me at [personal information was removed for the purpose of the written thesis] or one of my thesis supervisors, Dr. Corinne Koehn, (250) 960-6264 or Dr. Sylvia Barton, at (250) 960-6631; both are located at UNBC.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Lynn Switzman, B.S., M.Ed (Counselling) in progress
University of Northern British Columbia

Appendix C

Information Sheet

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled *Women in Midlife: Experience of the Mind and Body Movement of Nia*. The research is being conducted by Lynn Switzman, a graduate student in the Masters of Education (Counselling) program at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC).

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of women in midlife as they participate in the mind and body movement of Nia. It is also to query whether Nia influences a sense of well-being, and if so, how? Although Nia is recognized as a mind and body movement approach we know little about how it is experienced by women age 45-64. It is expected that the results of this study will be valuable in informing counsellors and other professionals who work with midlife women about the experience of Nia at this time of life.

Your participation in this study is completely **voluntary**. There is no obligation on your part to participate. You may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. You will be given a \$20.00 Pine Centre Mall gift certificate as acknowledgement of your contribution toward this research study, regardless of whether or not you withdraw.

If you choose to be a participant in the study, you will be asked questions during an interview that will focus on your experience with the mind and body movement of Nia. The questions are primarily aimed at obtaining your description and understanding of your experience with Nia. You will also be invited to share a written journal which will be collected periodically throughout the study. The only potential risk anticipated by the researcher is that some participants may feel slightly uncomfortable speaking or writing about experiences related to midlife issues. If this occurs, counselling support can be obtained through referral by your family physician to a suitable mental health professional or by contacting one of the following counselling services: Mental Health and Addiction Services 1- 866-565-2966, Registered Clinical Counsellors of BC 1-800-909-6303, or BC Psychological Association 1-800-730-0522. Potential benefits from participating may include feeling uplifted in reflecting on experiences of being involved in Nia during midlife and that your contributions will help our understanding of Nia. The interviews are expected to take 1 to 2 hours. There will be 2-3 in-depth interviews. Interviews will be audio tape-recorded in order that the material can later be analyzed by the researcher. You may turn off the tape recorder at any time.

A pre-interview will take place over the phone and will last no longer than 20 minutes. It is anticipated that the entire interview process will take place over 5 to 8 months. This time frame includes all individual interviews, journal writing, and the researcher's data analysis process which will be followed by an end conversation, where the researcher will present the results and gather feedback. Your interview will be transcribed and typed verbatim. Your journal submissions will be photocopied. Transcripts, tapes, and journal entries will be identified by a

pseudonym and not your name. Transcripts, tapes, and journals will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office at her residence. Tape transcriptions will be filed electronically in a computerized format and will be protected by a password. Only the researcher, the supervisory committee, and the transcriptionist will have access to the tapes and transcripts, and only the researcher and her supervisory committee will have access to the journal submissions.

The names and contact information of participants will be strictly confidential. Only the researcher will have access to names and contact information. The names and contact information will be kept in separate files from the transcripts. They will also be stored in a locked filing cabinet located in the researcher's residence. After the interviews from all the participants have been analyzed, you will be asked to help confirm the results. This step will involve a brief in-person or telephone contact of about 20-30 minutes.

It is expected that your experiences will contribute to the body of knowledge related to Nia and midlife issues. In an effort to inform counsellors, other helping professionals, and researchers of the findings, the researcher plans to publish the results in professional journals or reports and present the results at conferences. In order to illustrate the results, it is anticipated that some direct quotations from some of the interviews will be published. However, names of participants or others identifying information will not be revealed.

Tape recordings will be kept for five years after the study is completed and then the cassette tapes will be destroyed. Interview transcripts will be kept for seven years after the completion of the study at which time the documents will be shredded and electronic files will be deleted.

Should you choose to withdraw from the study during the initial interview, the tape recordings and any information you have provided will be immediately destroyed. If you withdraw after the initial interview, the information you have provided will be kept by the researcher because it will have been analyzed and incorporated into the emerging understanding and interpretations of the phenomenon of Nia.

You will be asked during the interview process if you would like to receive a summary of the final results and, if so, whether you wish to receive them by mail, email, or by picking them up in person. You may also obtain a summary of the results by contacting the researcher, Lynn Switzman [personal information has been removed for the purpose of the written thesis]. It is expected that the summary will be available by September 2008. Please let the researcher know if you have any questions before proceeding with the study. If you later have questions about the study please contact the researcher, Lynn Switzman [personal information has been removed for the purpose of the written thesis]. As well, you may contact one of my thesis supervisors, Dr. Corinne Koehn at (250) 960-6264 or Dr. Sylvia Barton at (250) 960-6631. Any complaints about the study can be directed to the office of Research, UNBC at (250) 960-5820.

The information Sheet must be attached to the Consent Form and a copy given to the Research Participant.

Appendix D

WANTED: WOMEN WHO TAKE NIA!



You are invited to volunteer in a UNBC research study called *Women in Midlife: Experience of the Mind and Body Movement of Nia*

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of women between the ages of 45-64 as they participate in the mind and body movement of Nia. It is also to query whether Nia influences a sense of well being, if so, how?

The study is **voluntary**.

If you choose to be a participant in the study, you will be asked to do 2-3 interviews and keep a journal.

You will receive a \$ 20.00 Pine Centre Mall gift certificate and a summary of the research results will be available by request.

The research is being conducted by Lynn Switzman, a student in the Masters of Education (Counselling) program at the University of Northern British Columbia.

All those interested in participating or wanting more information please contact Lynn Switzman [personal information has been removed for the purposes of the written thesis]

Appendix E

Pre-Interview Questions for Participant Selection

- 1). How did you hear about the study?
- 2). I will briefly describe the study and ask her if it sounds like something she would want to be a part of.
- 3). I will state that I hope to interview women who fit a specific criteria and in order select participants I will need to ask a few questions. If she is agreeable, I will continue with the process.
- 4). What is your age?
- 5). How long have you been participating in Nia?
- 6). Have you participated in Nia on a:
 - a) weekly basis
 - b) monthly basis
 - c) other
- d) had breaks in between participating, and if so, how many and for how long?
- 7). Do you practice Nia outside of the formal Nia class time, if yes, how often?
- 8). What level do you perceive yourself to be with regards to your experience in Nia?
 - a) novice
 - b) intermediate
 - c) expert
- 9) Do you do other forms of exercise activities other than Nia?
- 10). Would you be willing to reflect on your thoughts, feelings and insights regarding your experience participating in the mind and body movement of Nia?
- 11). I will briefly go over the benefits and the risks to participating in the study mentioning that sometimes when people share personal stories they can become emotional. I will inquire how the participant might manage if this were to occur.
- 12). Would you be able to commit to 2-3 interviews over a consecutive 5 to 8 month time period?
- 13). Would you be willing to share your reflections on your experience of Nia in a journal after participating in Nia classes?
- 14). Do you have any concerns about taking part in this study?

Appendix F

Journal Guide

The following are suggested questions to use as you reflect on your experience of Nia.

- (1). How did I feel before Nia today?
- (2). How did I feel after Nia today?
- (3). What was Nia's influence on my sense of well-being?
- (4). How was I managing before Nia today?
- (5). How am I managing after Nia today?

Appendix G

Research Ethics Board Informed Consent Form

To be completed by the Research Participant.

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Have you read and received a copy of the attached information sheet?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand that the research interviews will be recorded?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand that some of your actual words may be published in a written form?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in participating in this study?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you know what resources you can access for counselling support?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand who will have access to the information you provide?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No

This study was explained to me by: _____
Print Name

I agree to take part in this study:

Date: _____

 Signature of Research Participant

 Printed Name of Research Participant

I believe that the person signing this form understands what is involved in the study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

Date: _____

 Signature of Investigator

The information Sheet must be attached to this Consent Form and a copy given to the Research Participant.

Appendix H**Demographic Information Sheet**

Pseudonym _____

Please complete the following:

1. Current age _____
2. Highest educational level completed:
 - a) grade school _____
 - b) some high school _____
 - c) grade 12 _____
 - d) college diploma _____
 - e) university undergraduate _____
 - f) university graduate degree _____
 - g) other (please specify) _____
3. Marital status:
 - a) married _____
 - b) separated _____
 - c) divorced _____
 - d) living as married _____
 - e) never married _____
 - f) widowed _____
4. Are you or have you ever been a parent? ____ yes ____ no
5. What is your ethnic origin (e.g. Caucasian, Asian, Aboriginal, etc.)?

6. Current employment status:
 - a) employed full-time _____
 - b) employed part-time _____
 - c) employed seasonally _____
 - d) unemployed _____
 - e) permanently out of labour force due to illness/disability _____
 - f) out of labour force due to decision to be homemaker _____
 - g) student _____
 - h) retired _____
 - i) other (please specify) _____
7. Type of occupation: (please specify, e.g., teacher, salesclerk, manager, carpenter, artist, computer programmer, secretary, homemaker, etc.)

Appendix I
Participant Contact Information

Participant: _____

Address: _____

Phone number: _____

Email: _____

Do I have permission to contact you at home? _____ yes _____ no

If not, how would you like to arrange contact?

Appendix J

Interview Questions

The purpose of this research is two fold: (1) to study the experiences of women in midlife as they participate in the mind and body movement of Nia, and (2) to query if Nia influences a sense of well-being, and if so, how?

- (1). Please describe your experience with midlife?
- (2). Has Nia helped you manage with midlife, and if so, how?
- (3). How did you come to Nia?
- (4). Has Nia influenced your sense of well-being, and if so, how?
- (5). Would you please share with me your stories around your experiences with the mind and body movement of Nia?
- (6). What does Nia provide you that other forms of exercise do not?

Potential follow up questions:

- (1). You have described your midlife experience as _____, tell me more about your experiences.
 - a. What thoughts have stood out for you?
 - b. What feelings have stood out for you?
 - c. What behaviours have stood out for you?
 - d. What bodily sensations or changes have you experienced?
- (2). You stated that Nia has helped you manage with midlife, tell me about one of those situations.
 - a. What thoughts stood out for you?
 - b. What feelings stood out for you?
 - c. What did you do that was different, if anything, and how was it different?
 - d. What bodily sensations or changes did you experience?
- (3) Are there other situations that stand out for you? (repeat probes a-d)
- (4). When you first came to Nia what were your first impressions? (repeat probes a-d)
- (5) In what ways has your experience of Nia changed over time? (repeat probes a-d)
- (6) In what ways has Nia added to or detracted from your sense of well-being?
 - a. your mental well-being?
 - b. your emotional well-being?
 - c. your physical well-being?
 - d. your spiritual well-being?
- (7) In what ways, if any, does Nia influence your daily life?
- (8) You wrote in your journal about _____, please tell me more.
- (9) In what places do you prefer to practice Nia? Tell me more...
- (10) During what times do you prefer to practice Nia? Tell me more...
- (11) In what ways, if any, is Nia different for you from other physical activities you do?
 - a. How are your thoughts different, if at all?
 - b. How are your feelings different, if at all?
 - c. How are your behaviors different, if at all?
 - d. How are your bodily sensations and changes different, if at all?