The Transformative Potential of Nia® as Experienced by Six Advanced Nia® Instructors: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

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This study explored the transformative potential of Nia as experienced by six Brown or Black Belt Nia instructors. Nia is a barefoot fitness practice that is done to music, focusing on technical precision, individual expression and the sensation of pleasure (Nia South Africa, 2010). The participants had experienced transformation which was defined as a change that brings about a long-lasting state, including a fundamental shift in perspective and attention. This shift in perception includes the way in which one sees oneself and the world, and consequently impacts one's relationships and values in a lasting way (Schlitz et al., 2007). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009) was used and semi-structured, online interviews and thematic analysis were conducted to derive overarching themes. Eight themes included valuing the body as the most important relationship, self-regulation through the practice of Nia, healthier relationships, transformation through embodied principles, Nia as a sacred livelihood, disciplined practice as key to on-going transformation, healing the world through Nia, and increased spiritual connection to the universe. The findings have potential implications for advanced Nia practitioners, the Nia community and those interested in transformation through movement practices. Limitations of this study and further research are discussed.

Keywords: transformative potential, long-term transformation, Nia practice, advanced practice, black belt Nia instructor.

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Author's note: The registered symbol "®" in the title will not be used again in this study in order to simplify the text, but it is implicit in referring to the Nia Technique, Inc., Nia as a practice, Nia trainings and any Nia-related reference.

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This study was inspired by the transformation that I had experienced through various movement practices, as well as the transformation that my sister, who is an advanced Nia instructor, and others in the Nia community had experienced. The study focused on the factors that facilitate or hinder transformation, what the experience of transformation may entail, as well as the relationship between transformation of the individual and that of the wider community. This is in line with a working model of consciousness transformation (Vieten et al., 2011) that reflects the shift from an inner, subjective knowing, to developing a transformational practice, to positively affecting both the individual and collective. In this study, transformation was defined as a change that brings about a long-lasting state, including a fundamental shift in perspective and attention. This shift includes the way in which one sees oneself and the world, and consequently impacts one's relationships and values in a lasting way (Schlitz et al., 2007). This definition reflects the various aspects of transformation through various movement practices that are addressed in existing literature, as well as the transpersonal context and idiographic nature of this research.

Nia is a holistic fitness practice that is done barefoot to music, focusing on technical precision, individual expression and the sensation of pleasure. This body-mind practice includes elements of various dance styles, martial arts and healing arts (Nia South Africa, 2010). Debbie Rosas (2010), co-founder of the Nia Technique, describes the dance elements that include the expressive aspects of jazz dance, the emotional processing facilitated by modern dance and the free-spirited approach of Duncan dance. Martial arts influences include the groundedness and confidence of tae kwon do, the lightness of tai chi and the harmonizing flow of Aikido. Healing elements include yoga-based body alignment, the Alexander Technique's emphasis on eye movement as a force from which to move the body, and the Feldenkrais Method's focus on sensing the inner body and transforming the body through pleasure (Rosas, 2010). Nia is based on 52 principles that are derived from these various movement practices. These principles are structured into five core areas: the studies of movement, sound, body awareness, health, anatomy and the wisdom of the body (Nia Technique, Inc., 2018).

Nia offers a training system comprised of five successive belts. The White Belt focuses on physical awareness, the Art of Sensation, and self-knowledge, and certifies one to teach Nia (Nia Technique, Inc., 2018). The Green Belt is open to all teachers and focuses on The Body's Way, optimising well-being through choices that are guided by the body's wisdom (Nia Technique, Inc., 2018). The Blue Belt focuses on the Art of Communication, creating healthy relationships through body-centred communication (Nia Technique, Inc., 2018). The Brown Belt focuses on the Art of Perception, and the metaphysics of the body (Nia South Africa, 2010), focusing on positive energetic changes in all areas of life. The Black Belt focuses on the Art of Creativity, exploring the unknown in creative ways (Nia Technique, Inc., 2018), in order to become a Movement Medicine Healer (Nia South Africa, 2010).

In reviewing existing literature, the various movement forms from which Nia is derived, as well as a broader scope of potentially transformational movement practices, were considered. Most of these studies focused on short-term movement practices or dance programmes as therapeutic interventions for addressing specific issues or ailments. Switzman et al. (2011) explored the integration of Nia into the lives of mid-life, female Nia students and considered the possible role of Nia in psychotherapy. The participants experienced increased awareness of their bodies and their ability to self-heal, a belief in the wisdom of the body, and a more positive self-identity and worldview. Studies related to the therapeutic benefits of Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) (Bräuninger, 2014; Vaverniece et al., 2012), tango dance (Pinniger et al., 2013) and tai chi (Wang et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2012) suggested a decrease in depression, anxiety and stress. Mills and Daniluk (2002) explored the potential transformation as experienced by female survivors of child sexual abuse through DMT and suggested healing effects, including a reconnection to their bodies, more natural and spontaneous movement, an intimate connection in the safe space of the dance group, and being empowered by choice. Empowerment and an improved relationship with one's body were echoed in a study of the effects of the Feldenkrais Method for participants with eating disorders (Laumer et al., 1997).

Boleyn (2014) explored adult learning theory in relation to the somatic learning of White Belt Nia students, suggesting an increase in value of the body as a site of knowing and learning, and positive shifts in perspective. The importance of community was suggested by studies of circle dance (Borges da Costa & Cox, 2016), Movement Medicine (Kieft, 2014) and tai chi (Taylor-Piliae et al., 2006).

Studies regarding certain dance practices have described the participants' experience of joy, freedom and an enhanced positive perspective of life (Boleyn, 2014; Borges da Costa & Cox, 2016; Kieft, 2014; Wort & Pettigrew, 2003). Hoffman (2015) explored the potential of Authentic Movement as a catalyst for personal transformation, suggesting a sense of oneness with the universe and altruism. The literature also indicates that Authentic Movement (Hoffman, 2015) and circle dance (Borges da Costa & Cox, 2016) evoke an enhanced positive outlook and an experience of oneness and connection to the spiritual realm. The potential benefits of body-mind integration and an experience of the numinous have been observed with belly dancing (Jorgensen, 2012; Kraus, 2009).

None of the studies focused on movement practices as a profession or livelihood, and none of the Nia-specific studies explored the transformative potential of Nia according to the definition of transformation in this study. This study aimed to extend the existing literature by focusing specifically on the transformative potential of an advanced, long-term Nia practice for six Brown or Black Belt instructors.

Method

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to conduct this research, allowing for cross-case analysis, whilst honouring the idiographic nature of the data. By exploring each case in depth, the individual context of the lived experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012) may be considered.

Purposive sampling (Smith & Osborne, 2008) of six Nia Brown and Black Belt teachers was conducted. Potential participants received the definition of transformation by email and were invited to participate based on their experience of such transformation. The sample group was homogenous in that all six participants were female, advanced Nia instructors, and had an on-going practice of Nia. Five of the participants were Black Belt instructors and one was Brown Belt, but enrolled to complete her Black Belt training. All of the participants had been teaching Nia for at least five years. Participants ranged in age from being in their 30s to 60s, and lived and worked in various cultural contexts in North America, Europe, Africa and Asia. Further details regarding the participants' demographic and cultural information have not been included in this study in order to protect their identities, given the closeness of the Nia community.

The British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (The British Psychological Society, 2014) informed the research design and conduct. Ethical approval was granted by the Professional Development Foundation in partnership with Middlesex University. Participants were sent the interview protocol beforehand via e-mail, allowing them to prepare their responses in consideration of the definition of transformation. Being in various locations around the world, each participant was interviewed online via Skype.

The main research question and sub-questions that comprised the semi-structured interview are below:

Main Question

What is the transformative potential of Nia at the Brown or Black Belt levels and how is it experienced by six Brown or Black Belt instructors?

Sub-Questions

- What long-lasting changes have the participants experienced through their Nia practice?
- How have these changes influenced their self-concept?
- How have these changes influenced their perspective of the world?
- How has the Nia practice impacted the participants' relationships?
- How has the Nia practice impacted the participants' values?
- What key factors influenced this transformation?

Participants had received the interview questions beforehand, and this seemed to facilitate the meaningful consideration of their responses. Given my previous experience of Nia, I used bracketing to document my overall experience and ideas about the transformative potential of Nia, as well as my expectations and preconceived ideas about the participants. Explicating this information supported the interpretation of results. Thematic analysis was conducted to interpret the transcribed interviews, revealing emerging themes that were regrouped into main themes for each participant. These main themes were further regrouped into overarching themes. Recurrence was measured and the validity of the results was enhanced by only including themes that were representative of at least five of the six participants (Smith et al., 2009). Fictitious names were used to protect the participants' identities.

Results

Eight overarching themes emerged, as depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1
Overarching themes

Theme 1: Value the body as the most important relationship

All of the participants expressed the value they place on their bodies through the practice of Nia. Considering the body as a life partner and believing in the body's innate healing ability were central to this relationship.

1.1. Body as an essential partner

The participants' descriptions of the relationship they had with their body ranged from placing importance on the body, to listening to the body, to achieving self-mastery through the body, to regarding the body as a sacred vessel for their spirit. A key factor in this relationship seemed to be the emphasis that Nia places on living in and through one's body, and being guided by its wisdom.

[T]he *most* (italics indicate participant emphasis) important relationship I will first and foremost, *ever* have, and that is the relationship I have with my body (Becky).

[W]e can't really achieve any kind of mastery or level in anything *without* the body. Uhm, as a partner . . . And Nia has just proven that to me (Daniella).

1.2. Nia as healing

Five of the participants described the healing they had experienced through Nia, ranging from Nia as therapy, as a practice that cultivates self-love and self-healing, and as life-saving. The expanded awareness and perspective that the Nia principles seemed to foster seemed to be the common foundation for the diverse healing experienced.

I think if I had continued down that road . . . of uhm pushing and pain... I might be either very badly injured or... dead! So, that's how important Nia is to me... I thank Nia for my life . . . now I have a... body that I genuinely love... and is really healthy (Donna).

Theme 2: Self-regulation through the practice of Nia

All of the participants expressed increased self-regulation through the practice of Nia, including increased self-awareness, an improved ability to manage their transformation, and improved emotional regulation.

2.1. Empowered by choice

The shift in perspective that participants attributed to their Nia practice included greater self-awareness and consequently being able to choose their role in certain life situations.

[I]t gave me a way to be the surfer rather than what's being surfed (Daniella).

Choice was a source of empowerment for Donna:

[T]he theme of my transformation at the moment is... choice . . . And it's also, uhm, taking away my victim...mode (Donna).

2.2. *Nia provides tools for managing transformation*

The participants' increased self-awareness seemed to support their self-regulation, which in turn, provided a framework for understanding and managing their transformation. Nia also provided the tools for such transformation.

Daniella learned to regulate her energy, integrate various aspects of herself and actively create her life:

Nia, for me, was the thing that I *found* to... manage big transformation and big energy in my life (Daniella).

A contributing factor to Fiona's ability to manage her transformation was having the Nia-specific language that could describe her experience:

[A]h, I have this experience, and that's a word... or a term that fits really well (Fiona).

2.3. *Self-regulation through the practice of Nia*

Nia seemed to provide the participants with various forms of self-regulation, including energetic, emotional and spiritual regulation.

[A]ll these tools for handling...myself . . . has been pretty profound (Daniella).

[I]t's like a *reset* button for my emotions and my spirit . . . I feel... more present, more positive, and therefore I can face the rest of the day (Donna).

[I]t's helped me a lot with my temper (*laughing*)... I have tools, so I don't go bananas (*laughing*) (Tabitha).

Theme 3: Healthier relationships

All of the participants expressed a greater understanding of relationship dynamics and a more balanced, healthier way of communicating.

3.1. *More balanced relationships*

All of the participants expressed the transformative impact that the principles from the Blue Belt training had on their relationships.

For Celia, the energy put into and taken from relationships seemed to be more balanced:

[B]lue belt probably had the most *mind*-blowing principles in... recognizing the balance in relationship... I had to find the balance... and that was... very transformative (Celia).

Fiona and Donna explained how they were more comfortable with being vulnerable in a relationship, while Daniella learned to express her emotions rather than suppress them.

3.2. Clearer relationship boundaries

The participants explained that they were more aware of boundaries in relationships, equipping them to manage their expectations better.

I could get perspective to like, OK, that's not my business, or I can't and I shouldn't even try to change other people (Fiona).

3.3. Truthful communication

Five of the participants expressed the importance they placed on being honest with themselves and with others, often referring to the "truth" as a subjective, embodied guide in their lives.

I'm far more... concerned with truth. And truth-telling . . . To myself... and to *others* about myself (Donna).

Theme 4: Healing the world through Nia

Five of the participants described a transpersonal belief of impacting the world through one's personal practice, as well as the sense of responsibility this entailed for developing themselves through Nia.

4.1. Balanced movement practice for optimal well-being

Celia referred to Nia as a "holistic fitness practice", Daniella described this as a "rubric for joy", and Fiona spoke of the "*perfect* balance" that Nia offers. The result of engaging in this practice for all of the participants was optimal well-being.

4.2. Nia as an agent for change in the world

All of the participants expressed the potential of Nia to positively impact the world through their personal practices and the Nia community. They believed that the transformation they had experienced was available to everyone who practiced Nia.

[T]he felt *sense* of being *deeply* connected, *deeply moved* by the world around me. And *deeply invested* in leaving the world in a better place (Becky).

[T]hat journey to be a teacher . . . would also be the *way* that I could integrate and share all of these ideas ... And help facilitate *that* kind of transformation (Daniella).

4.3. Confident in the transformative potential of Nia

When presented with the definition of transformation, all of the participants expressed an immediate confirmation that it resonated with their experience of Nia. Their belief in the transformative potential of Nia was evident in their own experience, as well as in discussing the potential Nia had for others.

I watch people come in to that experience scared, and insecure, and closed and uh vulnerable, and...unsure... and they leave *open* and *radiant* and *emotional* and *connected*... and I watch how the practice touches and changes people... and how they move through their life (Celia).

4.4. Power of community

The community in which Nia is practised was a significant factor for many of the participants, providing a sense of belonging and ongoing support in their transformational journeys.

Coming to Nia was like finding my *tribe* (Daniella).

[T]his *global* community that speaks the same language, that, that dances to the same music, to the same choreography, that is connected, and inspires each other... being tapped in to *that* is, feels so powerful! (Celia).

Theme 5: Transformation through embodied principles

All of the participants described how the Nia principles that informed much of their transformation seemed to be processed not only on an intellectual level, but as embodied learning.

5.1. Embodied transformation through practice

All of the participants suggested that their long-lasting, embodied transformation had happened gradually and required engagement with their Nia practice.

[I]t comes together through the body, which was my goal from the very beginning (Daniella).

5.2. Embodied principles affect all areas of life

All of the participants suggested that their embodied transformation could not be separated from other areas of their lives.

[I]t's like I have prosthetics, I have Nia prosthetics (*smiling*).... if I took them off, I wouldn't have an arm or a leg (Tabitha).

As a practice, when it is... in my *body*, and in my cells and in my...*consciousness*, it affects...everything! (*laughing*) . . . From how I'm with my children to intimacy with my husband to, uhm, grocery shopping (Celia).

5.3. Nia as fundamental to life

The participants considered Nia as fundamental to their belief and value systems, and to life in general.

[I]t's like *breathing* – you know, you're going to do it 'til you die! (Donna).

I don't have an experience without Nia (Tabitha).

[S]ince that time it has been the, the inspiration and the motivation for...*being* (Celia).

Theme 6: Nia as a sacred livelihood

Five of the participants considered Nia to be their sacred livelihood - a Nia principle that entails aligning one's philosophy to all aspects of life, including one's profession.

6.1. Nia as a sacred livelihood

For Becky, the principle of creating a sacred livelihood expresses her philosophy of life:

I have chosen to have a philosophy that I can live by, that is the same in my life as in my business... it drives my choices... And, my purpose (Becky).

Nia as a sacred livelihood resonated with the sense of belonging and connectedness that the participants experienced through Nia, as was clearly expressed by Celia:

[I]n White Belt...it's... creating a sacred livelihood... I... literally sobbed through the entire principle... I finally had *found* that piece that I really searched so diligently for! ... for me, my Nia journey is about... embodying it, so that I can share it (Celia).

6.2. Nia as life's purpose

When they first experienced Nia, five of the participants experienced a sudden realization that Nia was their life purpose.

Nia is my *work*! It's my spiritual work. It's what I've, know that I'm here to share (Becky).

[I]t was the missing puzzle piece to unlock my...purpose (Celia).

Theme 7: Disciplined practice is key to on-going transformation

All of the participants believed that they had an active role in their transformation, and that it was a dynamic process, requiring on-going discipline and commitment.

7.1. Nia as on-going transformational practice

The participants described their transformation as evolutionary and never-ending, emphasizing the embodiment of the Nia principles.

[T]he change has been over so many years, and gradual... and that again, is also why I say it's a *practice* (Donna).

[Y]ou keep evolving, for sure, if you practice! (Daniella).

7.2. Transformation requires disciplined practice

All of the participants believed that a disciplined practice was key to transformation.

[T]he repetition of the *form*, is what really allows someone... to have body and life tools, so that it is not one peak, high experience . . . That's *what* makes it long-lasting (Becky).

[T]ransformation is *really* in... a disciplined practice (Donna).

7.3. Transformation intensifies with each belt level

Five of the participants expressed how the discipline and meaning of their practice increased as they progressed through the belt levels.

[W]e start doing it in Blue Belt, it's maybe at a more superficial level, and we get to Brown Belt... and it's a much deeper level. And then, when you get to Black, uhm, it's like...exponential . . . the progression has been pretty incredible . . . on a personal transformational level (Daniella).

Theme 8: Increased spiritual connection to the universe

All of the participants described a spiritual element of their experienced transformation, which seemed closely related to their sense of connection to the Nia community, the world, and the universe.

8.1. One with the universe

Five of the participants described how their Nia practice allowed them to sense that they were one with the universe.

When I dance Nia . . . I feel... that... I'm just a part of this greater... flow of life... (Donna).

You're creating an internal environment of, of *pure* life-force energy... And if we can do that, that is a way for us to... be connected to the universe that we are a part of and nested in (Becky).

8.2. Embodied truth as spiritual connection

Embodying the Nia principles fostered the spiritual dimension of the participants' transformation and reinforced their relationships with that which they considered sacred.

[T]here was a *deep* feeling inside my gut, which felt like ah, truth! When I was dancing. So, that, that to me is the spiritual connection (Donna).

I would call it a prayer practice (Fiona).

I sense Nia as a spirit... oftentimes, I don't even feel like I'm teaching. It's just coming through me (Celia).

Discussion

The findings suggest that the transformation experienced by the participants followed a similar process to the model of consciousness transformation developed by Vieten et al. (2011). The participants described how they intuitively knew that Nia offered potential transformation, were motivated to develop a disciplined Nia practice, and have experienced both individual and collective transformation. While the participants had various cultural backgrounds, religious or spiritual beliefs and life contexts, this seemed to add value to the findings, as the cross-case analysis and overarching themes suggested similar transformation regardless of these differences. This suggested that the experienced transformation may be related to how advanced they are as instructors.

In their book, *The Nia Technique*, Rosas and Rosas (2004) explained that one's initial practice of Nia may be motivated by a desire for fitness, but may evolve as a holistic healing practice. This progression was supported by the findings. For all of the participants, Nia entered their lives while they were searching for healing or life purpose, and their journey of Nia marked a significant aspect of their development, both personally and professionally.

While the findings of this study supported those explored in the literature review, certain themes highlight the new territory that was covered by this sample group, including Nia as a sacred livelihood and as life's purpose, valuing the body as the most

important relationship, healing the world through Nia, and the emphasis placed on the importance of a disciplined practice as necessary for ongoing transformation. Many of these themes are directly related to the sample group being instructors, as opposed to the majority of participants in previous studies being students. Another significant difference is that they were a healthy population and that Nia was not part of an intervention plan to treat a diagnosed condition.

Ramaswamy and Deslauriers (2014) suggested that the long-term practice of a dance form may ultimately culminate in a spiritual experience, supporting the current study's findings that emphasized the role of disciplined form in manifesting transformation, including spiritual connection. Jorgensen's (2012) study of American belly dance indicated a resolution of body-mind dualism and described the dancers' experience of the numinous. This resonates with the current study's suggestions that dance has the potential to integrate aspects of the self, whilst extending this sense of connection to the universe. Further exploration of the potential effect of a structured, disciplined movement form on one's spiritual connection and transformation would help to clarify the factors that influence transformation.

The suggested effects of DMT (Mills & Daniluk, 2002) were a reconnection to their bodies, an intimate connection in the safe space of the dance group and empowerment through choice. Empowerment through choice was echoed in a study of the Feldenkrais Method (Laumer et al., 1997), which further proposed an increased acceptance of one's body and increased confidence. These findings resonated with many of the suggested findings of the current study.

Limitations and Further Studies

While this study suggests insights into the transformative potential of Nia, it is limited by the nature of the sample group being healthy, female instructors. Further studies could address this by considering sample groups that include participants with physical challenges or specific injuries, male participants or Nia students. The participants' financial investment in Nia may have influenced the results, suggesting that a study of advanced Nia practitioners who are not actively teaching Nia may clarify the validity of the findings.

While the small sample size was due to the nature of an IPA, a larger scale version of the current study, including only Black Belt instructors, would potentially clarify the validity and generalisability of the findings. Further studies may address whether the transformation experienced by advanced Nia instructors intensifies at each belt level due to the increasingly transformative content or due to the instructors' increased embodiment of the Nia principles.

Since most of the participants in the current study highlighted the Blue Belt training as profoundly transformative, both in terms of relationships and their Nia practice

in general, it would be valuable to conduct a study that compares the transformative potential of Nia for a sample group of Blue Belt instructors who have not completed more advanced belt levels to the experienced transformation of Black Belt instructors. Another comparative study exploring the similarities and transformative potential of Nia and a choreographed devotional dance, such as Dances of Universal Peace (Dances of Universal Peace International, 2015) would potentially highlight the elements of transformation that are unique to certain practices and those that seem to be consistent across various structured movement forms that are performed in a group setting.

Conclusion

Exploring the transformative potential of an advanced Nia practice was an insightful process that suggested long-lasting transformation as described in the transpersonal context of this study. The participants seemed to have experienced fundamental shifts in perspective and attention, ultimately changing their relationships to themselves, others, their Nia community and the world. The findings call for further exploration of the transformative potential of Nia at various levels and with various sample groups, especially given the powerful impact that the practice seems to offer. A greater understanding of the factors that may facilitate such transformation would possibly impact studies of various movement practices. This could potentially inform the way in which long-lasting transformation through such practices may be encouraged in various settings, including educational and health settings.

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About the Author

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