



Re-patterning the Lover Dance: *Chi for Two* Awareness of Our Polyvagal Anatomy, “Biting/Snapping,” and Language

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Abstract

When lovers sense anxiousness in their bodies—and want to “bite each other’s heads off,” they might go to couples counseling for help with communication. Like parents trying to help siblings “use their words,” counselors try to help lovers talk. In couples dance/movement therapy, it is helpful to look at the physiology of language with awareness provided by the method called *Chi for Two*. *Chi for Two*—The Energetic Dance of Healthy Relationship was originated by a long-time dance/movement therapist. It synthesizes knowledge of nervous system functioning, infant development, and trauma patterning, which is passed down over generations, plus how the therapeutic relationship shifts attachment styles. Dance/movement therapists who have this knowledge can help lovers recognize when their interactions awaken unfinished infant/parent dances involving the “biting/snapping” rhythm from the Kestenberg Movement Profile system, adapted for *Chi for Two*. (The authors use the word “lovers” to name people who are engaging in mutually consensual sexual sharing with one another.) The biting/snapping rhythm is key in articulating language. When lovers can recognize what is happening in their bodies during their efforts to use words, they can learn to bring the bite/snap infant movement expressions to dance/movement therapists to work through those moves. When lovers work through the infant movement patterns with the dance/movement therapist in the presence of a romantic partner, but not acted out with the romantic partner, lovers can celebrate their partners’ bravery in doing their individual healing and relational re-patterning.

Keywords Polyvagal · Couples therapy · Attachment trauma · Kestenberg rhythms · *Chi for Two*

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Introduction

Child psychiatrist Judith Kestenberg and colleagues created the Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP), which identifies developmental movement patterns occurring in the interactions between infant and caregiver (Kestenberg Amighi et al., 1999). They observed what they termed “tension flow rhythms,” which alternate in binding or releasing tension. KMP identifies infant rhythms that alternate between ones they call “indulging” and ones they call “fighting” (Wagner & Hurst, 2018). The “indulging” rhythms seek connection, while the “fighting” rhythms seek to establish a sense of separate being (Wagner & Waisman, 2023). In this paper, authors Wagner, Jarvis and Shelton propose that the *Chi for Two* understanding of our polyvagal anatomy and how it relates to the infant developmental “fighting” rhythm bite/snap adds important information for dance/movement therapists to use when helping lovers. *Chi for Two* Embodiment Coaches call this rhythm “bite/snap” to be more present with the rhythm. The authors use the word “lovers” to name people who are engaging in mutually consensual sexual sharing with one another.

Lovers can revel in the “indulging” rhythms and then want to “bite each other’s heads off.” Sue Johnson, creator of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) describes this type of lovers’ interaction as a “demon dialogue” (2008). Resmaa Menakem identifies the “demon” in his book *Monsters in love* (2023). Menakem points to the potentially dangerous possibilities that can occur when infant behavior mobilizes adult bodies. The authors invite the *Chi for Two* awareness of our polyvagal anatomy and how it helps lovers recognize what Menakem speaks to in his book, *Monsters in love*, in a chapter called You Are Not Each Other’s Baby (Menakem, 2023).

The *Chi for Two* understanding of our polyvagal anatomy invites awareness of the role of the vagus in the coordination of breathing and swallowing (Breit et al., 2018). Our lives depend on our bodies’ ability to coordinate breathing and swallowing at birth when our umbilical cord is cut. The *Chi for Two* understanding of our polyvagal anatomy also invites awareness of the role the vagus might play in the bite/snap rhythm required in language. During the infant/parent dance, infants learn to use their mouth and teeth and tongue to cut off the air that creates vocal vibration, to form words and phrases in an attempt to more effectively communicate with parents. The authors propose that when therapists and lovers have a *Chi for Two* understanding of our polyvagal anatomy, it becomes possible to find the pathway for working through unfinished infant/parent dances with the bite/snap rhythm awakened by talking. The authors believe that lovers can get to a place where language is mobilized using the nervous system state, which scientist Stephen Porges—creator of polyvagal theory—called Play/Dance (Porges, 2011).

When the *Chi for Two* awareness of polyvagal anatomy helps lovers recognize the stirring of unfinished infant/parent dances involving the biting/snapping rhythm, lovers can then bring these infant movement expressions to the dance/movement therapist to work through those moves, creating a symbolic redo of the infant/parent dance. When the symbolic redo with the dance/movement therapist happens in the presence of the

lover, but is not acted out with the lover, romantic partners can then celebrate their lovers' bravery in this re-patterning.

***Chi for Two*®—The Energetic Dance of Healthy Relationship**

Chi for Two was originated by Wagner (2015), a long-time dance/movement therapist, somatic educator and counselor. It was developed into a healing method for trauma patterning, which gets passed down over generations, by Wagner; Wagner's son and tai chi teacher Stephen Wagner; counselor and somatic therapist Caroline Gebhardt; and long-time massage therapy teacher and musician Mary Lou Davidson. *Chi for Two* is a somatic therapy approach that offers a sequence of partner practices. There is a curriculum for teaching the method, which is approved for credentialing by The International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association. It is beyond the scope of this article to focus on specific partner practices. However, identifying the need for non-verbal processing of lovers' awakening bite/snap in a dyadic dance with the movement therapist, in the presence of the lover but not with the lover, can inspire movement therapists to use their skills in non-verbal processing.

Chi for Two expands upon Wagner's previous journal articles. The first article (2015) is Polyvagal theory and peek-a-boo: How the therapeutic pas de deux heals attachment trauma. A "pas de deux" is a dance between two people. The dance between client and therapist can bring awareness of power differentials. In the dance between child and parent, children do not have the power that parents are more likely to have to move through space to get food and find shelter. When clients come to therapists for help, this two-person dance of client reaching to therapist for help can provide a symbolic redo of infant/parent dances. In their article on couples' dance/movement therapy, Wagner and Hurst (2018) explain that the lover dance, which might bring one lover's body parts inside the body of their lovers, can feel similar to infant/parent dances that involve body-inside-of-body movement. This body-inside-body movement includes forming in the womb of our mother, being held by parents after birth, breastfeeding, and aspects of diapering, bathing and tooth brushing. Wagner and Hurst (2018) specifically talk about lovers awakening the infant developmental rhythm "biting/snapping." In their article about polyvagal theory and the dance of *mismatch*, Wagner and Waisman (2023) talk about how language and gestures that have "fighting" rhythms can create useful *mismatch*. It helps therapists and lovers to know that the infant "fighting" rhythms, when they occur during infancy, ideally create what Wagner and Waisman (2023) refer to as "individuation within the dance of relationship." Ideally in the dance with parents, the child develops their empowerment. Empowered children can grow into empowered post-pubescent lovers who can share sexuality with more movement expressions mobilized by the nervous

system through a state called Play/Dance, explained in more detail below (Wagner & Hurst, 2018).

How Somatic Dyadic Practices Deepen Couples Therapies for Different Populations

Co-author Mukti Jarvis is a certified *Chi for Two* Embodiment Coach and trainer, who works from Australia. She is a long-time couples' therapist, certified in EFT and Nonviolent Communication. The idea of a movement expression seeking a satisfying reaction can be seen in the dance/movement therapy understanding of the therapeutic relationship (Wagner & Hurst, 2018). Dance/movement therapists are taught Chace's kinesthetic empathy (Wagner & Hurst, 2018) as well as the role of the non-judgemental witness in Authentic Movement (Wagner & Waisman, 2023). As Gus Kaufman, PhD, a senior trainer in Pesso Boyden System Psychomotor who has been a mentor for the development of *Chi for Two* teaches, "Emotion is motion in the body; Motion causes Action; Action is designed to get a reaction" (personal communication, April 8, 2000).

Fred Shelton did a *Chi for Two* class early in the origin of *Chi for Two*, found it helpful, and later trained to become a *Chi for Two* Embodiment Coach, exploring how *Chi for Two* serves diverse populations with mindfulness. Shelton recognizes how *Chi for Two* Embodiment Coaching can help men, particularly African American men, with their romantic dances. When bite/snap awakens in lovers' efforts to communicate and lovers can bring the bite/snap to a movement therapist who can help them recognize their "baby stuff," this helps shift the energetic dance from what Menakem calls dirty pain to what Menakem calls clean pain. If the therapist has the *Chi for Two* awareness of how our polyvagal anatomy can lead to someone bringing someone else a "tongue lashing," this awareness illuminates multi-generational trauma patterning and the pathway to re-patterning.

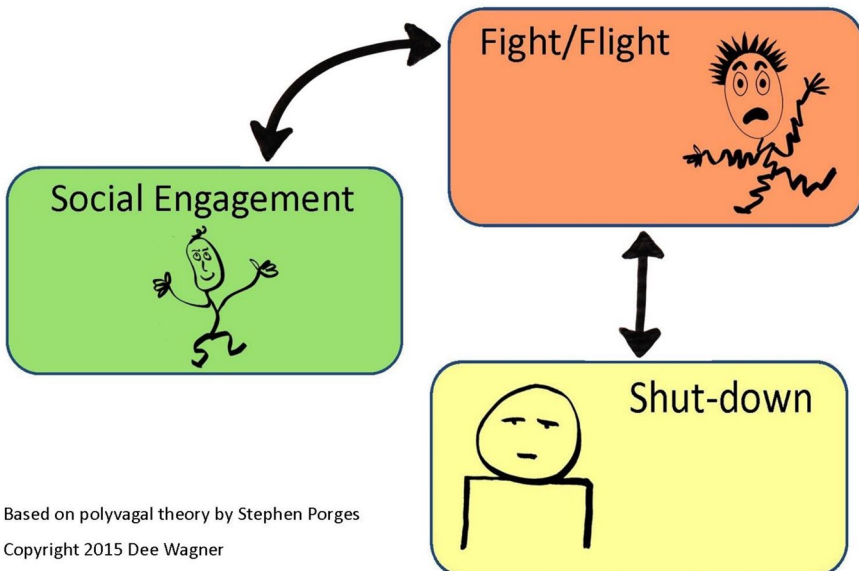
Oxytocin, Bite/Snap and the Vagus Nerve

Scientist Sue Carter studied the neuropeptide oxytocin (Porges, 2011). Before Carter's work, oxytocin was mostly associated with birthing and nursing. Carter noticed that some prairie voles pair bonded and co-parented and others did not. The major difference seemed related to oxytocin (Porges, 2011). Making love and orgasming can also raise oxytocin levels (Porges, 2011). The authors theorize that because oxytocin is associated with birthing and nursing, when we feel a rise in oxytocin during love making, that rise might contribute to the conflation of the Mother and the Lover archetypes. Knowing about the infant developmental rhythms can help separate the Mother archetype from our lovers. With our parents, our infant bodies ideally have both "indulging" and "fighting"

rhythms. However, multi-generational trauma patterning often inhibits the bite/snap rhythm (Wagner & Waisman, 2023). When lovers' bite/snap has become inhibited by multi-generational trauma patterning, being with a lover in what feels like an infant/parent way is likely to awaken bite/snap. The subtitle of Menakem's book *Monsters in Love*, is *Why your partner sometimes drives you crazy—and what you can do about it*. If we do not know what is happening, we can feel “out of control” and get into cycles that act out attachment trauma, sometimes in horrific patterns.

When we release air to form consonant sounds as we articulate words, the consonant sounds can seem to explode out of our mouths. The authors theorize that “using our words” rather than “biting someone’s head off” requires the biting off of air and the releasing of air required for articulation to be mobilized by the active state, which Porges called Play/Dance, versus Fight/Flight. Play/Dance provides the active functioning that is part of what Porges named our Social Engagement system. *Chi for Two* recognizes how Play/Dance anatomy makes it possible to stop talking and be present. When we have a *Chi for Two* polyvagal-informed understanding of the role of the vagus nerve in breathing, sucking, swallowing, and vocalizing (Breit et al., 2018), we can see how bite/snap could be mobilized by Play/Dance. Wagner first developed the “Map” of nervous system functioning to help clients understand polyvagal theory in an embodied way, including how polyvagal theory illuminates attachment theory.

Hierarchy of Nervous System Response



Based on polyvagal theory by Stephen Porges
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The “Map” was first published as a tool in Miller and Beeson (2021) *Neuroeducation Toolbox: Practical translations of neuroscience for counselors and psychotherapists*

The “Map” is a tool which creates interaction with clients. As therapists and clients interact with the “Map,” clients get a better sense of how we can get stuck bouncing back and forth between Fight/Flight and Shut-down because we do not feel safe. Clients can recognize that they have certain movements, which have become inhibited by dorsal vagal Shut-down in certain situations with certain people. When lovers can recognize how inhibited infant bite/snap can awaken in their efforts to use words, they can bring infant movement expressions to the dance/movement therapist. When clients work through infant moves with the movement therapist the movements will shift into mobilization with Play/Dance (Wagner & Waisman, 2023).

Looking at the “Map,” we can recognize Attachment Styles. Hazan and Shaver (1978) saw the similarity between romantic dances and infant/parent dances. They recognized lovers doing the same attachment dances that Mary Ainsworth saw happening between mothers and their babies in the Strange Situation experiments. In that study, Ainsworth noted infant behavior with the mother present, then absent, and then with the inclusion of a stranger, observing infant/mother proximity and contact, which led to a categorizing of behavior that became known as attachment styles. On the “Map,” we can see how Social Engagement system functioning aligns with Secure Attachment. The image above details a continuum between Fight/Flight and Shut-down that aligns with what has been called Insecure Attachment, with Fight/Flight aligning with Anxious Insecure, Shut-down aligning with Avoidant Insecure and the arrow between the two representing Ambivalent Insecure. The arrows point out the pathway for transforming Insecure Attachment into Secure Attachment, one symbolic redo of infant/parent developmental dance at a time.

The active state Play/Dance is part of Social Engagement system functioning. Play/Dance is facilitated by rhythmic braking and releasing of the ventral branch of the vagus (Porges, 2011). The ventral branch is myelinated creating a more nuanced capability for engaging and releasing than the dorsal branch, which is not myelinated. The authors theorize that the rhythmic braking and releasing, which occurs in the ventral branch of the vagus can have what Kestenber and colleagues identified as the first “indulging” rhythm—the “sucking” rhythm—because of the ventral branch of the vagus’ anatomical involvement in the act of sucking. The ventral vagus facilitates the pharynx in coordinating breathing and swallowing (Breit et al., 2018).

The vagus nerve brakes the body’s movement like the brake on a car. Without a foot on the brake, a car moves forward. We can tap the brake and release and brake and release to allow movement of the car while controlling the speed of the movement (Porges, 2011). Dance/movement therapists can recognize braking and releasing as what is called a Tension Flow rhythm. The infant rhythms identified by Kestenber and colleagues are Tension Flow rhythms: sucking, biting/snapping, twisting, straining/releasing, running/driftting, starting/stopping, swaying, surging/birthing, jumping and spurting/ramming. When the ventral vagus facilitates breathing, sucking, and swallowing, the dorsal branch’s braking and releasing is more able to facilitate peristalsis (Breit et al., 2018). Thus, when we mobilize our “biting/snapping” moves with Play/Dance (the rhythmic braking and releasing of the ventral vagus that occurs when we feel safe), our bodies naturally do what has been called Rest and Digest. The authors theorize that language can be mobilized with Play/

Dance and that when our bite/snap is mobilized with Play/Dance, we can stop talking and be present.

From the work of trauma expert Levine (2010) along with the work of Porges (2011), we know that when we sense danger, our bodies shoot off Fight/Flight chemistry to help us flee or fight if we must. If we feel trapped, the rhythmic braking and releasing of the dorsal branch of the vagus slows down. As digestion slows, the pelvic floor becomes more lifted, and breathing becomes shallow (Porges, 2011). Hopefully we can escape the danger unnoticed, we can “slip under the radar” of the predator, but if not and death is inevitable, dorsal vagal Shut-down makes death less painful because it has an analgesic effect (Levine, 2010; Porges, 2011).

When the dorsal branch creates Shut-down in the core, slowing digestion and making breathing shallower, it will likely inhibit what Bainbridge Cohen, creator of Mind–Body Centering® calls Navel Radiation, which is key to movement. When we understand how dorsal vagal Shut-down inhibits movement expressions, we can see how the “dance” of humans’ biting and snapping at the mother (natural for mammals) became inhibited over large periods of time. From awareness derived from various dance/movement therapy techniques and particularly the technique Authentic Movement, we can see how most human bodies have certain movement expressions in certain situations with certain people that have become inhibited by dorsal vagal Shut-down (Wagner & Waisman, 2023).

Evolution of the Inhibition of Bite/Snap

Before polyvagal theory, humans did not know about dorsal vagal Shut-down, which slows digestion and shallows our breathing. Humans thought that making children sit still and be quiet was a way to create calm. We did not know until polyvagal theory that dorsal vagal Shut-down is only short-term “calm” (Levine, 2010; Porges, 2011; Wagner, 2015; Wagner & Hurst, 2018; Wagner & Waisman, 2023). When movement expressions that have been inhibited by Shut-down awaken, they are mobilized with Fight/Flight (Levine, 2010). This Fight/Flight helps the animal get away from the danger that caused the Shut-down or fight if necessary. For humans, the Fight/Flight may be simply a flush of tears or a rush of hope as we sense the question, “Is it safe now to move this way?!”

Awakening inhibited movements of the mouth, teeth, and tongue with the bite/snap can create a “bewildering” urge to bite/snap that defies reason, leaving us confused and looking for justification for our behavior (Wagner & Waisman, 2023). Mammalian infant biting and snapping urges target the bodies mammals come out of because biting begins as part of nursing behaviors. The authors theorize that messages like, “Children should be seen and not heard,” or “Children should be well-behaved and nice,” create a cultural norm for bite/snap to become inhibited by dorsal vagal Shut-down. Then when the bite/snap awakens mobilized with Fight/Flight, it naturally targets people who smell more like oxytocin. Because oxytocin increases during love-making, it makes sense that there can be baffling urges to attack lovers. Menakem (2023) uses the metaphor of becoming a monster to describe this behavior. Lovers will accuse each other of, “Losing it,” “Blowing his top,” “Flipping her

lid.” Urges to justify the awakening of inhibited bite/snap can lead to blaming the lover on the one hand and shaming ourselves on the other hand. This bouncing back and forth can be seen on the “Map.” Blaming the lover can be seen as Fight/Flight. Shaming self can be seen as Shut-down. When lovers have processed the awakening infant movement with the movement therapist, they can return to communicating because they can stop talking and listen.

Summary

The authors theorize that when we have a polyvagal-informed understanding of the anatomy of breathing, sucking, swallowing, and vocalizing, we can see how bite/snap could be mobilized by Play/Dance, so we can “use our words.” When bite/snap arises out of lovers’ unfinished infant/parent dances, therapists can “catch” that bite/snap. This “catching of the awakening infant bite/snap” can help lovers work through the Fight/Flight that occurs when we awaken movement that has been inhibited by dorsal vagal Shut-down. Understanding multi-generational trauma patterns that inhibit certain movements in certain situations using dorsal vagal Shut-down, can help therapists help lovers talk mobilized by Play/Dance. Using the “Map” of nervous system functioning, everyone can understand the physiology of language with awareness of our polyvagal anatomy. Everyone can understand how multi-generational trauma patterns relate to infant developmental rhythms identified by Kestenberg and colleagues (Wagner & Waisman, 2023). Menakem (2023), author of *Monsters in love* invites lovers to *Rock the boat* (his original name for the book). *Chi for Two* awareness helps lovers learn to talk and stop talking, so they can listen to one another, connecting passionately and playfully during the re-patterning of the lover dance.

Author Contributions Author Dee Wagner is the co-owner of Harbor of Dreams Art, home of *Chi for Two*. Author Fred Shelton works for Harbor of Dreams Art as the Director of Diversity Marketing.

Declarations

Competing interest Dee Wagner has the copyright for the drawing, which was published previously in Miller and Beeson’s 2020 *The neuroeducation toolbox: Practical translations of neuroscience in counseling and psychotherapy*, and used in the article *Stirring up health: Polyvagal theory and the dance of mismatch in multi-generational trauma healing in Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy*.

Ethical Approval As this is a commentary article, no research on people or animals was involved. No consent was necessary.

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Mukti Jarvis (she/her) is an accredited Emotionally Focused Therapist, a certified Nonviolent Communication (NVC) Educator, Mediator and *Chi for Two* Embodiment Coach. Mukti studied alongside the late founder of CNVC, Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, in Switzerland, the USA and Australia before co-training with him in New Zealand and co-leading in Bali. She was trained and supervised by Dr. Jenny Fitzgerald, Australia’s foremost Emotionally Focused Therapy trainer. Mukti has delivered programs for global and local businesses, school communities, tertiary health education, and franchise organizations. Her inclusive private practice is for all those in intimate relationship or wanting to be.

Fred Shelton (he/him) is a *Chi for Two* Embodiment Coach. He offers nervous-system coaching: helping people with, “things that get on your nerves.” He has studied the experience of human interaction for many years within the corporate arena and offers individuals, couples, families and businesses an opportunity to see themselves and each other in a new light. Fred sees clients out of the Harbor of Dreams Art in Stone Mountain, GA, with a particular interest in providing underrepresented communities a new path toward mental and physical health. He firmly believes that you get healthier in your relationships by getting healthier in your body.