

By 17, my dream of becoming a ballerina was over. I had pursued grace and beauty, the perfect balance of gentle artistry and powerful athleticism. Now my hips were torn – along with my self-esteem...



# Joining the dance

Lucie Clements wonders why there aren't more applied psychologists working with dancers

**D**uring my early experiences of dance, I had reaped all the documented benefits of participation – musicality, self-expression and social cohesion (e.g. Lovatt, 2020). Eventually, my experience of dance had become one of autonomy suppression, as is often reported in research (e.g. Morris, 2003). By 2005, my once positive relationship with dance was changing.

That same year saw the publication of a UK survey of 1056 training and professional dancers' health and wellbeing. It highlighted that somewhere in the process of moving from dance as a hobby to dance as a professional pursuit, dancers were experiencing negative psychological effects from their investment. Ninety-two per cent had experienced a concern with their psychological wellbeing in the last 12 months, and 47 per cent had no access to psychological support (Laws, 2005).

I wanted others to truly enjoy dance, to experience dance teachers who understood and drew on psychology. I still have the copy of my UCAS form, where I wrote of that passion for bringing psychology to dancers. Over a decade later I have achieved my secondary dance dream, as a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Chichester, with an expertise in dance psychology research, and applied work with dance schools and companies. But applied psychology and provision of mental health support is still overwhelmingly absent from the dance scene. You can see concern regarding psychological wellbeing in dance in the news; from a 2018 story in *The Times* citing the exit of a third of employees from English National Ballet due to 'verbal abuse and a hostile working environment', to a 2019 scandal of children being encouraged to smoke to remain thin in Vienna's State Opera Ballet Academy.

While no UK-based evidence has been published since the 2005 survey, findings from Australia and the USA suggest little progress. One in three Australian dancers report a mental health concern, as do 75 per cent of US-based dancers (van den Eynde et al., 2016;

We are Minding, 2018). While cautiously noting the use of self-report measures, these statistics seem to indicate a slightly higher incidence of mental health concern in dancers than the general population. With 75 per cent of the US sample having no access to any form of psychological support through their dance school or company, it is clear that dancers' psychological needs are not being met (We are Minding, 2017).

## A need for applied psychologists

Few schools or companies make use of regular performance psychologists, and engagement with psychology could be more embedded into the curricula and culture. While some dancers do have access to mental health support via a counsellor or psychologist, this is often not reflected in teaching behaviours, for example. So, the question remains... Why are there so few applied psychologists working within dance schools and companies?

And importantly, in an industry which is highly represented by self-employed or freelance dancers, how can we provide support to those individuals?

Much of the literature demonstrating the psychological challenges associated with ballet participation at both the vocational

and professional level draws upon well-supported theories and concepts from sport (e.g. Quested & Duda, 2012). Indeed, dancers and athletes face many similar stressors – training for 40+ hours a week, performing multiple times a day, job instability, high risk of injury, pressure to remain a low weight, likelihood of a short career and many more workplace stressors. According to the BPS, 'Sport psychology's predominant aim is to help athletes prepare psychologically for the demands of competition and training', yet few dancers outside of large ballet companies have this support for what are often very similar demands to those faced by athletes.

Despite these similarities, there are also clear challenges in drawing parallels between sports and dance. Many sports can be reduced to objective values, such as finishing position or rank, distance travelled,

“...why is the field of dance psychology not recognised the way sport psychology is?”



or time taken. Objective factors such as degrees of flexibility or jump height can be used to assess optimal performance in dance, but dance is predominantly evaluated through less objective criteria. While dance undoubtedly relies on the athleticism and strength of a sports person, success as a dancer also emphasises aesthetics and beauty; factors which make dance inherently subjective. These differences necessitate the growth of psychology for dance.



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wellbeing, particularly for women. Dancers experience autonomy suppression, or thwarting – there is a clear hierarchy, where dancers

are expected to be unquestioning of teachers and choreographers. A number of studies have identified that this is of particular concern in ballet.

A recent media storm centred around the question, ‘Where are all the female choreographers?’, identifying the low number of female choreographers or women in positions of leadership. This led me and my colleague Dr Sanna Nordin-Bates to explore this issue in more detail (2020). We interviewed eight professional dancers turned choreographers to establish how their creativity had or hadn’t been nurtured, finding differences in experiences between genders.

Women experienced substantial autonomy suppression throughout their training and careers, with ballet requiring females to be more obedient and disciplined than their male counterparts. One of our female participants said of her experiences of dance training: ‘The idea was wear black ... and don’t stand out. Just look like the girl next to you as much as possible, be in line. Then you won’t get shouted at. You know, if you don’t hear your name, it’s good.’ Men also had little room to think creatively or to express themselves, and face psychological concerns regarding homophobia and bullying (Risner, 2014).

### Providing support

There is hope for change in the provision of psychological support for dancers, particularly due to the work of One Dance UK’s Healthier Dancer Programme and the National Institute of Dance Medicine and Science. They bring academic psychologists like me into a diverse range of dance schools and organisations, where I give psycho-educational workshops to dance teachers, performers and students. In these workshops I share how to provide a task-involving motivational climate, how to manage symptoms of performance anxiety or how to reframe teaching pedagogy to minimise emphases on perfectionism.

While much of this work remains within ballet and musical theatre schools and companies, I have recently worked with the hip-hop theatre collective Far from the Norm through the process of the Olivier Award winning production BLKDOG. This company is one of the first to access a psychologist for support through

### Low locus of control

The focus on the body for aesthetic purposes implicates an array of additional factors, including the dancer’s stage presence, emotional responses and fluidity of movement, many of which can be assessed in terms of the impact on the audience, rather than the individual’s specific, quantifiable attainment. All too often, casting decisions are made using a highly personal criterion, such as simply having the wrong hair colour or something entirely outside of one’s control (e.g. breast size, leg length).

In some dance genres, the use of weigh-ins remains common, with dancers asked to lose weight or risk losing a contract. As a result, dancers often report very low locus of control over their successes and failures, which may contribute to poor psychological wellbeing or the likelihood of developing mental health problems. Unsurprisingly, with this scrutiny of the body, training and performing in tight clothing, plus continued exposure to mirrors, eating disorders develop in around 16.4 per cent of training and professional dancers (Arcelus et al., 2014).

Dance is first and foremost an artistic, creative endeavour. My own research has highlighted the benefits of childhood dance participation for developing creative thinking (Sowden et al., 2015), but in reality, many professional dancers feel that their creativity is stifled. Ballet, in particular, is very focused, emphasising technical drilling, repetitive practice or imitation of a teacher, within a relatively formulaic class structure. As such, many dancers experience perfectionistic concerns which in turn limits their creativity and self-expression (e.g. Nordin-Bates, 2019). This emphasis on similarity and conformity also threatens

### Key sources

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Full list available in online/app version.

their tour. We have worked together to discuss how to prepare for and recover from intense rehearsals, how to manage the stresses of a hectic touring schedule and how to integrate self-care into their schedules.

While many of these principles are ones that promote general health and wellbeing, the context is highly specialist and the ever-shifting artistic and creative demands are substantial. As a classically trained dancer myself, this has challenged my understanding of the demands on the company and creative director. This is a call to arms for researchers to recognise the need for psychology in dance, and to support dance in the same way that we support other performers.

### An uncertain future

There are many areas of dance which are yet to be explored within the dance literature. Published works overrepresent employed ballet dancers, to the neglect of the wide variety of other dance genres, from hip-hop to musical theatre, and the vast number of freelance dancers. Each dance style comes with an accompanying history and culture that informs its practice. For example, while ballet emphasises replication and preservation of tradition, contemporary dance values openness and a greater acceptance of alternative body shapes. Many areas of dance, such

as musical theatre, tap, South Asian and commercial dance forms are entirely under-researched.

There is still an absence of mental health and psychology support in dance. There needs to be greater awareness about the need for it, and greater investment in dance psychology in order to keep our dancers healthy and the art form alive. Working alongside One Dance UK, I am now replicating Laws' 2005 survey to see just how far we have come in the last 15 years in dance and psychological wellbeing.

Covid-19 has been particularly challenging for dancers, many of whom have been furloughed, and face continued uncertainty about their job security. I have seen a huge spike in dance schools and companies reaching out to me for education to support dancers who are currently experiencing high levels of anxiety. With many theatres not due to open until 2021, much of the workforce remains unsure whether they will have jobs to return to. Many graduating dancers, who have committed their entire adolescence to rigorous dance training, and have very little other identity, may face very low chances of finding employment. I have worked with them to understand how they can regain personal control over the situation and remain focussed on their professional goals. But those who have had support are few and far between. Now more than ever, we need to talk about psychology in dance.




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