Dancers' stories: A narrative study of professional dancers

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ABSTRACT

The lifestyles, identities, and motivations of professional dancers are not well documented in the literature. This study used a grounded theory qualitative methodology combined with a modified Life Story Narrative script to assess professional dancers' life stories and identities. Twenty professional dancers from the U.S. Midwest were interviewed. During the interviews, dancers recounted emotionally vivid memories related to their dance careers. Data analysis revealed that most dancers emphasized the importance of personal recognition and chose the dance profession at a relatively young age. Variances between working [currently performing] dancers and retired [no longer performing] dancers were found regarding agency of entering the dance field, challenges within the career, and interest in teaching new dancers. Finally, a dichotomous description of appropriate teaching approaches emerged; some dancers expressed concern that past teaching methods were too harsh, whereas others conveyed that extreme measures better prepared students today for the professional realm. This study provides a deeper understanding of a unique population of people as well as evidence that time affects narrative stories; both of these implications are useful to inform public awareness and clinical practice.

1. Dancers' stories

Movies such as Black Swan and The Red Shoes, or biographies like Dancing on My Grave, articulate the difficult experiences some professional dancers face (Aronofsky, 2010; Kirkland & Lawrence, 1996; Powell & Pressburger, 1948). As a result, these works generalize dancers as neurotic, unhealthy individuals who appear driven to madness because of their profession. From a more evidentiary standpoint, previous research on dancers have predominately focused on pre-professional students, often focusing on eating disorders, physical injuries, or the trauma that occurs during career transition (Pickman, 1987; Ringham et al., 2006). The studies concentrated on professional dancers have focused primarily on ballet dancers, thus omitting a vast majority of professionals in the field (Gray & Kunkel, 2001; Hamilton, Hamilton, Meltzer, Marshall, & Molnar, 1989). The goal of this project is to explore the real lives of professional dancers from their perspectives, as well as to uncover insights about their identities and motivations during their professional careers.

A dancer's life is highly demanding and may appear mysterious from those unaware of the professional's day-to-day activities. Dancers often begin training at a young age and must dedicate extreme emotional and physical energy to daily classes, rehearsals, and performances (Aalten, 2005). A typical day for a professional dancer varies, yet many consist of eight or more hours of dance rehearsals and classes (Quested, Duda, Ntoumanis, & Maxwell, 2013; Twitchett, Angioi, Koutedakis, & Wyon, 2010). In addition to those rigorous physical demands, dancers must spend extra hours conditioning their bodies outside of the workday and must monitor their diets carefully to keep their bodies strong and lithe, as is required for the art form (Kirkland & Lawrence, 1996). Many companies also spend a significant amount of time on the road touring (Njaradi, 2014). This type of schedule often allows limited time for other activities and social involvement, potentially explaining the mystery surrounding this profession. Therefore, one goal of this study is to increase the understanding of dancers' career experiences.

Most published information on dancers is taken from the Balanchine era[1] (Gordon, 1983; Gray & Kunkel, 2001; Kirkland &

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[1] George Balanchine (1904–1983) is known as one of the greatest choreographers of all time as well as one of the most influential people in twentieth century ballet. He choreographed for and directed some of the most highly regarded dance

Lawrence, 1996). In one such study, Gray and Kunkel (2001) report the development and effects of the female ballet dancer's experiences drawing upon interviews from New York City professional ballet dancers in Gordon's (1983) book, *Off Balance: The Real World of Ballet*. According to the authors, dancers feel deprived of individuality and power, so much so that they have described themselves as properties of their companies and have felt treated as inanimate objects. Dancers can trace their introduction into the dance world to a parent(s) and perceive the ballet community as their family because it is so interconnected. Gray and Kunkel (2001) perceived that dancers feel trapped in an unending childhood where they are constantly ruled by directors and feel dependent on their families [the dance companies]. Although Gray and Kunkel (2001) provide enlightened insights and interviews from actual working professionals in the field, their data are limited in that they were collected in the early 1980s through relatively unsystematic interviews. From a research methods perspective, it is more difficult to compare and contrast dancers' stories in this way (Hannabuss, 1996). Employing a structured interview protocol, the current study aims to determine whether the dancer identity and lifestyle is now portrayed differently than it was approximately three decades ago and to determine whether dancers working in other forms of dance (i.e. jazz, contemporary, musical theater, etc.) think and feel the same way about their careers as ballet dancers from the 1980s.

In another study, Stinson, Blumenfield-Jones, and Van Dyke (1990) studied pre-professional dance students' (ages 16–18, $n = 7$) individual and communal meaning-making regarding dance. The researchers found that the students' identities were intertwined with how they described and experienced dance. The dancers described their training as hard work and constantly sought approval from their instructors. The students found satisfaction in meeting challenges in class, but rarely felt adequate in regards to their bodies or techniques. Similar to Gray and Kunkel (2001), these researchers also found that dancers seek recognition not only for approval but also for validating their existence and effort. Aside from the competitiveness the dancers felt between their classmates, they also likened the dance community to family. Further, the students did not think people outside of the dance culture understood them. This sensation of being set apart from the broader culture causes dancers to self-identify within the group and to feel dependent upon dance as an identity. Also consistent with other studies, these dance students traced their dance careers back to their mothers, yet at the same time reported ownership of their ultimate choice to pursue dance. Dance became such a critical component of their lives that many reported fears (e.g., lack of direction and purpose in life, lack of exercise) regarding a life that did not include dance.

Results from the Stinson et al. (1990) article were that the student participants believed the dance world was fixed in its rules and values, and they expressed feeling powerless to change any of it. Consequently, these students might have an increased likelihood of developing a sense of self that is overwhelmingly influenced or controlled by parents and teachers rather than experiencing the self as largely autonomous. This leads to a cycle wherein the art becomes unchanging because entrance to it is allowed only to those who maintain it as it is. Thus, the researchers questioned whether the dance world can change and evolve and whether the field is suited to educate all dance enthusiasts, not just future professionals. This study aims to explore issues surrounding the dancer identity by obtaining the opinions of those best suited to comment on them, working and retired professional dancers. Interviews of professional dancers were collected and qualitatively analyzed to assess

the perceived identities and motivations of this unique performing artist population.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and data collection

Participants were twenty professional dancers (two men and 18 women) with a mean age of 41.65, SD = 16.42 years. Participants reported dancing professionally for an average of 15.63 years, SD = 8.62 years. When asked which style of dance they most identified as a professional, seven reported ballet, four reported jazz/musical theatre, and nine reported modern/contemporary. Half of the dancers ($n = 10$) considered themselves currently working and the other half ($n = 10$) considered themselves to be retired. Working dancers, for the intentions of this study, are defined as dancers who are still performing; retired dancers are those who no longer perform (Stinson et al., 1990). Recruitment involved notifying dance companies, studios, and social media sites of the research study. The first author interviewed each volunteer participant individually, at a location requested by the individual participant such that each participant would feel comfortable in expressing his/her experiences. These environments were mainly dance studios and nearby coffee shops. All interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 10 and 60 min ($M = 28.98$ min, SD = 12.81 min). The varied interview length is best explained by both differing personality characteristics (i.e. individual differences in talkativeness) and differing comfort levels in speaking about themselves and their careers. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Northwestern University approved this study and participants were compensated for their participation.

The first author conducted all interviews as she had previous experience within the dance field and her experience likely provided a more expansive compilation of data; participants perhaps felt more comfortable opening up to someone who shared an experiential knowledge of their profession. Neither the second nor third author has had experience working as professional dancers. It is thought that their perspectives complement and balance the perspective of the first author to reduce bias.

The interviews were conducted using a modified version of the Life Story Narrative originally developed by McAdams (1985, 2013). This methodical approach consisted of a standardized script and follow-up questions based on a life-story theory of human identity (McAdams, 1996). Beginning in the adolescent years, people construct and internalize narratives of the self, in order to provide their lives with some sense of temporal continuity and meaning. As such, life stories reconstruct the past and imagine the future in such a way as to provide a culturally-meaningful account of how a person has become the person that he or she is becoming. The Life Story Interview asks people to think of their entire lives as novels and to describe chapters and particular scenes, such as high points, low points, and turning points. The Life Story Narrative approach to collecting data from our population was chosen to narrow the scope of potential responses elicited from the participants regarding their career experiences and also as a means to strategically compare and contrast aspects of their career experiences.

The modified version used for this study asked participants to consider their dance careers as novels and each question as a scene or chapter within the story. Each of the six questions asked participants to reflect upon a specific scene or episode in the story of their careers. They were also asked to elaborate upon the significance of the event in their lives as dancers and individuals. The six scenes included (1) a moment that explains why they began dancing, (2) the moment they chose the profession, (3) a high point (most exciting or joyous time), (4) a low point (most negative or