



“My day-to-day person wasn’t there; it was like another me”: A qualitative study of spiritual experiences during peak performance in ballet dance



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ABSTRACT

This study reviews spiritual lived experiences (secular and religious) reported during peak performance in the performing art of ballet. This review is located in academic discussions of mystical and spiritual experiences in the Western cultural tradition. A small sample of seven selected former professional ballet dancers was interviewed using qualitative research with an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. The findings made evident four major themes: the peak performance lived experience was ‘extraordinary’; the experience continued in a ‘post-performance high’; the experience was described as spiritual; and an overall love for ballet. These findings not only confirm previous research but also provide in-depth insights into the spiritual aspect of peak performance in a way other studies in contemporary times do not. A summary table of the findings is included.

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1. Introduction

The primary focus of this research is spiritual lived experiences during peak performance. Such experiences have been the subject of a considerable amount of scholarly research over the decades. In the discipline of psychology of religion alone, spiritual experiences have been studied from perspectives such as art, music, nature, meditation, psychosis, sex, stress, alcohol, drugs, birth and death (Watson, 2007).

However, when discussion about spirituality in peak performance takes place, there is often a lack of clarity surrounding frequently used terms such as ‘mystical’ and ‘spiritual’. These terms, as well as more recent additional terms such as peak experiences, optimal experiences, states of ‘flow’ and being ‘in the zone’, are often used inter-changeably in literature. The aim of this project was to understand the nature of these subjective lived experiences during peak performance and the meaning people made of them.

Traditionally mystical experiences were confined to the religious domain and involved altered states of consciousness and frequently a ‘divine’ encounter (Watson, 2011). Examples range from biblical narratives where God spoke to Adam and Eve in

the Garden of Eden to the present day, when He inspired in Pope Benedict during a “mystical episode” the “absolute desire” to retire (Kington, 2013).

However, with the advent of spirituality studies in the early 1900s, pioneered by the first major American psychologist William James (1842–1910), there was a distinct shift in perception. Mystical experiences were seen not only from a strictly religious perspective but also from a secular point of view. James was the first researcher to seriously examine the phenomenology of religious experience in his classic book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). He found mystical states were “extra-marginal” and “outside of primary consciousness” and occurred not only through religious practices such as praying, but also through secular activities such as walking in nature and even taking drugs (James, 1982).

The discoveries by a prominent pioneer of humanistic psychology, Abraham Maslow (1908–1970), furthered James’ work. During his studies of the lives of prominent people for his landmark research into ‘self-actualisation’ Maslow (1987) made an unexpected finding. One common characteristic was reported: frequent mystical experiences. Maslow called these episodes ‘peak experiences’ and found they typically involved heightened positive emotional feelings, altered states of consciousness and a transcendence of the self.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (1988) foundational psychological research into optimal experiences and states of ‘flow’ builds on the work of Abraham Maslow and marks the next major milestone.

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For several decades Csikszentmihalyi (1988) studied the lived experiences of people during intrinsically motivated behaviour. One unexpected finding was that diverse groups of people such as surgeons, rock climbers, artists and dancers all described their experiences in similar terms. Csikszentmihalyi called these experiences ‘optimal experiences’ and described them using the metaphor ‘flow’. These altered states of consciousness included a “transcendence of the self” which was “beyond the realm of human experience” and “stands out in its integrity” as a “higher state than normal everyday life”.

Studies into spirituality in sport over the past three decades have also focused significantly on lived experiences during peak performance. As Hutch (2012) notes, while lived experiences in sport performance can be ordinary and routine, they become out-of-the-ordinary and non-routine at times of significant success. Hutch suggests that during such times “cosmic reframing”, the recognition of spirituality incarnate, frequently takes place. Other research has consistently confirmed that peak performance in sport has the ability to take athletes beyond their “ordinary sense of self” and into “spiritual territory” which was thought to be “mystical, occult or religious” (Murphy & White, 1995).

It is acknowledged that interpreting altered states of consciousness is difficult and many psychologists would require more than a self-report to conclude the reported state was different from normal consciousness (Matlin, 1995). However, as this study is phenomenological, that is, based on lived experiences, self-reports have been accepted as ‘sufficient proof’.

To add to the body of knowledge about peak performance, particularly in the performing arts, a qualitative study was undertaken with a small group of former professional ballet dancers. Ballet was chosen as the focus area for a number of reasons. As a performing art, ballet, like phenomenology of religion, falls under the arts-humanities umbrella. Additionally many former renowned professional ballet dancers have reported spiritual experiences during peak performance. Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky entered a trance-like state and was able to see himself from outside of his body (Murphy & White, 1995); Anna Pavlova experienced “the purest expression of every emotion, earthly and spiritual” (Classical Ballet News, 2013); and Margot Fonteyn found “the soul can be released and the spirit can shine forth” (Fonteyn, 1979). This focus area also builds on previous research in sport because ballet dancers, with their strict training regimes, are regarded as elite athletes as well as performing artists (McCann, 2014).

As qualitative research focusing specifically on spiritual experiences in ballet dance is rare, a further objective was to provide additional in-depth insights about lived experiences in peak performance to add to the current body of knowledge. These findings would also make a contribution to, and have relevance across, multiple disciplines such as: studies in religion, psychology of religion, psychology, sports psychology, spirituality in sport, and the performing arts.

1.1. Related ballet/dance research

Quantitative research by Fave and Massimini (1988) studied the changing contexts of ‘flow’ when dance was performed as a work or leisure activity. Dance was classified as a work activity for respondents who practiced their skills every day and as a leisure activity for those who practiced less than four hours a week. A questionnaire was circulated to sixty modern dancers (including ballet dancers) ranging in age from eighteen to forty-four. Respondents included students enrolled in second to final year dance training and dance teachers. Only fifty per cent of participants in the leisure group (second to fourth year students) mentioned dance as a flow activity, but this increased to one hundred per cent in the professional work group (final year students and dance teachers).

Phenomenological research carried out by dance educators Bond and Stinson (2000) into the lived experiences of children during dance is another related study. Data was collected from six hundred school children aged between three and eighteen in the USA, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. The children’s dance experience ranged from one or two workshops to many years, and the emphasis was on creative forms of Western dance in educational settings.

The study found young people placed a high value on dance education because it provided them with bodily, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual freedom. But the evidence Bond and Stinson found most surprising, which they had not intended to look for, was the existence of what they called ‘superordinary’ phenomena. Experiences during dance which were significantly different from the everyday were consistently reported across gender, age groups and cultures. These experiences included heightened states of arousal, loss of awareness of time or place, awareness of another ‘real’ or ‘inner’ self, and “Unnamed” spiritual experiences. Comments made by students included:

When I’m dancing . . . I have my own little world I can go to. Then I come back to the earth
It felt like there was a god or a spirit inside of me. It was making me move.
It puts you above the normal plane of living. . . I think that dancers are above angels.
When I dance I’m more of a soul.
I become engrossed in a magic spell. Dancing is a spark that should be felt deep inside.
You find a different person that you didn’t know about yourself before.

2. Method

The aim of this study was to review the spiritual lived experiences (secular and religious) reported during peak performance in the performing art of ballet. This review was located in academic discussions of mystical and spiritual experiences in the Western cultural tradition. A small sample set of seven selected former professional ballet dancers was interviewed using qualitative research with an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. Additionally, as there is often a lack of clarity surrounding frequently used terms such as mystical, spiritual, peak, optimal, ‘in the zone’ and ‘flow’ experiences, a further aim was to understand the subjective nature of these lived experiences and the meaning people made of them.

As well as being used in psychology, IPA is becoming accepted and being used more broadly across the human, social and health sciences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

IPA allows participants to tell their own stories through conversation. The theme is introduced by the interviewer and participants choose the specific experience to talk about. The aim is to obtain detailed descriptions of these experiences, not simply general opinions (Kvale, 1996). Another important perspective of IPA is that researchers take into account their own values, assumptions and biases during the research process rather than pretending it is possible to ‘bracket’ them out and become a scientific, detached observer (Pembroke, 2011).

IPA texts typically provide: essential data on which to base findings; the basis of interpretations; and the main medium for presenting and communicating findings (Flick, 2009). The overall aim is to uncover qualitative knowledge expressed in normal language and to discover central themes and meaning by interpreting not only what is said but also how it is said (Kvale, 1996).

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