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# DANCERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS \*

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KEY WORDS: Dance, Perception, Psychological skills.

ABSTRACT: Psychological skills have been shown to influence the quality of sporting performance and the enjoyment of participation. Although dance obviously involves physical activity and places emphasis on performance it is not traditionally included in discussions of sport psychology. Before investigating the effects of a psychological skills training program on dancers, it is imperative that it is first determined which psychological skills may already be used by dancers, and which skills may be of benefit if developed further. A group of 22 dancers were interviewed to ascertain their beliefs about their own mental strengths and weaknesses, as well as what role they felt that mental skills could play in dance performance. Results indicated that whereas motivational skills were quite strong, strengthening the areas of arousal control, concentration, imagery, self-confidence, and self-talk could be beneficial. Dance may be able to provide sport psychology with a valuable domain for study which inherently focuses on performance rather than outcome.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Danza, Percepción, Habilidades Psicológicas.

RESUMEN: Se ha demostrado que las capacidades psicológicas tienen influencia sobre la calidad del rendimiento deportivo y el disfrute de la participación. A pesar de que la danza incluye obviamente actividad física y pone énfasis en el rendimiento, no ha sido incluida tradicionalmente en las discusiones acerca de la psicología del deporte. Antes de investigar los efectos de un programa de entrenamiento de

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las capacidades psicológicas en bailarines, es imperativo que se determine que habilidades psicológicas son usadas habitualmente por los bailarines, así como que habilidades pueden ser beneficiosas si se desarrollan con posterioridad.

Se entrevistó a un grupo de 22 bailarines para evaluar sus creencias acerca de sus puntos fuertes y débiles mentales, así como qué papel deberían ocupar las habilidades mentales respecto a la práctica de la danza. Los resultados indicaron que mientras las habilidades motivacionales son muy importantes,

puede ser beneficioso reforzar las áreas de control de la activación, la concentración, la práctica imaginada, la autoconfianza y las autoinstrucciones verbalizadas.

La danza puede ser capaz de proporcionar a la psicología del deporte un dominio válido para ser estudiado, ya que se focaliza inherentemente sobre el rendimiento más que sobre el resultado.

### Introduction

Many studies have demonstrated the usefulness of psychological skills when attempting to enhance physical performance (For a review see Greenspan & Feltz, 1989). Traditionally programs involving mental skills training and physical performances have concentrated on competitive sport. A large performance area which has not customarily been incorporated in the domain of sport is dance. Although dance obviously involves great physical activity and places great emphasis on performance, it is not traditionally included in discussions of sport psychology. With applied sport psychology focusing on performance enhancement and dancers focusing on performance, it seems logical that applied sport psychology may have something to offer to the area of dance.

The literature available on psychology and dance is extremely

limited. The area appears to have been equally ignored by sport and the performing arts. In a book titled **The Psychology of Performing Arts** dance is completely overlooked (Wilson, 1985). No systematic approach to the investigation of mental skills and dance has been reported. McQueen (1986) published a short essay on the use of Modified Autogenic Training (MAT) for improving dance performance. The MAT program is described in the essay, but no data is presented. A laboratory study by Jette, Shick, and Stoner (1985) investigated the concentration of modern dancers during balancing tasks. The summary of this study was that concentration is an important foundation for performance in dance, but that success in performing balancing tasks was not related to the direction of concentration of the dancer. A third study examined the psychophysiological tension of professional ballet dancers (Helin, 1989). Physiological and self-estimated reports of mental tension demonstrated that principals' activation during performances was increased more than that of soloists and corps de ballet dancers when compared to baseline values. Additionally, although subjective mental tension tended to be highest during final dress rehearsals

and first-night performances, some artists reported excessively high levels of mental tension whereas others had difficulties activating themselves particularly during shows performed many times.

Although the limited literature suggests that concentration and arousal control may be the most important mental skills for dance performance (Helin, 1989; Jette, et al., 1985), no research exists which indicates the appropriate content of a mental skills training program for dance. Before becoming involved with a group of dancers as a sport psychologist, implementing a psychological skills training program, and evaluating its effectiveness, it is imperative to first determine the psychological demands of dance performance. As with any proper mental skills training program, the needs of the participants need to be assessed prior to any intervention. The purpose of this paper is to explore what psychological skills may be already generally used by dancers and which skills may be of benefit to dancers if developed further.

## **Method**

Twenty two dancers (7 males and 15 females) were interviewed to ascertain their beliefs about their own mental strengths and weaknesses, as well as what role they felt that mental skills could play in dance performance and the enjoyment of participation in dance. All of the dancers interviewed either had professional dance experience or were training with the intent of becoming professional dancers. The dancers represented a

wide variety of dance styles with many individuals participating in multiple styles. The most popular styles were classical ballet, contemporary, and jazz. Other styles which some of the subjects participated in were folk, tap, cabaret, and improvisation. The participants had been dancing for an average of 10.5 years (range 2 - 16.5 years).

Notices were placed on bulletin boards asking for dancers who were interested in discussing the mental aspects of dance performance to sign-up for posted interview times. The interviews were conducted individually in rooms next to either the rehearsal halls or class studios.

The interviewer was a university lecturer in sport psychology. The dancers were aware that the interviewer believed that the professions of sport psychology and dance may have something to offer each other. They were also aware that the interviewer was a former professional figure skater and the sister of a dancer.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Fictitious names were assigned to each subject. Inductive analysis created raw data themes with direct quotes, higher order themes, and finally more general areas of mental skills. These general themes were then reanalysed by determining the frequency of citation across subjects.

## **Results**

### **Motivation**

Responses to the question «Why do you dance» tended to fall into one of three main categories: a) the

satisfaction of doing something I'm good at, b) the feeling of movement, or c) the chance to perform/entertain others. None of the dancers failed to come up with an immediate reason or reasons, and none of them danced because of others' expectations or because they felt they had to participate. Aside from possible positive reinforcement from audiences when performing, the majority of responses could be classified as intrinsic reasons for dancing. Intrinsic motivation appeared to be high.

Few respondents expressed that motivation to attend classes or rehearsals was ever a problem. Most actually agreed that they were always keen to go to classes. Some expressed that when they were tired (particularly early morning classes), they realised that even though they did not feel like going, once they got there they'd get into it and enjoy it.

"Sometimes I make myself go when I don't feel like it and then you feel better once you start. As soon as you start after a couple of exercises, you feel so pleased and relieved that you made it to class and you were all excited and it is not as bad as what you imagined it would be." (Lucy)

"I want to go because I know that once I get used to the work load again, because I'm sort of doing a few other things as well, and that's made me tired, but once I start getting into classes—as soon as I got here, like the first five minutes of classes, a bit bleary-eyed, knowing... but once you get going it's «Ahhh». You know what I mean, you get some adrenalin

going." (Andrew)

Others promoted the idea that going to classes and rehearsals was just part of a routine, and therefore they never thought about not going.

Any motivation problems tended to appear at the opposite extreme. Instead of not having the motivation to rehearse or attend class, a few of the dancers stated that they danced when they were injured or sick, even when doing so made the injury or illness worse.

"Once I've got an injury I don't worry about it, I just keep going, keep pushing myself." (Andrew)

"I find it very hard to tell myself when to stop. I've danced through injuries. It's very hypocritical, because I know, I'm aware of my body and what I should and shouldn't be doing, but even though sometimes I'm injured, I'll still dance through an injury." (Roger)

"I tend to push myself too much sometimes. If I'm sick I do go to class. The only way it really stops me sometimes is if I'm just about half dead." (Helena)

When injured, dancers were expected to watch classes. Although a few found they could learn something while in the role or spectator, no one enjoyed the role. Many would rather dance on an injury instead of observe. Additionally there was the underlying stress of others improving and looking good when the individual could not participate because of illness or injury.

### **Anxiety**

With the emphasis within dance on presenting oneself on stage in front of audiences, dancers were asked about stage fright and nervousness. A few of

the dancers had had specific incidents where they forgot steps or lost their places, but generally speaking most of the dancers experienced nervousness when they were in the wings waiting to go on, and then felt fine once they were on stage.

“Before hand I was feeling really hyperactive and nervous and running around and going, «Oh my God, what am I going to do». When I got out there I was shaking like crazy. I think I just did it, and I got over it. I just sort of went, «OK, this is it». Everything went well, so that was it. After that I felt pretty good.” (Andrew)

“I panicked. It was terrible. I was going over in my head everything that we did in this piece in the movement, but I think that it made it worse, because I knew what I was doing, but because I was nervous, I couldn't concentrate and you almost talk yourself into not knowing what you're doing. «Oh, I don't know what I'm doing, I really don't know what I'm doing». It just gets worse and worse.” (Lucy)

A common strategy for dealing with nerves was to see nervousness as a sign of readiness. Many respondents explained the relationship between nervousness and performance along the same lines as the inverted-U relationship between arousal and performance. Not to be at all nervous is bad because the performance will be flat, but too much nervousness will also cause performance to suffer.

One factor which appears to influence the degree of nervousness experienced by many dancers is who is in the audience. Friends, relatives, and past teachers affected the dancers. Many stated that their

presence made them more nervous, but a few stated that their presence makes them perform better because they try to impress.

“Like your old dancing teacher or someone is there. It doesn't affect me in a bad way, it actually turns out to be quite a good way, because you try to put on your best, best performance. If it's somebody you're trying to impress, then usually things go quite well. Sometimes it can get me a little bit nervous at the beginning, then I think, «no, it will be all right», and I seem to forget about them in the performance.” (Helena)

In addition to having to deal with their own nerves, many performances involve dancing with one or more other people. Dancing with others who are nervous was dealt with in different ways. Many attempted to reassure and calm the nervous individual, where as a few are so involved with their own performance that they tended to ignore others. When partnering, one person's nervousness could lead to the other person losing trust, loss of trust creates more nervousness, resulting in a continuing cycle. Some people used this argument to make themselves more nervous, others used it as rational to make themselves strong so their partners could also be strong.

### **Mistakes**

Nervousness during a performance was sometimes increased when coming to a place in a piece where a mistake was made in a previous performance. Negative self-talk was often evident. Several dancers made comments such as, «I try not to make the mistake» instead of thinking about

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	<i>% of dancers</i>
<i>During classes</i>	
Things totally unrelated to class	64%
The feeling of the movement	50%
What the movement should look like	36%
Picking up the steps/ aspects of technique	27%
<i>During rehearsals</i>	
Getting the choreography/ how I fit in with others	50%
Things unrelated to rehearsal	27%
Understanding the intention/mood of the piece	27%
What it should look like	27%
What it should feel like	9%
That I look OK to others	9%
<i>During performances</i>	
The audience	32%
Having a good time/enjoying it	27%
Being in character or portraying the mood	23%
Appearance/what things should look like	18%
Music	14%
How it feels	9%
Not falling over/ everything that could go wrong	9%
Nothing/ try to be blank	9%
Things totally unrelated	5%
Past corrections	5%

Table 1. *Summary of Descriptions of Attentional Focus.*

what it was they should do.

Most respondents felt that they were fairly good about continuing with a performance after a mistake. They felt they had been trained to keep going no matter what, and to expect little things to go wrong. Most of them managed to put mistakes out of their minds when they were still on stage, but as soon as they got backstage reflected on how horrible they were. Most agreed that they always think they were worse than they actually were. They realised that they may have made a tiny error which probably was not even noticed by anyone in the

audience, yet even though they rationally acknowledged this, they got very upset afterwards. It appears as though dancers are constantly reassuring themselves and each other either about what will happen or what has already happened.

In addition to dealing with their own mistakes, dancers talked about potential catastrophes which had occurred on stage due to sound faults, misplaced props, or falling scenery. These unplanned errors which were outside of their control or responsibility did not tend to bother them. Sometimes momentary stress was

experienced as they tried to figure out strategies for dealing with an external fault, but the aftermath rarely resulted in negative feelings.

**Attention/Concentration**

The dancers were asked what they tended to focus on or think about while they were dancing. The answers were

dependent on when and where they were dancing (e.g., class, rehearsal, performance). Some of the responses were dependent on the style of dance involved. For example a few dancers focused on the feeling of the movement in contemporary dance but focused on body line or what the body looks like in classical dance.

	<i>% of dancers</i>
Before performance	41%
No set time or purpose	32%
Definitely not before performance	9%
To build confidence	9%
To choreograph	9%
To calm myself down	9%
At home	5%
Don't - images are never successful	5%
Systematically once - best performance ever	5%
Used with trampolining but not dance	5%

Table 2. *Use of Imagery (When and/or Why).*

The most common response about the focus of attention during class was on something totally unrelated to class. Examples included personal relationships, going home, travelling, paying bills, and buying socks. Understandably during rehearsals the most prevalent focus of attention was on picking up the choreography of the piece, yet more than a quarter of the dancers reported thinking about things unrelated to rehearsal. Reported attentional focuses during performances were the most varied. Only one dancer reported thinking about events unrelated to performance. See Table 1 for a summary of attentional focuses.

Many of the dancers mentioned that

they needed to work at improving their concentration, particularly during class. All but two recognised that concentration was a skill.

**Imagery**

All but two of the dancers used imagery. When asked to describe how and what they imaged some interesting practices emerged. Half of the dancers depicted either standard internal imagery (seeing the external world from their own eyes and feeling themselves move) or standard external imagery (seeing themselves from the outside as if watching themselves on video). Five dancers used a combination of these two standard methods. The remaining four dancers

used imagery techniques which have not been readily reported by athletes. Two subjects imaged internally but with no feeling. They would see the visual feedback which they would normally experience while dancing, but had no sense of kinaesthetic awareness during the images. The remaining two dancers imaged themselves from behind, one using external imagery and the other using a combination of internal and external imagery.

"I used to see it like I was watching from the back. I'm standing behind myself and I could see myself do all these things... Usually whenever I was thinking about it I was always watching myself from behind. Probably so I could see the steps that I was doing." (Andrew)

"I view it from behind... I'm not in the audience, I'm like - here I am, and I'm a dancer directly behind me doing exactly what I'm doing...I'm doing both, I'm seeing myself and doing it." (Leanne)

The subjects reported a variety of uses for imagery and also reported using it at different times (See Table 2).

Imagery was used to build confidence, calm oneself down, prepare for performance, and choreograph. The most common time for using imagery was before performance, although many had no set time for imagery. Some dancers

recognised the potential of imagery yet never or rarely used it systematically.

### **Self-Confidence**

Almost all of the dancers interviewed stated that self-confidence was related to performance. If self-confidence was high the performance was good. If self-confidence was low, performance was bad. A few dancers appeared to have a strong and realistic level of self-confidence, one which they were quite comfortable with. These dancers would also probably be seen as others as self-assured. One dancer came across as arrogant and egotistical. Whether this person was over-confident (false confidence) or justified in the level of confidence is unknown. Most of the subjects, however, felt that their own level of self-confidence was not always as high or strong as it ideally could be. Even so, very few dancers felt that they could have any control over their self-confidence. It was seen as something that you either have or you don't have. Many respondents seemed excited or amazed by the idea of looking at self-confidence as a skill.

There was one exception to this. One dancer felt that self-confidence is undesirable because one doesn't want to be egotistical. Whether this was due to unpleasant interactions with others who have seemed egotistical, a sincere belief that self-confidence is bad, or a different operational definition of self-confidence was not determined.



## Implications

Based on the information gained from these interviews, it appears that enhancing the mental skills of dancers may prove to be beneficial. One mental skill area which did not appear to need improvement was motivation. Topics such as boredom, burnout, or lack of desire never surfaced. Aside from dancing when sick or injured, the only motivational concern seemed more of a lack of arousal problem for early morning classes.

Although major episodes of stage fright were rarely reported, many reported unpleasant feelings immediately prior to going on stage. Stress was also mentioned when discussing mistakes on stage, auditions, or analysing mistakes made in class or on stage. A general introduction to controlling arousal levels may be of use. Relaxation may be particularly relevant to some when it comes to trying to sleep after performances.

More than half of the dancers described situations where they concentrated on things completely unrelated to dance particularly during classes. A few had actively worked at improving this skill, but most just expressed a need to do so.

Imagery emerged as a surprisingly underused area. Many students mentioned that during classes or rehearsals movements were taught to them by having the feeling of it explained to them (particularly in contemporary dance). Even so, less than half of the dancers appeared to use imagery to enhance performance or help remember movements. Only one dancer recited systematic use of imagery. Expanding the use of imagery by dancers may be beneficial. The development of this skill definitely bears investigation.

Although self-talk was never specifically addressed, it did appear in many of the interviews. This most frequently happened when talking about making mistakes. Several dancers tended to repeat to themselves what they shouldn't do. Negative self-talk also arose in discussions of self-confidence. Numerous respondents continually made negative comparisons of themselves to others. Self-talk and self-confidence could both be improved.

## Discussion

Although this paper has not investigated the implementation and evaluation of a mental skills training program with dancers, it has outlined where mental skills may influence dance performance. Future research may want to explore the effectiveness of an applied mental skills training program. Sport psychology may have something to offer to dance. Additionally, dance may have something to offer sport psychology. Sport psychologists often suggest that athletes should focus on performance rather than outcome (e.g., Burton, 1989). Dance provides a domain where performance is inherently the focus. Apart from exams or auditions, outcome is rarely of immediate concern to dancers. Discovering how different mental skills or factors interact in such