

## Socially constructed bodies in American dance classrooms.

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### **Abstract:**

This article explores body, power and pedagogical issues related to a study in dance education. The study investigated the body perceptions of participant student teachers in a somatics and creativity project within a university level instructional setting. During this project somatic (body-mind) practices were used to explore body perceptions and image. The students then created what they called an 'interactive movement performance', which explored the issues raised in class. It explored how these body perceptions are influenced by society and the dance world. During the project the participants were asked questions about previous experiences in dance education, and how they have learned to perceive their bodies in reference to a model weight and body ideal.

The initial qualitative/postpositivist analysis, from class discussion, interviews, observation and document analysis, indicated that the participants' previous experiences in dance did reflect an emphasis on 'ideal body' myths in the dance world. Students also expressed the value of somatic practice as a tool for body awareness and consciousness of these socio-political issues in traditional dance education. The students tended to tie somatics to an inner authority that resists technologies of normalisation and dominant meaning systems in dance and society. Somatic practice facilitated a dialogue through which they realised and expressed the pressures to meet an imposed bodily standard. Further, it allowed them the space to explore a connection to their bodies rather than the disconnection that comes from attempting to meet standards of bodily ideals. This article focuses on the themes of pedagogy and power that emerged from the study.

**Keywords:** body image | dance education | dance pedagogy | body perceptions

### **Article:**

Recently, a number of educational theorists have problematised<sup>1</sup> the term 'empowerment'. They have suggested that although teachers sometimes claim to help students learn, in actuality they may silence them or train them to act docilely (Ellsworth, 1992; Green, 1999; Lather, 1991; McWilliam, 1994). For example, in her often cited scholarly piece, 'Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy', Elizabeth Ellsworth

(1992) raises some pedagogical concerns regarding teacher authority during her research with film students. Ellsworth (1992) suggests that critical or emancipatory educators, who are trying to change the ways we teach, often assume that they have privileged knowledge which they can use to help 'free' students from oppressive dominant meaning systems. In order to 'empower' students, critical educators often offer access to methods that they believe may liberate students from false knowledge or what is often referred to as 'false consciousness'. But Ellsworth (1992) suggests that the concept of false consciousness implies that there is a 'true consciousness'; she raises concern about any educational approach or perspective that places authority on a real truth that is not also looked at critically or problematised.

In the name of 'empowerment', educators may sincerely attempt to free students from falsely imposed values or systems of knowledge. Ellsworth (1992) points out, however, that progressive educators cannot be free from power relationships themselves. Rather, in an attempt to free, educate, or empower students, teachers often inadvertently begin to speak for them, assume they know what is right for them, or even abuse them. She cautions educators to be aware and reflexive about how they attempt to 'help' students 'understand' the 'truth' and how power plays out in the classroom regardless of liberatory intentions.

Similarly, dance is often thought of as a 'freeing' art form, whereby performers use the body to 'express' themselves in a myriad of ways. Artists in general are often considered renegades who break rules, and free us from an imposed dominant culture. Dance educators often attempt to 'free' up students or open them up so that their bodies may be used as 'expressive' instruments. Particularly in modern dance, educators and artists often believe in dance as a liberating experience and teachers often focus on offering students access to an ability to free themselves through movement. Yet, dance teachers do not always attempt to be self-reflexive regarding the ways the student dance body may be mechanised or habituated into an ideal form that represents the teacher's learned belief system and presumed ideas about what the body should be and do. It is not common to find dance educators reflecting on how power enables them to mould student bodies and standardise bodily behaviour in class.

Dance educators may ask themselves whether they really free students to be expressive movers and empower them to use their bodies effectively. And if dance students, like Ellsworth's film students, begin to ask whether or not they are 'truly' empowered, dance educators and researchers may need to reassess commonly held beliefs and traditional pedagogical approaches and strategies for teaching dance.

I offer these considerations as an introduction to my study in which I investigated the body perceptions of dance education students in dance during a somatics and creativity project within a university setting in the United States. During the study and accompanying course titled, 'The Gendered Body in Dance Education', somatic practice was used as a tool to investigate body perceptions and the experiences of these undergraduate dance education majors. This teaching and research project explored how these body perceptions have been influenced by American

society and the dance world, particularly in reference to gender. For example, the participants were asked questions about previous experiences in dance, and how they have learned to perceive their bodies in reference to a specific weight and body ideal. Class movement explorations, somatic exercises and discussion were used as tools to explore social influences on the body. In a previous article, I presented the research and discussed a number of themes that emerged from the investigation, particularly regarding the myth of the ideal body in the dance world (Green, 1999). As is common in many large and complex qualitative research projects, I presented findings from a fuller investigation based on analysis around the theme of 'the ideal body'. In this article, I focus on specific pedagogical themes, findings, and implications for dance education. My focus here is on the topic of educating 'the student body' in dance.

### The Study

As a recap or review of the fuller investigation, I draw on my preliminary introduction and analysis from my aforementioned article. There I pointed out a common dominant focus in Western dance education, on an externalised view of the body, a view that tends to objectify the dancer's body and requires students to strive to achieve a specific 'look' while being 'corrected' so that the students perform 'proper' dance technique. I want to point out that this does not imply that technique is not valid or that all dance teachers focus more on outward appearance than a sense of inner authority—or that it is not valid to look at the dancer's body from an outside view. However, through a number of body stories told by the participants, I highlighted an often dominant focus on an objectified student dance body that, without inner reflection, may lead to oppression and abuse.

As a qualitative researcher, I also discussed my personal struggle with an often adopted approach to teaching that reflects a particular power relationship between dance teacher and student. By this I mean an over-riding approach that places an emphasis on the dance teacher as an all-knowing expert and requires that students somatically detach from the inner messages of their bodies, consequently giving their bodies to their teachers (Green, 1999). As a somatic educator I have been concerned about body issues. I personally value proprioceptive awareness and the ability of students to listen to the inner messages of the soma. As a researcher who has been interested in socio-cultural issues related to the body and dance education, I have been interested in postpositivist methodologies that allow me to investigate such issues within a broader and more socially critical context.

### Somatic Authority

By somatic authority I mean a focus on and affirmation of what goes on inside the body rather than a sole focus on what the body looks like or how it 'should' behave. In other words, beyond simply objectifying students and looking at the external appearance of the body, somatic educators tend to include students in the process of learning dance by also bringing awareness to inner sensory and proprioceptive processes. Don Johnson (1992) refers to this as sensual

authority or experiential authority. According to Johnson, and a number of other somatic theorists, Western culture creates the myth of a body/mind split that removes us from the experience of bodies and often results in disconnecting us from our somas as living processes. As a result we are often numbed to the awareness of internal body messages and the power of our connected selves. Somatic dance educators are beginning to attempt to help students take ownership of their bodies through attention to inner bodily processes and the 'living body' or soma. They attempt to use proprioception as a tool to educational practice in dance.

Of course many dance educators in diverse areas such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States have been using Rudolf Laban's qualitative work as a framework for creative exploration and kinesthetic movement experience in dance classrooms. Laban's work (see Bloomfield, 1988; Davies, 1988) has been tied to a student-centred approach to dance education because it tends to encourage movement exploration and creativity, while recognising qualitative elements of movement description and use. In fact a number of American educators have described Laban's work as a somatic practice. For example Martha Eddy (1992) says,

Laban Movement Analysis, based on the theories of Rudolf von Laban and developed in the U.S. by physical therapist Irmgard Bartenieff and her students, is a type of somatic description that captures subtle qualitative changes in human movement and has far-reaching implications for appreciating the motivations underlying movement. This form of analysis includes an understanding of how body parts interrelate for effective weight shift and level change, what spatial pulls are required within the body, an identification of the direction of movement through space using a sophisticated reference system (within geometric forms), and a view to how the body changes shape ...Major principles from this system contribute to a new philosophy of dance training. For example, by considering the need for recuperation after a period of exertion, teachers and choreographers are reminded to include variation within movement patterns and to allow absorption time for the learner. Laban's principles have provided the core of movement education in the British and Canadian school systems for decades (1991, p. 92).

Many somatic systems are closely associated with Laban's work because they address inner qualitative feeling states and kinesthetic awareness. Perhaps one reason why somatics is becoming more valued in the US today is partly due to the influence of thinkers such as Laban.

Further, it should be recognised that a number of dance education scholars from a number of areas have begun to call for more of an inner bodily focus in dance education, particularly in university level curricula (for example, see Asker, 1994; Bannon & Sanderson, 2000; Eddy, 1991/92; Engelsrud, 1988; Fortin, 1998; Green, 1999, 2000; Holdaway, 1994; Kovich, 1994). My point here is that there has been a recent growing shift in the US, as well as other countries, particularly regarding university and adult classes, to more of an appreciation for inner proprioceptive awareness and somatic authority in dance. A number of dance teachers have begun to explore somatic practices as part of dance education and training, and although somatic

use is not dominant in dance classes in the US, its influence is growing. Interestingly, in the UK the situation is quite different. While technique classes are traditional in American dance classes, schools, and universities, in the UK, dance education in schools, colleges, and universities has traditionally focused on the individual creativity, with the professionally trained dancer being a relatively late influence.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding the differences in degree of somatic authority and technical skill in dance education, I do believe that university 'technique classes' in the United States still do not ordinarily reflect a somatic approach or perspective, although this is changing and as I previously said, somatic theory and practice is finding its way into technique classes. There is still much debate about whether or not, and to what degree, university dance educators in the United States offer students opportunities for body awareness and somatic exploration (see Green, 2000). My sense has been that somatic authority is still not valued in most classes and that a body-mind split still pervades the dance culture as well as society in general. Johnson (1992) suggests that dominant cultures often perpetuate this body-mind split in an effort to maintain somatic weakness. He asserts that by disconnecting us from our sensory selves through the imposition of external models of 'ideal bodies' the dominant culture maintains control as we begin to distrust our own sensory impulses and give up our somatic authority.

In line with Johnson's (1992) claim that disconnection leads to social control, somatic authority in dance may be viewed in relationship to Michel Foucault's (1979) idea of docile bodies. Foucault, a French postmodern thinker who looked at power and its relationship to knowledge (1979, 1980), was particularly interested in studying power in institutions. He addressed the extremes of standardising bodily behaviour that have characterised institutions such as military schools, prisons and mental hospitals, and believed that schools are primarily designed to train docile citizens. His studies similarly approach the body as a site of social and political control and power.

However, Foucault did not explain power and control as an external force placed on subjects from without through prohibition or force. He rejected power as repressive but rather explained it through discourse regarding the ways it is exercised through explicit laws and codes requiring citizens to be under constant surveillance. Foucault did not claim that the body can provide us with a grounded 'truth' or help us to find a true self. He spoke about 'technologies of the self' that are part of regimes of power. They are techniques that society requires of people to discipline themselves. As a result, society produces what Foucault has referred to as 'docile bodies', which are bodies that are self regulated and habituated. In this sense, the training of docile bodies in dance removes the student from a sense of somatic authority through techniques that require habituated movement patterns and regulate the body as a training instrument in dance. If Foucault studied dance education as culture he might say that students' bodies in the dance class are constantly under surveillance.

This may be why it may also be problematic to speak of somatic authority as another panacea for dancers. As I will explain later, somatics may also be a 'technique' that requires students to 'liberate themselves' by finding a specific 'truth' through personal 'experience'. If bodily experience is socially constructed any experience that moves toward a universal truth is impossible. This is why I attempted to present somatics, not as a panacea or answer to 'bad' dance training or education, but as a tool to explore body perceptions. Yet, I acknowledge that any attention to inner experience begs us to ask how real somatic experiences are for students.

## Methodology

Given the nature of the research problem and the practical context of the instructional setting, a qualitative/postpositivist,<sup>3</sup> or naturalistic inquiry approach and design was used. According to Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1989, pp. 254–255), in naturalistic inquiry, the researcher cannot know what constructions will be introduced during the investigation, and cannot predict beforehand what claims, concerns and issues will arise. While the initial research problem and general procedures for data collection and analysis provided parameters and a general guide, I was purposefully open to emerging patterns throughout the study. It is true that an openness to emerging patterns is a characteristic of any good researcher and not limited to any particular approach. However, in qualitative research the research design itself tends to emerge through the particular context of the research (Green & Stinson, 1999).

I began the investigation by announcing the new experimental course, 'The Gendered Body in Dance Education', to dance education students who were preparing for student teaching at the university. This course was designed as both a pedagogical endeavor and an opportunity for me to collect data for the research project. An all female sample was selected because I was attempting to look at the relationship between the body in dance with particular reference to gender. I wanted to explore the body experiences of females in dance. Since most dance classes in the United States consist predominantly of girls and young women, I thought that it was important to see how these females address the issue of bodily ideals in dance.

I used a 'snowball sampling process' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to find dance education students who were interested in exploring somatic practices and issues of body image. During this snowball sampling process I informed my students about this project, and they in turn, let others, who were not necessarily in my classes, know about it. In this way, I was able to recruit student participants who were interested in exploring somatic practice and the issue of body image. I did not have the problem of having to turn away men because there were no men in the dance education programme at the time. However, there were other concerns and ethical issues that arose from the sample. For example, one ethical issue was my own role in the research. I was acting as both teacher and researcher during the investigation.

This dual role status is supported through recent qualitative research in education. For example, recent teacher education research in the United States has embraced new paradigms and

strategies for conducting research. Rather than rely solely on quantifying experience and measuring learning, many educational researchers have begun to expand the inquiry process to a broader context which includes their own students. Some benefits of this approach include professionalisation of teaching, an intimacy with the data as well as the participants of the project, and collaborative engagement in the research process (Adler, 1993; Hammack, 1997). Earlier, I pointed to some benefits of including separate teacher and researcher comments in my field notes (Green, 1993). In this way, I was able to more acutely understand particular teacher–student dynamics. I noted that my teacher-self was privy to particular information. By maintaining these separate comments my teacher-self was able to inform my researcher-self about this information.

Resonating with these ideas of accessibility and intimacy, more and more researchers and teachers are conducting studies with their students. As Susan Adler (1993) points out,

Research in education is no longer restricted as it once was, to empirical– analytical, or experimental approaches. Alternative paradigms have opened educational research to the notion that there are multiple ways of knowing and coming to know (Eisner, 1990). Expanded images of and expectations for research have done away with the necessity of a separation between the practitioner, involved in the experience, and the researcher, once thought to stand outside the experience. ... Thus, coming to know can involve the researcher in the exploration of his or her experience as a teacher and as a person. ... Teaching and conducting research should be seen, not as conflicting, or even different, but in fact, as part of the same whole (Adler, 1993, p. 160).

However, at the same time that educational researchers are pointing to the benefits of a dual role relationship with students, many investigators are noting the ethical issues inherent with such practices. For example, without critical reflection and an ‘interplay between objective and subjective understandings’ (Adler, 1993, p. 161), such research can become one-sided and lead to what Lincoln and Guba refer to as ‘naive inquiry’ (cited in Adler, 1993, p. 161). Therefore, researchers conducting this type of work must be self-reflective and continually seek outliers and discrepant cases. Adler suggests keeping a log of one’s teaching experience to facilitate reflective inquiry and explore taken for granted assumptions to question one’s own established beliefs. I have attempted to explore both suggestions and include a section on discrepant cases at the end of my analysis. Another thorny issue that emerges from the dual role relationship is the question of coerciveness and obligation to students. In this case, the students were receiving grades in the class designed for the research project.

The potential problems for teaching and research cannot be denied. For one thing, the question of unfettered informed consent must be raised (Hammack, 1997). Do the students registering for the class feel pressured to take part in the research process? Anticipating this potential problem, I informed the participants about the class and study before the class began and let them know that they were not required to take part in the study. However, I was lucky because all the

participants indicated that they were interested in the research as well as the class. Since the class was an elective, the students joined both class and study willingly. However, I did inform them that they may drop out of the study at any point.

Grading was a particular thorny ethical issue. For this reason, I informed students that they would be graded on quality of written work and project rather than what they had to say. Of course I had to take into consideration the idea that they may want to please me and tell me what I wanted to hear in order to receive a good grade. For this reason, again, I attempted to be reflective and encourage them to disagree with me. I was happy that many of the participants did provide data that conflicted with my initial assumptions (as evident in the section regarding discrepant cases). This provided some evidence that the participants were not interested in pleasing me in order to receive high grades in the class. Further, during the first and final individual interviews, I asked each participant whether or not they felt pressured to provide particular responses and support my claims and findings. They all said that they felt they were able to voice their opinions and viewpoints.

I do still believe that this type of research does present some problems. Along with the asset of providing many benefits, researchers who conduct this type of investigation are particularly at risk of becoming one-sided. Therefore, we must be continuously cognisant of the ways our viewpoints and participation influence the study.

As a result of the sampling process, five students joined the project. Two students were at the student teaching phase of their programme; two other students were enrolled in the student teaching seminar but were preparing to student teach the following semester. One student participant was a year behind the others and was scheduled to student teach the following year. Although all the students were undergraduates, ranged in age from 20 to 24 years old, and knew each other prior to the project, their backgrounds were diverse. Out of the one African American (Jasmine) and four Caucasian students, one was from Long Island, New York (Missy), two were from New Jersey (Kathy and Tess), and two were from North Carolina (Jasmine and Nancy). Two participants also identified themselves as lesbians (Kathy and Tess).<sup>4</sup> It is significant that these two participants identified themselves as lesbian because they often addressed how bodily ideals affected them as women and as lesbians. Sexual preference and expectations that female dancers are necessarily heterosexual became major themes in the larger study.

Data collection occurred throughout the duration of the two semester study. Classes met once a week for 3 hours and usually included discussion, somatic and creative work, and work on the final performance/production. Each session was audiotaped and videotaped. Audiotapes of group discussions were transcribed and used as group interview data. Since I taught each class, videotapes were revisited for research purposes (i.e. data for field notes). The data collection methods included individual interviews, group interviews, observation and document collection. Individual interviews were conducted with each participant in May at the end of the project. They addressed perceptions about socially inscribed bodies entering the project and after being



exposed to somatic practices at the conclusion of the project. They also addressed the role of dance educators in relationship to student perceptions of the body, and future plans for action. Unstructured (Denzin, 1989) and theme-oriented questions (Kvale, 1983) were used in order to keep an open sense of give-and-take between interviewer and interviewee.

Group interviews were conducted informally. After each exercise, students discussed their experiences. These discussions provided a natural vehicle for data collection by offering data about lived bodily experiences. These informal group interviews were ongoing throughout the course of the project. However, once during November and once during May, after reviewing collected data, I focused specific questions around my current findings and emerging themes. These interviews also served as 'member checks', a common validity criterion used in naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Observation provided additional data. I used videotapes of each session in order to take field notes of each class. Documents also became a primary data source. Throughout the duration of the project, participants submitted various forms of artwork from class sessions and for the production/performance. Participants also, collected advertisements and articles that were analysed from a critical perspective and submitted journals that included experiences, feelings, reactions, changes and observations during the project.

Data analysis included both an informal 'analysis-in-the-field' phase, and a more formal 'cut-up-and-put-in-folders approach' whereby themes were generated and categories emerged from the data analysis process (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

One final consideration regarding methodology was validity/trustworthiness in postpositivist research. Where validity in positivism focuses on generalising claims, and measuring and verifying existing knowledge, validity in postpositivism focuses on understanding specific contexts, and investigating and generating the application of knowledge (Kvale, 1989, p. 89). Some common appropriate criteria used during this study included triangulation of data and sources, a systemised reflexivity, checking for discrepant cases, member checks, questioning, theorising, peer debriefing, and catalytic validity (which requires that an investigation take action to produce desired results).<sup>5</sup> Triangulation of data and sources meant that I used diverse data sources such as interviews, journals, observation of videotapes and fieldnotes, etc. Although this article addresses primarily the findings from the individual and group interviews, the larger study contained data from other sources. Theorising meant that I looked for general statements about the research and then also sought to find disconfirming evidence in order to see if I was not on the right track. The second part of the findings section of this article addresses that data which disconfirmed my emerging theories. Catalytic validity was indicated through the call to action taken by the participants in the form of teaching strategies, by the end of the project.

Findings: training docile bodies in dance

For the dance education students in the study, somatic authority often meant a sense of personal engagement in the learning process and an ownership of the student body. Throughout the

project students began to affirm this sense of inner awareness or authority. One student, who I will call Tess explained it as a connection to the body and refusal to disconnect from her physical needs. While describing former experiences in dance she spoke about health issues when referring to this idea:

I always thought I could push myself...over and over. And now that I'm getting more in touch with myself [during the somatic class and course of the research project], it's like ...I can't abuse my body...It's that I have to take care of myself, because if I don't, the body's...just going to collapse.

For other students somatic authority meant taking time to feel their bodies. Another student, Nancy, spoke of this in relationship to some of the somatic practices experienced in class when she said, 'Somatics has been so nice for me, because it's the only time I can slow down all week long'.

But when describing past experiences in dance education, the students overwhelmingly referred to situations when they felt disconnected from inner sensory feedback, a numbness toward inner bodily sensations, and even a sense of abuse they had sometimes felt during their prior dance training. Again, I do not attempt to imply that dance education is a monolith, that all dance forms are taught alike and that all teachers use similar methods and strategies, nor do I wish to universalise dance education. This qualitative study focused on one particular teaching setting reflective of the five participants in this particular study. But these student responses and experiences may raise some issues and generate some theory and discussion regarding the teaching of student bodies in the United States.

For example, one over-riding concern for these dance education students was teacher abuse and power. Due to a focus on external appearance, and an unattainable body ideal, students often felt required to give up their sense of somatic authority and power to the dance teacher. As Tess professed, 'We treat dance instructors as gods because that is the way we are brought up. We don't question what they say. We don't question what they do'.

Student comments and responses often resonated with Johnson's (1992) reference to a body ideal that disconnects us from a sense of an inner authority and Foucault's (1979, 1980) notion of disciplining the body through surveillance. With the teacher's eye constantly on students, the teacher does not have to impose outside force to motivate students to perform according to specific standards; the students learn to discipline themselves through self-regulation and unconscious habit. Unfortunately, this habituation often leads to a disconnection from the inner messages of the body as well as a loss of a sense of authority and control. And, while a watchful eye can sometimes work in a student's favour, without a sense of student ownership of the body it sometimes leads to unsafe pedagogical practice, injury, physical strain, pain, and a general lack of confidence and well being.

For example, during the time of the research study, many of the student participants were taking classes with a new guest artist (Jeff). According to the students, Jeff often treated their bodies as entities to be looked at and judged from his expert 'gaze' and as objects for him to manipulate and control. During one class discussion, Nancy remembered him saying to her

Your body doesn't do this right. It should look like this, (my emphasis)... when he did it [forced her leg up the side], he had my leg and he was saying, 'put your hip down, put your hip down'. And I felt like I was going like that [demonstrating a twisted, contorted, pained position and expression on her face]...And he goes, 'Well, it could be higher and look better'.

Another student Missy emphasised his focus on pushing the body beyond where students felt comfortable when she explained, 'He has this philosophy that like if you keep stretching it beyond your limits [referring to forcing the height of the leg], it's going to go further'. Other students also referred to his assertive, quick, and uncaring approach to his classes. For example, Jasmine characterised his classes when she said, 'It was just boom, boom, boom. You are doing this wrong. Correct it now'.

Students constantly communicated the idea that they were taught to train their bodies in accordance to conform with this teacher's bodily ideals, aesthetic and ideas about how the body should move. This not only meant striving for physical perfection through such common techniques as weight control practices and changes of appearance, but forcing their bodies into 'shape'. Sometimes this meant allowing him to physically force their bodies to conform with idealised dance movements such as high extensions or perfect turnout. There were accounts of his pulling student hair and physically wrenching body parts beyond where students felt comfortable. There were also stories about other teachers who physically forced turnout from the feet or manipulated student bodies in other destructive ways. Students were literally required to openly allow teachers to touch, prod and manipulate them. The message here was to avoid the inner messages of the body and to numb the body to pain.

Although these examples demonstrate direct teacher force, the participants also provided many examples of teacher directions which required self training and regulation in order to achieve an external standard. Comments included instructions and corrections such as, 'Don't let your butt stick out', 'Lock your knees', 'Make sure your back is flat', 'Squeeze your butt'. Students indicated that these instructions often gradually became part of their own unconscious inner talk during dance classes in general and that much of this inner talk focused on an imposed outward appearance or way of moving, one that they felt must be forced into place.

Teachers were also accused of stopping class to point out student weaknesses in these areas. According to the participants, pressure to meet these standards led to dysfunctional bodily habits and movement strategies such as tucking the pelvis under, hyperextending the knees, forcing

turnout and a number of other physical ailments, injury, lack of feelings of connection and well-being, physical and emotional distress and pain.

With the training of docile dance bodies so prevalent in the minds of these participants, authority and power relationships became over-riding themes in the study. The participants often discussed feelings of oppression and dominance by powerful instructors. Some students indicated that they felt intimidated by various teachers and some outwardly described specific teachers as authoritarian. During class discussions Kathy referred to 'the whole authoritarian structure' of dance classes, and Tess referred to a silent code when she said, 'If you break the code of what you're supposed to do, you are just upsetting the whole hierarchy'. In her journal, Jasmine literally and metaphorically remembered, 'I remember beginning a jazz class...and I got scolded for being out of line'.

Many times, participants discussed particular authoritarian practices and standardized behaviours that were previously required within the broader educational dance setting. Often control was established through institutionalised codes of dress and behaviour, particularly in classes at dance conservatories, where students in different levels were required to wear different coloured leotards and eating was monitored by teachers.

Competition, cliques, and rivalry for teacher attention were other tensions discussed. These conditions often further exacerbated inequities in power while disconnecting students from a sense of somatic awareness and authority. They also led to feelings of intimidation, student frustration, isolation and lack of confidence. Moreover, students often perceived dance programmes as divisive and dance teachers as unsupportive and threatening. Most of the participants indicated that they were the target of unfair grades and that some teachers wielded their power with grades or through humiliation during class. Furthermore, some students reported difficulty with the assessment process and felt that they received lower grades due to how their bodies looked or whether they behaved or performed according to standardised teacher expectations. During mid-term evaluations, there was particular concern regarding meetings with Jeff, the aforementioned guest artist. Jasmine indicated that he told her she could go no further because she does not have a good body, while Nancy was told she has an excellent dance body, and therefore she should perform better.

It may be significant to point out that although somatic practice was used as a vehicle for body awareness and release of habitual tension patterns, I caution educators not to use somatic practice separate from social analysis and critical thought. It may be just as dangerous to view somatic practice as a panacea for dealing with the effects of power and the training of docile bodies. In past research, I have pointed out the danger of solely employing somatic practice outside the recognition of a socio-political context and in an individualistic and micro context alone (Green, 1993, 1996b, 1999, 2000). Without a broader social context used to examine how bodies are socially habituated and regulated through technologies of normalisation, we are not likely to change pressure to conform to a dominant ideal body model or break down strategies for training

docile bodies. For example, there are dangers in using somatic practices and systems as methods for controlling bodily behaviour, through an emphasis on 'correction' to meet a standardised bodily requirement. If only one somatic practice is deemed valid for all problems, educators may be sending the message that one method can solely correct any bodily problem. Further, used simply as a behaviouristic 'stress-reduction' method, relaxation techniques alone can actually keep us from using the proprioceptive sense or listening to the inner messages of the body. Johnson (1992) points out that these types of methods have actually been used to numb people to how their bodies and the bodies of marginalised groups are being oppressed, sedated, and disconnected from sensual authority.

### Reflexive Analysis: surprises and discrepant cases

Up to this point, it may seem that participant responses neatly fit into place regarding my own paradigmatic perspective and theoretical assumptions when I entered the study. Certainly researchers can easily make data fit into their own theoretical framework. For this reason, I did consciously attempt to look for conflict with my assumptions and ideas when I entered the study. As a result of this effort I found a number of places where data was discordant with my theoretical perspective. I became aware that the pieces to this research puzzle did not actually fit together so neatly as I found myself struggling with a number of outliers and discrepant cases.

I chose to first discuss what seemed to come together while saving some of these problematic aspects or findings until the end of the discussion. There were, however, a number of surprises as well as disconfirming pieces of evidence, as is often common in a self-reflexive postpositivist analysis in which the researcher seeks out conflict and complexities through a search for disconfirming data.

For example, I found that not all past experiences in dance education involved such abuse as some of the aforementioned examples. Although I did not formerly assume that all dance education is abusive, I did enter the project with a sense that many pedagogical strategies often lead to physical and emotional dysfunction. There were a number of discussions that included memories of effective and helpful university dance teachers regarding attitudes toward the body and pedagogical style. Interestingly, most of these memories involved women teachers who included inner bodily awareness in their classes and taught with a more somatically sensitive teaching style; some men were awarded some positive qualities too (i.e. using somatic practices and approaches) but women were reserved for particular acclaim regarding this consideration.

Another discrepancy was evident in a number of Missy's negative responses to the more supportive teachers as well as a resonance with the ones who were problematic to other participants. For example, Missy often had problems in more supportive and somatic classes. And she often expressed success with teachers like Jeff who intimidated other students, while she sometimes explained that she likes to be pushed and physically challenged. She said that she hurts in Jeff's classes but that she liked it. Listening to her, I could not help but feel that Missy's

responses were connected to her training, that she may have felt more comfortable with this approach because it was familiar. She felt like she was working 'hard' and achieving success in controlling her body through selfdiscipline and restraint. In Susan Bordo's (1989, 1993) sense of colluding with the dominant culture or power at play, she may have experienced some sense of mastery over her body, with pain as an unfortunate result. Her words often haunted me because I could not help but think this was a case of physical denial and an effort to numb the body. Interestingly, she also spoke of a prior eating disorder where she felt a sense of mastery over her body when denying herself food and working at shaping her body into a specific ideal (see Green, 1999).

To my surprise, there were also a number of themes that I did not expect to emerge from the investigation. For example, race surfaced in a number of instances. Some feminist and postmodern scholars are re-examining earlier perspectives and are critical of oversimplifications and over-generalisations characteristic of earlier periods of feminism. Many scholars point out that it is dangerous to assume all women's experience is universal and that gender can be constructed around the experiences of white women (Gray et al., 1987; Hsu, 1987). A number of feminists are now addressing the dangers of valorising constructs that may be unconsciously racist and elitist (Bordo, 1993). In fact, some scholars problematise the notion of experience at all because it tends to universalise assumptions about knowing and define normal gender behaviour while marginalising groups that do not fit into a dominant model.

Reflecting back on the theoretical assumptions that guided the study, I realised that I made the same error and demonstrated the same blindness that has been attributed to white feminists by some African American scholars. In the end I found it beneficial to observe and hear the responses of an African American student while I realised that you cannot really talk about gender as separate from race. For example, in this study, Jasmine raised issues of difference regarding perceptions of women's bodies. During class we were fortunate that Jasmine talked about these issues in a number of ways. For one thing, she came to me because she wanted to address some of the issues she was dealing with as an African American dancer but felt were difficult to communicate because as she said, 'The other students don't want to talk about racism'. I encouraged her to raise the issue in class and began to gear the research toward these issues. I began to ask questions such as 'How does racism relate to body ideals?' 'How does the body affect African-Americans when we are talking about a white body ideal?' 'How do we marginalise students of different cultures in class?' And the students began to communicate the importance of these issues. As Tess explained, 'We tried not to [look at race]. Not until Jasmine went, Wait a minute I'm here too'.

There has been some scholarly discussion about difference regarding body ideals themselves. It has been argued that African American women are not tied to normalizing images and standards and that larger women are more accepted in the black community (see Bordo, 1993; Gray et al., 1987; Hsu, 1987). Jasmine often claimed that she was affected by standardising body ideals but she did suggest that some of her issues were different. Specifically, when talking about body

image, she spoke about perceptions of the lightness of skin as being a factor in the black community and how she struggles with life as a light skinned African American.

Jasmine also addressed her frustration at wanting to discuss her issues but seeing that other dancers did not always understand or want to talk about her concerns although she said that she did feel successful when raising issues and getting other students to discuss her concerns and feel more comfortable about discussing race. Jasmine was often more sensitive to attitudes toward her as an African American dance student than to attitudes about her female body; however, these concerns sometimes overlapped. For example, besides finding difficulty talking about problems, she explained that the African American students in dance are often pushed to the back of the room and are actually physically displaced in class. She recalled that teachers often ignored her because they did not want to deal with the race problem or racial tension, and some did not encourage her to succeed because they had prejudged her failure based on her skin colour.

With the significance of these differences in mind, and the acknowledgment that this study took place in the United States, where racial issues have significant import, I believe, as Bordo (1993) suggests, that we should be cautious about assuming too much difference regarding gender. Bordo and other feminists, although affirming difference, are unwilling to disregard gender as a construct and are unwilling to accept the notion that white women alone are affected by standards regarding appearance. Referring to a 1990 article in *Essence*, 'Fat is a black woman's issue too', she suggests that although sometimes commanding another aesthetic or standard, black women are also held to ideal models. Furthermore, she cites a number of sources that illustrate the growing trend toward ads in magazines with wide black readership that glamorize slenderness and other white Western body ideals and bodily behaviour (cited in Bordo, 1993).

Resonating with Bordo's argument that black women are also affected by body ideals, Jasmine demonstrated numerous struggles with achieving an ideal body type. Furthermore, she often referred to particular pressure as an African American student since she was in the dance world and felt she needed to meet the standards of a Western white model and a dance ideal. In some ways her problems were more severe. For example, she referred to a number of times when African American students had been particularly chastised for 'having a big butt' and forcibly encouraged to tuck their pelvises under. So in this case body ideal standards and implications in dance education were relevant to Jasmine and as Kathy suggested, some of her African American issues were feminist issues.

#### Agency and Other Implications for Dance Education

In closing, I would like to talk about action. Very often agency is valued as a validity criteria in postpositivist research (Lather, 1986, 1991, 1993). Particularly for emancipatory pedagogy, educators and researchers attempt to work toward change and action in both the teaching and research processes. This is why teaching and research often overlap.

For this reason, throughout the class and project I asked the participants about the relevance of the issues in relationship to their goals and objectives as dance teachers. Many ideas, strategies and plans for action were generated. For one thing, these participants discussed the need for awareness of these issues. As Jasmine suggested, It's important just to be aware that we can address those [issues]. You have those materials in the back of your mind from this class and some different ways of getting [toward] somatic and gender [awareness]...I'm thinking that, like if somebody in class has a problem wearing leotards and tights...that they have a problem with their body, say OK, it's all right to wear a shirt or put dance pants on.

The participants also referred to the need to teach multiculturally, in other words, to be aware of who is marginalised in the dance class and to be aware of judging students based on body types. Interestingly, Missy, although striving at times to achieve a muscular look, indicated that there is nobody who can meet these impossible standards and said she would strive to bring this awareness into her future classes.

Furthermore, participants addressed the need to honour all body types and teach all students both in the studio, by emphasising that dancers come in all shapes and sizes, and outside it by choreographing works that use dancers of different sizes, and alternative body types. Also by bringing in and showing videos of ethnically diverse dance companies and dancers who use different body types and deconstructing traditional gender roles.

I was quite surprised that by the end of the project, the participants were also thinking about directly addressing critical issues in class. As Kathy suggested, 'As dance educators, we can integrate ways of broadening the definition of who is a dancer...and how they should be and act and look'. They spoke about including classes modelled on the one we used for the project and by brainstorming and leading discussions which directly raise the issue of body ideals and habits. Kathy also suggested teaching dance history critically and including the body as a topic. Some specific ideas included using videos of traditional dancing critically by raising questions regarding the lack of colour and diverse body types and problematising ads, texts and other materials and sources that teach and perpetuate reliance on achieving a body ideal, and to recognise and challenge bias and prejudice in the classroom.

After acknowledging uneasy feelings regarding race, Jasmine came to class prepared with questions addressing diversity in dance education in order to lead a critical discussion on the topic. This type of critical discussion was later raised as a potential multicultural and feminist pedagogical strategy. The participants were also interested in challenging the societal construct that female dancers must be skinny by discussing the detrimental effects of the pressure to attain this ideal including particular ways this may lead to bodily disconnection (i.e. retraction of the pelvis to fit the body of an ideal women can lead to alignment problems and injury while the additional compensation of tucking the pelvis under can create another set of problems).



Finally, the participants also discussed plans to incorporate somatic and body awareness practices into their classes and curricula and as Tess suggested to also make it available to men because they are not often taught to get in touch with their bodies. Kathy spoke about the need for somatic work when she said, 'Somatic experience, you know, connecting the mind and the body, would seem to be another feminist pedagogical tool because dance doesn't necessarily do that'.

Many of the participants spoke about helping students reclaim ownership of their bodies and associated somatic authority with an inner strength. Regarding direct strength training, Kathy expressed her plans to continue using somatic practice in the fitness world by emphasising an inner focus. She articulated that by reconnecting inwardly even fitness teachers may incorporate a somatic approach to an activity that generally brings authority to objectified bodies. For the most part the participants were interested in using strategies that disconnect from an external standard and reconnect to their embodied selves or to use Jasmine's words, 'to really get into your body'.

## Conclusion

Thinking back on Ellsworth's (1992) advice to be reflective about the ways we cannot escape power over our students, I am aware that this study taught me that as teachers and researchers we need to be careful about assuming we have the key to opening up students in dance. Yes, I still believe in an action oriented critical agenda and in the necessity to change the way we teach dance. Certainly the participants affirmed the need for a pedagogical approach that honours inner work and somatic authority. However, we do need to take these experiences at face value; at the same time, we also need to look at how our own previous training and even our changing assumptions about the body interact with students in the dance class. For example, because I advocate viewing the body as a social construction inscribed by the culture in which we live, I assumed that strength training was destructive because it took student bodies, particularly women's bodies, away from a sense of somatic authority and imposed an objectified view of the body through an unattainable aesthetic. Yet, a number of participants recalled a sense of inner strength from such work. I needed to look at how complex these issues and interactions can be for students. If I attempt to speak for the students, I as a teacher and researcher may do just as much harm as those more traditional teachers who directly require standardised bodily behaviours from their students.

Moreover, I feel a need to continuously problematise somatic experience and authority as the 'way' for all students. Yes it is maybe true that Western culture has embraced objectivity as a dominant way of knowing the world. Somatics and inner awareness offer an alternative way of processing information and valuing student ownership of their own bodies. However, the belief that somatics represents 'true' body experience is at odds with Ellsworth's (1992) call for caution in assuming that there is a true consciousness that teachers can teach to students with false consciousness. This may be just as troubling as those modernist teachers who claim to 'liberate'

dance students through expressive and creative activities. Somatic practice may provide a space for dance educators to investigate the body, however, without an awareness of how power is playing out in the classroom and how docile bodies are being created through a system of laws and requirements and surveillance controls within the classroom, the student is not being empowered at all. If we need to be careful of framing discourse around repression, so that simply freeing student bodies is questioned, we must always be suspicious of somatic work that simply attempts to free bodies. In other words, without reflection about how the student's and teachers' backgrounds, construction of body and assumptions play a role in habituating the students, we cannot learn how to bring authority to the students.

However, although I attempt to be self-reflexive and problematise my own agenda, at the same time I continue to feel an ethical obligation to look at how students' bodies are inscribed by society and dance culture. I still feel compelled to work for creating a healthier dance space while searching for strategies that bring authority to the inner work necessary to help students empower their own bodies, even while questioning inner work that does not also see the body as a social construction and reflect the larger macro picture. So, although I am happy to hear that the participants found the somatic work gratifying and will attempt to work in this way in the future, I hope they will not forget to be reflective practitioners, think critically and within a socio-political context, and continually investigate their own assumptions and agendas. I hope they will continually ask why their classes may not feel empowering to their students.

## NOTES

[1] I refer to the term 'problematise' in relationship to a move to critically analyse or 'deconstruct'

meanings that are well accepted or sometimes taken for granted. Patti Lather (1991) uses this term as well as the term 'to trouble' (Lather and Smithies 1995) to highlight her move toward a 'postmodern turn'.

[2] This difference was pointed out to me by one of the reviewers of this manuscript. I greatly appreciate being made aware of this point. See also Bloomfield (1988), Davies (1988), and Cole (1994) for discussions about the trend in the UK from a student-centred approach to an arts model approach.

[3] Postpositivist inquiry includes a number of research paradigms often existing at the same time. In a postmodern world of conflicting positionalities, multiple and competing perspectives and fuzzy boundaries, these categorisations are not often so clearly defined. See Green (1996a, b), Green and Stinson (1999) and Lather (1991) for fuller discussions about postpositivist research.

[4] Pseudonyms are used in this article.

[5] Due to lack of space here and the complexity of the issues of validity in postpositivist research, I will not discuss this broad topic. For a fuller discussion see Green and Stinson (1999), Guba and Lincoln (1989), Lather (1986, 1993), and Lincoln and Guba (1985).

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