AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY OF MEANING IN DANCE: VOICES OF YOUNG WOMEN DANCE STUDENTS

By: Susan W. Stinson, Donald Blumenfeld-Jones, and Jan Van Dyke

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This study attempts to gain understanding of how adolescent pre-professional dance students experience dance; a qualitative methodology is used. The researchers describe larger issues which emerge from the analysis, focusing primarily on how the students in the study perceive the experience of dancing, how they perceive the dance world, and how they are trying to find their place in it. Finally, the researchers reflect upon the meaning of their findings in terms of implications for the dance profession.

What is dance? What does it mean? Dance scholars and critics have written many words in response to these questions. Choreographers and professional dancers have also spoken, most frequently in biographies and autobiographies, of what dance means to them. But some voices are not heard in dance literature, particularly the voices of children and adolescents not enrolled in professional schools. What is the dance experience like, and what does it mean, for them? And what does this mean to us, who work with young people in dance? This study reports the beginning of what we hope will be a large, long term project concerned with these questions, carried out through a number of small studies with different target groups.

I. METHODOLOGY

ASSUMPTIONS

We held two initial assumptions which guided our choice of methodology. One is that meaning in dance is, ultimately, personal meaning, each individual's point of view being by definition uniquely his or hers. We sought a methodology that would retain the uniqueness of each person, but at the same time might reveal larger issues.

Second, personal meaning is not always immediately available to consciousness, ready to be expressed briefly and quickly. This implied a methodology that would allow us to pursue each individual's emerging thought in whatever way it unfolded, and to follow up on issues raised. It was important to dialogue with our subjects rather than administer a questionnaire. The length of time needed with each individual, and the amount of data that would be generated, posed a limitation to the number of subjects.

In keeping with our research interests and our assumptions, we chose a methodology drawn from both phenomenological and hermeneutic inquiry. (See Beittel, 1973; Braxton, 1984; Kollen,

1981; Natanson, 1966.) Initially, it involved listening to the voices of individuals with as much attention as possible, allowing them to speak freely and openly.

PROCEDURES

We consciously selected a group of subjects that was fairly homogeneous in terms of certain characteristics, in order to allow us to focus on more individual differences. All were skilled, serious dance students between the ages of 16 and 18 who had studied dance 5-14 years each. While all seven had studied ballet, two were primarily modern dancers and all had had some modern dance and jazz training. All were planning to attend college or had just begun; several were classified as "academically gifted."

We interviewed each student twice. The first interview, lasting in most cases 60-90 minutes, focused on questions that allowed the student to speak about dance and about herself as a person and as a young woman. Later, the interviewer observed the student in a dance class; this was followed by a second, shorter interview focusing on the student's feelings during that class and issues that arose in relation to it. Interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed.

The analysis of the data occurred in three stages. The first stage was a reduction of the transcripts, eliminating what we considered to be extraneous material, but retaining the students' own words; we referred to these as "summaries." There were two checks on the accuracy and completeness of these summaries. First, each summary, prepared by one researcher, was checked by another against the original transcript, and against the tape recording when necessary for clarification of intent. Second, each student was consulted regarding whether or not the summary basically reflected what she felt at the time of the interview; the few changes requested by the students were made. The summaries were the primary source used in further stages of the analysis, although at times we returned to the full transcripts and even the tape recordings for confirmation of interpretation.

In the second stage, each researcher identified points of view from the summaries, resulting in three versions for each student. There were both similarities and differences among our versions. Since the distinctiveness of individual voices is considered an asset rather than a liability in the methodology we were using, we decided not to attempt to reduce our unique perspectives to a single version.

In the third stage of the analysis we reduced the points of view to themes which seemed to exist across subjects, using as source our three perspectives on the points of view for each individual. Again we discussed the similarities and differences of our interpretations, and through a series of drafts, eventually came to an understanding of these young women's words. This will be discussed in Section II.

CLARIFICATION OF PURPOSES AND LIMITATIONS

It is important to recognize the intent of the interpretive methodology we chose, what it can and cannot tell us. The work of Robert Donmoyer (1985) presents a helpful way of thinking about research methodology in relation to its purpose. He points out that questions of meaning are appropriately answered by methods of what he refers to as "humanities-based" research. Humanities-based research is not concerned with testing whether a proposition is true or false,

but with developing a language. Languages are neither true nor false. However, they have considerable capacity to be useful to us, because different languages allow us to "both see different things and see things differently." (p.4)

Interpretive research, further, does not give us findings that are generalizable in a statistical sense. Donmoyer (1988) argues that statistical generalization is important when we wish to think about aggregates and cause-effect relationships, but not when we wish to think about individuals, who construct their own meanings from their lived experiences. Vicarious experiences, whether they come from reading a novel or listening to the voices of others in interpretive research, can also contribute to this construction of meaning. Donmoyer suggests that this kind of generalization is particularly important in helping us expand the cognitive structures that serve to filter our perceptions of the world. In other words, when we see the world through someone else's eyes, we may be able to see a different world.

These comments are important in understanding the purposes and limitations of this research. Our desire was not to develop a statement of fact about what dance means to all young people, or even to the seven young women with whom we spoke. Rather, we sought to expand our own language for thinking about what dance can be for those who do it, how it comes to have meaning, and what all of that means to us as persons involved with dance and young people. Such language is grounded in what people actually say about their experience in dance, and our language was enriched by the words of our subjects.

In the spirit of participant hermeneutics, we invited our participants to engage in the meaning making process with us. One of the premises of hermeneutic inquiry is that the meaning of a phenomenon becomes richer and/or more clear in the process of reflecting on it. Thus we expected our respondents to not just tell us what they already knew about their experience of dancing and what it meant to them, but to become more aware of its meaning in the process of trying to find words to talk about it.

In the spirit of phenomenological inquiry, we attempted to describe the lived experience of our respondents and the structures of consciousness underlying it. Following the guidelines for this form of inquiry, we attempted to attend only to that which presented itself. In the interview process, this meant allowing the students' interests to guide the development of the interview. During the analysis phase, we required that our interpretations be substantiated by the words of our respondents, and we frequently challenged each other in this regard.
Our attempt to attend only to that which presented itself made us quite aware of one of the premises underlying phenomenological research--that one cannot remove one's subjectivity from a relationship, even a research relationship. In the interviews, our own personal interests inevitably influenced the way that we each followed up on initial statements with further probing questions, and the way that each of us came to understand the interview content. We recognize the current debate over objectivity and subjectivity in research methodology. While we will not discuss this issue further here, we must note that our subjectivity was intentional for our method, allowing us to interact with our subjects as subjects ourselves.

A second premise of phenomenological research is that the nature of the data is always fragmentary. We recognized that the words spoken by our respondents were not in themselves

the complete and accurate representation of what these students actually thought and felt, and that much of the reality out of which each of us acts does not exist in our conscious awareness. One of the purposes of phenomenological inquiry is to describe the structures of consciousness and their functions, how people make meaning in the world.

II. THE ANALYSIS

In our study, two structures emerged which helped us begin to understand the way dance became meaningful for the students with whom we spoke. The first structure focuses on the relationship between the student dancer and her own experience of dancing; the second focuses on the relationship between the student dancer and the dance world.

THE DANCER AND DANCING

In the first structure, the meaning of dance is intertwined with the identity of the student. In the words of the students,

"It is who I am." (Lily)
"I just can't imagine life without it." (Peggy)
"I can't imagine not doing it. If something would happen and I couldn't do it I'd be a very bitter person probably." (Amber)

In our study, how students perceive/describe/experience dance reflects in general what they value. It is not clear to what extent these values are instilled by dance training.

One particularly lucid example is the value of hard work and discipline. As Rachel said when she discussed her preference for technique class over improvisation:

You work harder and things are set, so you know what you're supposed to do...And you get a hard sweat, heavy sweat and get tired. I guess I like it cause it feels like you're really dancing...working hard.

Amber, speaking of discipline, noted, "...if I'm in any class I'm there to take class and not to goof around."

The focus in technique class is on doing the movement and getting it right. When asked what she was thinking about during class, Lily responded, "I'm basically thinking about the step and how you do it...I think about what I would look like to someone if they were watching me." Ellen stated her thoughts as, "I gotta get it. Oh God I did that wrong. I gotta do this right." Jane said, "There's so much pressure to get everything right. I want to impress the teachers, for them to see my progress."

Dance class offers them challenges and thus gives them a forum for proving themselves. Satisfaction comes from keeping up (especially with older and more experienced dancers), being able to do things which are physically demanding, doing specific movements correctly, improving, and getting recognition from the teacher or choreographer. The recognition need not be in the form of approval; just being recognized validates their existence and effort. As Amber said, "I'd much rather be told that I'm doing it wrong than not to be noticed at all."

Performing offers another arena for proving oneself. Lily described a special moment on stage that illustrates this: "I did a triple (pirouette) on stage...I just threw it in...like, well why not? Show what I got." The consequences of failure are greater in a performing situation, but the resulting sense of risk can be a bonus when one is successful. As Elizabeth stated, "It's the excitement...thinking about whether something will go wrong and if it doesn't it's such a triumph." They recognize their own mistakes even when the audience does not. However, audience response is a major contributor to one's own sense of satisfaction. As Lily said, "...it's nice to have someone say that was really wonderful."

Dancing helps the students get in touch with their bodies and express their feelings more easily than through the written or spoken word. It also gives them a chance to enter a transcendent state. Elizabeth told us, "When I dance I'm more of a soul." Sometimes the transcendence of the here and now happens in class. Ellen said, "I come to dance a lot because it's a way to forget everything else." As Peggy noted, "...when I...get frustrated with life in general...it's a real release." Performing was described as "the ultimate high" (Lily) and "above the normal plane of living" (Elizabeth).

Whether dancing alone, in class, or in performance, there is a total absorption in what one is doing; the rest of the world is blocked out. As Peggy stated, "Sometimes I really get in touch with something...in which case I'm so caught up with it that the whole world could crash around me." There is a sense of power and well being that comes from feeling in control of one's body, as long as one is able to do what is called for and do it well. Elizabeth referred to this when she said, "It's such utter control and all that's important is that pirouette you've done."
The real limitation to this sense of power, however, is that, no matter how well one dances, one's body and technique are never good enough. These young women have high standards for themselves. Several described themselves as perfectionists. Yet perfection is never possible in dance technique. As Amber noted, "I always feel I have so much room for improvement." Rachel said "Technique is hard because you're always striving for more." Elizabeth described a teacher who often praises students, but says, "a lot of times I just don't believe him...my standards are higher than his."

Further, the human body can never reach a state of perfection. Dance students are aware of every flaw and limitation they have, according to the current aesthetic. As Elizabeth told us,

> I don't look at myself in the mirror very often, except when I have to. Or if I do, then I look at my face or my feet, or my hips to make sure they're right. But I don't like my body, the way it looks. I guess everyone's critical on themselves.

Rachel said, "Lots of times I think I'm too much of a brute to be a dancer"; Amber stated, "If my legs matched my body then I'd be perfectly happy." Jane said, "My body is such an uncapable body."

In regard to the theme of dance as identity, then, we see a number of dualisms. The students perceive dance as either discipline and structure, in which the goal is to "get it right"; or else as a transcendence of structure, a release and/or an escape from the everyday world. Lily expressed the dualism she experiences when she stated, "You either dance it or you don't. There's no in between. You're either performing or you're working." Similarly, the students experience

themselves as alternately body or soul, working hard and sweating or existing "above the normal plane of living". They feel alternately full of deficiencies and limitations, trying to improve themselves; or strong and full of power, as they meet challenges and exceed the expectations of others.

THE DANCER AND THE DANCE WORLD

In addition to what they know of their own experience of dancing, these students indicated an implicit awareness of a world of dance that exists beyond their own experiences in the studio and theater. Their ideas about the dance world emerged for us as they told the stories of how they had gotten started in dance, what their lives were like doing it, and what they saw as their future.

Being started at an early age by one's mother was a common theme. As Rachel told us, "I don't know how my mom got me into it. When I was four I didn't have much to say about it." Several of them said they hated it at first, but it is clear that they are all glad dance is a part of their lives. As Jane said, "Even though I might not have wanted it or I might have missed a lot when I was younger, I'm glad that my mom put me in those classes." However, they are not sure how dance came to be so meaningful to them. Rachel simply stated, "It's really important or I wouldn't be doing it." There is a sense of finding themselves on a path without being clear how they got there. As Jane stated, "It just depends on what you are put into when you're young."

At this point several factors keep them dancing. One is personal satisfaction: "I dance because I want to dance." Another is fear: "If you give it up you'll regret it later." "You can never let up or you will lose it." There is also a sense of need or dependency, not only because dance is such an important part of their lives, but also because they have done it for so long and cannot imagine not doing it. Rachel said "I'd have to find something else to do every day." Being a dancer means living a disciplined life, having control over oneself. Jane described a sense of self disgust when she stopped and "got out of shape."

Despite this sense of almost being driven to dance, our respondents clearly valued the idea of free choice in regard to whether or not one dances; several said that being forced to dance will ruin it. They have no regrets about their choices to dance thus far, but recognize that a choice to dance has also been a choice not to do other things. They noted that it is hard to have a "normal" life and also be a dancer. Non-dancers usually do not understand them. Rachel's words echoed those of several others in our study when she said "Most of my friends don't even know what I do. Every day you go to dance and you want to get away from that sometimes and do other things." The most "extreme" statement of this came from Elizabeth, who said,

"I didn't have any friends. Dance was all I talked about, cared about. I wanted to get through school so bad so I could go take my ballet class. I didn't care about anyone there and I thought no one understood."

Several students indicated a sense of community or understanding among dancers, but this seemed equaled or even exceeded by the competitiveness. Most competition is regarded as constructive; as Rachel said, feeling competitive "is good in a way because it makes you strive for more."

There also is a sense of feeling special in being set apart. While dancers may not be particularly understood or appreciated by the larger culture, these students appreciate themselves--the

discipline that characterizes their lives and the knowledge they have that others do not. Elizabeth expressed this as, "I think that dancers are above angels--God, dancers, angels, humans."

The students with whom we spoke perceived that their future options in dance were very limited. Performing was the only dance career any of them had seemed to consider. They had all weighed whether they had what it takes to become a professional performer: ability (talent and the right body) and great effort/will/desire. Elizabeth told us,

> Technique has to come first. People who have soul aren't allowed on stage unless they have strong technique. I see where that's important cause everybody probably thinks they have a special something inside of them when they dance...Maybe there wasn't anything inside of me that did make me work hard enough or do what they wanted me to do. If you really love it, it'll show in your technique.

All of the students seemed to feel it was important to be "realistic" in evaluating their own abilities in relation to the expectations they perceived. None of them thought they could make it to the top echelon in dance. Lily was the only one who clearly intended a performing career, but felt she was realistic in guessing how far she could get:

> I think I could make it in the corps level in New York, but I... started too late to get any further -- not that I couldn't do it but that I'm too old by their standards... I'd like to be a principal dancer in a regional company.

Other students were still in the process of choice-making. Rachel expressed the conflict involved in trying to make a choice between what she saw as mutually exclusive opportunities:

> I'm really concerned cause I don't know if I want to do dance, or all my education that I've learned at school, I don't want to throw that away. I'm thinking about maybe minoring in dance or something, cause I'm going to hate spending this much time working hard and coming to this point and then just throwing it away.

All of these young women seemed to have considered a career as a dancer, and with most there was at least some sense of sadness in giving up a dream. Elizabeth spoke poignantly to us when she said,

> Every six year old girl wants to be a dancer...every six year old girl has a pink tutu in their closet. I just thought mine was special and apparently it's not cause I would have been successful already and I haven't.

It seemed to us that these students were giving up the dream not because they preferred to do something else but because they did not think they would succeed in "making it" as a major performer. Several of them noted that it was easier for men to be successful in dance, because there is less competition.

Even if they were to "make it" as a professional performer, they recognize the risks and sacrifices. As Jane said,

> Everybody knows that being a dancer does not give you money. It does not give you a lot of time to go out and do things. It's hard to have a family. It's got to be something you love. Teaching dance, however, was not seen as an attractive alternative. Even though dance teachers clearly had been important in their lives, the students perceived teaching as having considerably less status than performing, and offering much less gratification. As Amber said, "I don't particularly want to teach people to do what I should be doing myself." None of the students mentioned any other career possibilities in dance.

Elizabeth summed up her very strong feelings about herself in relation to the dance world when she said,

> I feel good when I do a combination myself but if I start thinking about myself in relation to anyone else who might have done that, it's not important cause it's not the professional world...I can't settle for teaching. It's like stepping down...If I can't have exactly what I wanted...I want to just remove myself from it completely, and do something else that I can succeed in. If I stay in dance I'll feel like a failure.

As these young women spoke to us about trying to decide what they would do with their lives, a picture of the Dance World emerged for us as a separate and fixed world, a hierarchy that is created and controlled by others. They perceive themselves as being at the bottom, and at times outside it altogether. At the top of the hierarchy are Real Dancers--professional performers--and at the very top are those in the best known companies. The hierarchy functions as a series of levels to which individuals must gain admittance; teachers and choreographers serve as gatekeepers, deciding who may enter. Such decisions are based on fixed requirements in two basic areas: ability and desire. There is no way of knowing if one has an adequate amount of either without attempting to gain admittance; those who "make it" are the ones who have what it takes. What it takes gets greater and greater as one moves up the hierarchy. Failure is inevitable for the majority of those who attempt to enter; the number of those who wish to be Real Dancers, even the ones who are talented, is much greater than the number of places open to them.

III. Discussion

As we discussed the relationships that emerged through the words of the students, we were particularly struck by what seemed initially paradoxical. On the one hand, the students feel a sense of identity between self and dance. On the other hand, they feel themselves on the fringes of dance and likely to remain so. They seem to perceive the Dance World as a set of givens and fixed values, and themselves as powerless to do anything about changing them. However, they focus not on their powerlessness, but on their power to make realistic choices about whether or not they wish to try to enter the Dance World as it is.

The more we discussed this paradox, however, the more it made sense to us, and a metaphor--of mother and daughter--began to emerge. Because the child is connected with mother prior to a consciousness of self as separate creature, both child and parent are aware of the ways in which the parent influences the child, shaping and molding her, but hardly aware at all of the child's corresponding influence on the parent's development.

Similarly, we see a picture of students beginning dance at an early age, finding themselves embedded in it before developing a separate consciousness. As Amber said, "I've always done it." Our students recognize that dance has made them who they are, and not only physically. Responsibility and discipline are particularly credited to dance. As Ellen stated, "I usually finish what I start. I think that's because I dance...I've got everything together and I'm real responsible and I think that's because of dance." However, the students seem not to correspondingly see the ways in which they create Dance, and the ways that they might contribute to it, or even change it, in the future. They remain unable to see that they have any choice other than whether or not to participate in it.

We do not see this as particularly surprising in the current context of society. The vast amount of socialization for most children is directed toward helping them fit into society and adjust to things as they are. This is particularly true for oppressed peoples (Freire, 1983) and women. Recent literature in dance (Brady, 1982; Gordon, 1983; Kirkland, 1986; Vincent, 1979) points out the degree to which dancers in professional ballet companies are encouraged to remain both physically and emotionally at a prepubescent stage of development, children who will obediently do what they are told and fit into structures created by others. The young women with whom we spoke are not so passive as the picture presented of professional level ballet students; they seem to be strong, articulate young women who wish to be in control of their own lives. However, they still perceive the world as fixed and do not see that the dance world is a human creation which they have the capacity to expand and/or change.

IV. Conclusions

At first glance, the results of this study seem decidedly unremarkable. It appears natural and inevitable, in a glamorous and competitive field, that only a few will "make it." "Many are called; few are chosen" applies to many other fields as well as dance. It also appears natural that young students in the midst of their dance study reject career possibilities other than performing even if they hear of them. Some degree of disappointment and confusion is normal during adolescence; these students have gotten many good things from their dance study and now, whatever their choices, will go on to live the rest of their lives.

Yet if we look beneath such conclusions, a number of issues emerge for us. We find evidence that the choice to dance is not necessarily as freely made as one might assume. To some extent, dance has chosen these students and will not let them go, while at the same time expelling them from the ranks of the chosen.

Further, it appears that dance study for these young women has concentrated almost entirely upon learning to dance. It has not been a full education in dance, which would also include exploration of its career possibilities and their satisfactions, as well as ongoing dialogue regarding how they perceive dance and their place in it. As we look beyond the students to the world of professional dance, we see extraordinary technical demands which dictate the requirement of almost total dedication to training from middle childhood through adolescence, particularly for girls. In other words, girls start dance training at an age before they are able to make a free and fully informed choice, in order to even see if they measure up to the standards.

What are the costs of this state of affairs? In terms of human costs, we see that they may include a great deal of personal destruction, as revealed by recent literature on the professional ballet world. (Brady, J., 1982; Gordon, S., 1983; Kirkland, G., 1986; Vincent, L.M., 1979). However, only one of our respondents, Elizabeth, indicated that her experience in dance had been personally destructive.

Whatever the human costs, some may feel that they are an inevitable consequence of having great art. We also see that there are consequences as well for the art. What is lost when a great many bright, articulate young women decide that there is no place in dance for them, because they do not have the "right body," or do not otherwise meet the requirements for the art as it now

exists? To what extent does this restrict the development of the art, by allowing entrance only to those who will maintain the art as it is?

Another issue that may reflect the costs of the current system is the disproportionate representation of men in positions of leadership and power in dance. We wonder about the relationship between this disproportionality and the emphasis on passivity and obedience in dance training, and the earlier age at which girls begin dance.

We also must question whether it is indeed natural and inevitable that the system operate in this way, in which human lives are seen primarily as means to make great art, and the art itself is diminished by the loss of so many who might well have important contributions to make. Is it inevitable that art determine artists, rather than artists determining the art? Who is being served by maintaining the extraordinary technical demands which dictate an obsessive dedication to dance study that has time only for technical training? What kind of art form might result if dance training consisted of less time learning to reproduce movement, and more time learning to think about it? What might result if teachers spent more time in dialogue with students? Many of the students indicated what we could best describe as delight in having someone listen to them with interest, as they spoke of dance and of themselves. Several noted that they had never had an opportunity to speak in this way with someone who understood, and that all dancers should have this chance.

The questions we raise do not have easy answers. However, the value of interpretive research lies not in its capacity to give us answers, but in its capacity to reveal complex issues. We hope to continue exploring these issues in the future in our work as educators and researchers. As we do so, we take with us a clear affirmation of the significance of hearing the voices of dancers.

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