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Research Article

Flourishing in Salsa Dance: A Qualitative Investigation of Aesthetic, Artistic, and Creative Contributions

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Salsa has been referred to as the world's most popular partnered social Latin dance and is likely health-enhancing when participated in for leisure and socialisation purposes. We are unaware of any qualitative research that has explored salsa dance, specifically, through an aesthetic, artistic, and creative practice lens. In this research, we sought to interpret how these elements of dance may contribute to a sense of flourishing, or holistic well-being, as described by Seligman (2011) in his PERMA model, in a positive psychology context. We designed an anonymous fully open-ended online qualitative survey to explore the experience of salsa as it relates to dancers' flourishing. Forty-one salsa dancers completed the survey. Their average experience level was 11 years of dance practice in salsa. We used the reflexive thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2021) to analyse our data. Our actively constructed themes (A dance of positivity; Dance's cognitive embrace; Healthful bodies in harmony; and Steps, hearts, and spirits coming together) highlighted emotional and physical benefits, cognitive and learning aspects, health and wellness, and community building within the data. We believe these findings illustrate that salsa dance does indeed foster a sense of flourishing in experienced dancers within a community dance setting. The practical applications of our research in terms of promoting dance for health are discussed.

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Introduction

Dance is an aesthetic, artistic, and creative practice defined by Hanna (1995) as human behaviour that is intentionally rhythmical and purposeful, involves non-verbal body movement, is often experienced with musical accompaniment, and requires use of the body, mind, and emotion in a culturally mediated fashion. Hence, dance necessitates a multisensory somatic, cognitive, and affective experience for the dancer. More recently, Akande (2023) described dance as an aesthetic practice combining cultural and social elements that form a vehicle through which ideas are projected, emotions are expressed, and stories are narrated. When performed in a community or participatory setting, as Amans (2017) wrote, dance inspires us to embrace inclusive practice, build collaborative relationships, celebrate diversity, and create opportunity for positive participant experiences. Real-world examples of dance practice engaged in by a variety of learners were presented by Vartanian et al. (2023) whereby participation developed self-discipline, self-awareness, self-respect, and respect for others. Dance has also been described by Buck and Snook (2020) as being facilitative for supporting mental resilience. Furthermore, dance has been explored by Novikov et al. (2019) as a communicative medium with its own linguistic, social, and developmental features. Moreover, as suggested by Christensen and Calvo-Merino (2013), a dancer has the opportunity to embody the full aesthetic-artistic-creative experience through practice.

We feel it is clear that dance, whether engaged in for reasons of pleasure, enchantment, achievement, social benefit, physical health, or psychological well-being, has much to offer all people of all ages. This is evidenced qualitatively in the aforementioned research. One important area of investigation we feel warrants further exploration is the link between opportunities in dance participation and the

experience of flourishing. Does dancing foster, support, or lead to a sense of flourishing? Does this experience vary across different genres of dance? In recent years, the positive psychology movement has proposed functional models to enhance subjective well-being and happiness through social and personal responsibility and agency. Csikszentmihalyi (2014) proposed that, although happiness must be prepared for and cultivated, in the long run, individuals seek high challenges within the environment and, in turn, develop the necessary skills to deal with them in order to feel happiest and experience the most subjective well-being. This is the process of engaging in the challenges of attaining one's personal goals. Seligman (2011) put forth a holistic well-being theory whereby the constituent parts of well-being, each a real construct, contribute to it but do not define it. These constituent parts comprise five pillars: positive emotion; engagement; relationships; meaning; and accomplishment. The model is referred to as PERMA. The properties of these pillars are such that each contributes to well-being, is pursued for its own sake, and has measurability independent of the others. Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, in a similar fashion to that proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (2014), moves the emphasis of well-being away from personal disposition to one of supportive life choices. Seligman's (2011) well-being theory is referred to as flourishing. He stated that "the goal of positive psychology in well-being theory is to measure and to build human flourishing. Achieving this goal starts by asking what really makes us happy" (Seligman, 2011, p. 29). The following discussion of qualitative literature in non-clinical contexts suggests how dance participation may lead to flourishing in adult dancers when looked at through an aesthetic, artistic, and creative practice lens.

Feelings of positive emotion may be improvable. For example, as Jans-Beken et al. (2020) suggested, if we cultivate gratitude and thankfulness, we can feel happier about the past. Learning to savour the moment can increase positive emotion about the present. When we build hope and optimism, evidence demonstrates we tend to feel

happier about the future. One of the routes to greater happiness, as Seligman et al. (2004) explained, is through engagement in activities where we experience positive emotion. The constructivist phenomenology research of Ali et al. (2017) showcased experiences of positive emotion in female dance students and dance professionals through participation in world dance. Data were generated through focus groups and the findings suggested that the dancers benefitted through feeling creative, happy, healthy, and supported. World dance practice created an environment for these women whereby feelings of joy and positive emotion were facilitated.

Engagement, or the pursuit of gratification, refers to when we are fully absorbed and immersed in a particular task. There are, unfortunately, no shortcuts when pursuing gratification. Seligman et al. (2004) stated that “we must involve ourselves fully, and the pursuit of gratifications requires us to draw on character strengths such as creativity, social intelligence, sense of humour, perseverance, and an appreciation of beauty and excellence” (p. 1380). The state of full engagement in an activity, where one experiences deep involvement, energised focus, and a clear sense of accomplishment, is what Csikszentmihalyi (2014) defined as flow. Flow in contemporary dance improvisation was investigated by Łuczniak et al. (2021) using qualitative content analysis. Female and male students of a professional programme at a dance conservatoire took part in a group creativity task. Interviewing was used for data generation to allow the dancers to describe their personal experience and understanding of flow. Themes constructed centred around effortless attention and enjoyment. The dancers described how artistic creation occurred naturally for them when they were fully engaged and how they associated flow with pleasant feelings and without self-judgment of any kind.

According to Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model, relationships that are positive are those that establish and maintain mutually beneficial interpersonal connection with others. Positive relationships are characterised by appreciation, support, and value. It is these social relationships that we seek out and build in our quest to flourish. An example of how impactful development of positive relationships can be, was demonstrated in the participatory action research of Iuliano et al. (2017), who evaluated a community-based social Latin dance project. The participants were Latinx and non-Latinx members of a local social Latin dance community where dance was culturally and historically relevant, accessible and with low barriers to participation, and seen as a positive, diverse, and inclusive activity for leisure and socialisation purposes. Data were generated at community stakeholder meetings, organised dance events in the community, and through focus groups. Findings indicated that involvement in dance led to a strong sense of social connectedness to individuals and the wider community. Dance cultivated feelings of belonging within the local community that reached far beyond the dance floor. Moreover, the participants described “the potential of Latin dancing as a bridge between cultures and generations” (Iuliano et al., 2017, p. 143) that permitted valuable interaction and fostered the building of positive relationships.

Being able to lead a meaningful life requires applying our strengths and developing our virtues towards something that is ultimately larger than ourselves. This route to a deeper and more enduring happiness comes from the sense of belonging to and being in the service of an end bigger than one’s self. To quote Seligman (2004), experiencing meaning “satisfies a longing for purpose in life and is the antidote to a ‘fidgeting until we die’ syndrome” (p. 1380). The experience of meaning in circle dance was studied by Borges da Costa and Cox (2016) using a constructivist grounded theory approach to qualitative inquiry. A group of women and men who were experienced circle dancers shared, through interviews, lived

experiences that they attributed to circle dance. Dance practice was regarded as a sanctuary where belonging, transformation, and spirituality were experienced. A sense of fulfilment, self-investment, and self-development were reported. The circle dance environment was experienced as being supportive, safe, and stable. These factors together contributed to circle dance providing a sense of regeneration, meaning, and purpose in the participants’ lives.

The final pillar in Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model is accomplishment, which refers to experiencing a sense of achievement or mastery over a particular domain of interest. Feeling competent and persevering in order to attain one’s goals is a key component of flourishing. Moreover, being intrinsically motivated enough to pursue a task for its own sake characterises this aspect of the well-being theory. A clear sense of accomplishment was demonstrated in the reflexive thematic analysis interview research of Domene and Morley (2022), who explored salsa dance as a non-formal learning opportunity for university students. One of the constructed themes likened the experience of taking salsa dance classes to learning a new language—for novice dancers the task was challenging, but over time the experience became increasingly rewarding. Dance skill acquisition was described in terms of participant achievement and linked to student well-being promotion.

Objective

Despite salsa dance being referred to by McMains (2016) as “arguably the world’s most popular partnered social dance form” (p. 27) and despite the research of Chappell et al. (2021) who, using a life course approach, reviewed the aesthetic, artistic, and creative aspects of dance, we are currently unaware of any qualitative research that has explored salsa dance, specifically, through an aesthetic, artistic, and creative practice lens. Salsa has, however, been investigated by Lloyd (2021) using a phenomenological approach to better understand the nature of interactive flow sensations during dance practice. In the current research, our objective was to interpret, strictly in a positive psychology context, how these elements of dance may contribute to a sense of flourishing in experienced dancers of salsa within a community dance setting.

Methodology

Study Design and Participants

We designed an anonymous online qualitative survey to explore the experience of salsa dance as it relates to dancers’ flourishing. Our design made use of a fully open-ended survey in order to prioritise qualitative research values and techniques as we acknowledge that data produced by participants, as Suzuki et al. (2007) wrote, will always be partial, situated, and contextual. This research was given ethical approval (application P146244) from the College of Engineering, Environment and Science at the first author’s university. For inclusivity, we conceptualised the population from which we recruited to be any dancer aged at least 18 years old with previous experience in salsa. No requirement for language fluency was made; however, the survey was presented entirely in English. The dancers who volunteered to participate in our research were purposively recruited through online social media posts. Remuneration for taking part was not advertised nor offered.

Forty-one salsa dancers completed the online qualitative survey between January and May 2023. Of these participants, 29 identified as female and 12 identified as male. In terms of age, the youngest dancer was 25 years old, whilst the eldest was 69 years old. The average age of our dancers was 45 years old. In terms of salsa dance

experience, the average experience level was 11 years with the minimum and maximum experience levels being 1 year and 36 years, respectively. We asked the dancers in what country they reside, and we found that the majority were living in the United Kingdom; however, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden were also represented.

Procedure

The survey questions were initially drafted by the first author, a cisgender Latinx male, who has practiced salsa dance as an able-bodied person regularly for 13 years, primarily in the United Kingdom. By profession, the first author is a university lecturer with previous experience in researching community and participatory dance. The second author reviewed the survey questions and, following the process described by Lees et al. (2022), provided a forward reflexivity perspective as a critical friend. The second author, a cisgender British female, is an able-bodied independent dance artist and instructor by profession with 14 years of experience in salsa, also primarily in the United Kingdom. Following amendments to the initial draft of the survey questions, a final set of four demographic and 10 main questions, all of which were open-ended to allow for natural and conversational style responses to be provided, was agreed.

To gain a nuanced understanding of the experience of salsa dance, we explored several broad areas of dancers' flourishing that were largely based on the review of Chappell et al. (2021). It was our intention, as qualitative researcher-explorers, to write overlapping questions in order to allow for reflexivity, as presented by Finlay (2002), and for generation of rich data interpretation that followed what O'Neill (2002) referred to as a big Q qualitative paradigm. The survey questions asked the participants to describe what the following prompts mean to them, as a salsa dancer, in their personal experience whilst dancing: well-being; identity; belonging; self-worth; creativity; embodiment; affectivity; aesthetics; and mood. A final question allowed the participants to provide additional information they felt was important to them that had not already been covered in the previous questions. The open-ended demographic and main questions we used are shown in full (Table 1). There were no minimum or maximum word limits that could be written for each of the questions. The online qualitative survey was hosted by Online Surveys (Jisc, Bristol, United Kingdom) using an institutional account provided by the first author's university. Following the participant information statement and informed consent screen, the 14 survey questions were presented. The data generated for analysis comprised 17,206 words.

Demographic	
1.	Can you please tell us your gender?
2.	Can you please tell us your age?
3.	Can you please tell us how long you have been dancing salsa for?
4.	Can you please tell us what country you live in?
Main	
1.	If we talk about your well-being when dancing salsa, can you please tell us what 'having a healthy body' may mean to you, personally, as a salsa dancer and how you may have experienced this in the past?
2.	If we talk about your identity when dancing salsa, can you please tell us what 'self-identity, self-expression, and meaning making' may mean to you, personally, as a salsa dancer and how you may have experienced this in the past?
3.	If we talk about your belonging when dancing salsa, can you please tell us what 'the individual in relationship with the collective' may mean to you, personally, as a salsa dancer and how you may have experienced this in the past?
4.	If we talk about your self-worth when dancing salsa, can you please tell us what 'achievement, learning, and development' may mean to you, personally, as a salsa dancer and how you may have experienced this in the past?
5.	If we talk about your creativity when dancing salsa, can you please tell us what 'expression of one's own creative body' may mean to you, personally, as a salsa dancer and how you may have experienced this in the past?
6.	If we talk about your embodiment when dancing salsa, can you please tell us what 'immersion and escape' may mean to you, personally, as a salsa dancer and how you may have experienced this in the past?
7.	If we talk about your affectivity when dancing salsa, can you please tell us what 'pleasure and enjoyment' may mean to you, personally, as a salsa dancer and how you may have experienced this in the past?
8.	If we talk about your aesthetics when dancing salsa, can you please tell us what 'questioning aesthetic assumptions' may mean to you, personally, as a salsa dancer and how you may have experienced this in the past?
9.	If we talk about your mood when dancing salsa, can you please tell us what 'feeling low and having worries' may mean to you, personally, as a salsa dancer and how you may have experienced this in the past?
10.	Can you please tell us if there is anything else about your experience of dancing salsa that you would like to share with us if it has not already been discussed?

Table 1. Online Qualitative Survey Questions

Analysis

The reflexive thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2021) was used for analysing our data. As qualitative researcher-explorers, we recognise that our interpretative framework influenced both the generation of our data and the co-creation of knowledge. The analytic account we present is shaped by our lived experience as dancers of salsa and Latin, our personal understanding of flourishing, especially as it relates to able-bodied adults, and our theoretical alignment. Finlay's (2002) deliberate approach to qualitative research was used, which encompassed critical self-awareness and reflexivity at each stage of the project. We adopted Braun and Clarke's (2021) method of latent coding to try to understand the underlying meanings behind the data that we felt were informing the semantic content. Theme construction was done deductively, as described by Braun and Clarke (2021), as we acknowledge our existing understanding of the subjectivity of well-being in relation to dance participation.

We followed the step-by-step phases of doing reflexive thematic analysis as detailed in the dance-based research of Domene and Morley (2022). In brief, the data were read several times over for familiarisation and noting of initial codes. Candidate themes were formed from the initial codes, which was a recursive process and involved consultation between authors. Good fit in the patterns of shared meaning we were developing with clarity in each central organising concept was sought. Our final themes, with corresponding sub-themes, were actively constructed. Both authors contributed to the analysis and were in agreement that the final themes do indeed represent genuine experiences of the participants

involved. A thematic map is provided depicting our final themes and sub-themes (Figure 1).

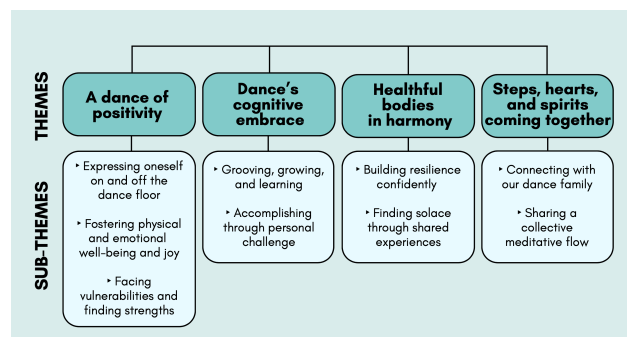


Figure 1. Thematic Map Generated During Analysis of Our Online Qualitative Survey Data

Findings and Discussion

Experienced dancers from the salsa community, who lived in several countries across northern and western Europe, provided an in-depth, coherent, and clearly expressed set of ideas about how they embody the aesthetic-artistic-creative experience of dance through practice. We used an interpretative analytic process which was underpinned by our understanding of the subjectivity of well-being as it relates to dance. With this in mind, we constructed four particularly salient themes that centred around salsa dance and its

ability to foster, support, and lead to a sense of flourishing, as described by Seligman (2011) in his PERMA model. Our constructed themes were: A dance of positivity; Dance's cognitive embrace; Healthful bodies in harmony; and Steps, hearts, and spirits coming together. These themes and their corresponding sub-themes are discussed here within the context of pertinent dance-based literature.

A Dance of Positivity

Emotional and physical benefits were experienced by the dancers, and this was a frequently discussed positive aspect of engagement. Dance practice gave the dancers an opportunity for expressing themselves, both on and off the dance floor. Some dance educators, however, have argued that expressiveness in dance is considered to be at odds with a technique-oriented focus to learning. Morris (2003) described how artistic dancers train for technique in a mechanistic manner, whereby, inevitably, the subtle and expressive qualities of dance are ignored. More recently, artistic expression in dance students was investigated by Spohn and Prettyman (2012) who used metaphor in dance practice to create opportunities to experience positive pleasure in physical movement. Similarly, our salsa dancers interpreted self-expression as one of the elements that contributed to a positive and beneficial dance experience. Emotional benefits were felt, as demonstrated in the following quotations: "to express myself in dance is one of the few safe places left for me to be fully me without misinterpretation" (female, 50s, 9 years' experience); "it's inclusive and no one cares how old you are, where you are from, or what you look like. It's a shared joy in dancing" (female, 40s, 21 years' experience); and "the... emotional benefit of personal and communal experiences is unlike any other hobby I have found" (male, 40s, 15 years' experience). Perhaps the most succinct way of communicating the emotional benefits of dance is through the description of salsa as: "simply one of life's greatest shortcuts to happiness" (female, 50s, 23 years' experience).

Positive physical experiences were also discussed, as illustrated in the following quotations: "knowing my body is healthy and able to move that way [in salsa] is fascinating and I'm grateful for it" (female, 20s, 6 years' experience); "salsa gives me great enjoyment physically. In terms of the feeling of endorphins, [it's] similar to having been to the gym" (female, 30s, 4 years' experience); and "[salsa] improves physical health, muscle mass, weight loss, [and] flexibility" (female, 50s, 23 years' experience). That salsa dance fosters both physical and emotional well-being and joy, we feel, is difficult to argue with. These findings are generally in line with the research of Quiroga Murcia et al. (2010) who, in a similar fashion to our own research, collected data using an open-ended online qualitative survey to explore amateur dance and well-being in an arts and health context.

Positive emotions were also experienced as a result of dance providing a channel through which to face vulnerabilities and to find inner strengths. In terms of facilitating and nurturing creativity in dance, Watson et al. (2012) explored personal characteristics in pre-vocational dancers and reported that a positive and creative physical movement experience arises when facing one's vulnerabilities, being courageous, developing self-confidence, and feeling open. The experience of dancing salsa entails a certain degree of creative processes, as was reported by Domene and Morley (2022) in novice dancers, and this is likely one of the key aspects that contributed to feelings of positivity. Examples of vulnerability and finding strength through dance are shown in the following quotations: "I 'met' salsa at a very vulnerable time in my life, a transitional time. Dancing with another person and connecting [with] them helped me build trust in others" (female, 20s, 6 years'

experience); "dancing definitely helped me train my willpower, resilience, and capacity to lovingly... embrace that I am not perfect, and don't have to be" (female, 30s, 5 years' experience); and "I've never had any body image issues anymore since I started dancing. I don't think it's because of actual changes in my body but simply because my focus is now on the joy my body gives me" (female, 30s, 5 years' experience).

The participants, on the whole, often spoke about salsa as a dance of positivity where they experienced personal betterment, both emotionally and physically. Personal accounts were shared that involved self-expression, well-being, and finding inner strengths. All of these aspects led to dance being discussed as a pleasurable and joyous pursuit to take part in. These findings are largely congruent with the research of Sheppard and Broughton (2020) who reviewed participation in dance across the life course and concluded that active engagement in this shared experience encourages healthy behaviours, such as physical movement, well-being promotion, and management of stress and emotions. It was also suggested that dance practice, as part of a wider programme of performing arts, could be a cost-effective manner in which to facilitate self-management of good health and well-being and, in turn, reduce burden on traditional systems of healthcare.

Dance's Cognitive Embrace

Cognitive and learning aspects of salsa were spoken of frequently by the dancers as a significant benefit gained through participation. Engagement in dance requires attention, memory, decision-making, reasoning, and a constant evaluation of oneself and others. These dimensions of dance practice were described, in broad terms, by Hannah (1995), yet we feel that they indeed apply to salsa, especially due to the partnered leading/following nature of this genre of dance. As a form of physical movement that takes place within a cognitively stimulating context, it is likely exactly this reason that maximises salsa dance's cognitive and learning benefits. Dhami et al. (2015) reviewed the dance literature in a neurorehabilitation context and suggested that dance may be the "ideal example of what multimodal training should consist of" (p. 5) as it brings together both physical and cognitive activity within an enriched environment. The cognitive and learning benefits of dance are likely supported by the multisensory and simultaneous combination of physical movement, music listening, and interaction with other dancers. Moreover, music listening, even in the absence of physical movement, has been theorised by Croom (2012) to be beneficial for cognitive functioning and has been associated with feelings of accomplishment within a well-being context.

The following quotations are examples of personal growth demonstrated through cognitive and learning experiences in dance: "my self-worth as a dancer certainly was dependent on seeing my level improve. Positive feedback from the community in general... was important for my... motivation to become a better dancer" (male, 30s, 20 years' experience); "I was fairly against... taking part in partner dancing originally. I eventually learnt to let go of control and yield, rather than 'fight' within a salsa partnership. This has definitely been a personal development for me" (female, 50s, 7 years' experience); and "less obvious [benefits] to non-dancers [include]... brain training, remembering moves, lyrics, etc." (female, 50s, 23 years' experience). Another example of dance's cognitive embrace can be seen when learners improve in their technique training to the point where they are aware that less conscious effort is needed to perform the required physical movements:

My initial feeling when learning [salsa] was halfway between learning a new language and going to the gym—the new vocabulary, muscle memory, remembering sequences and technique, etc. Once a lead gets to the point where they are no longer ‘thinking’ about the moves they’re leading, the emphasis can switch to understanding the music and to a more nuanced interaction with their dance partner. (male, 40s, 15 years’ experience)

Experiencing a sense of accomplishment and achievement was also spoken of by the salsa dancers in relation to facing personal challenge. We recognise that not all dancers consider their practice as “a vehicle for healing and growth” when confronted with challenge, as described by Leseho and Maxwell (2010, p. 19); however, the dance-based literature does provide evidence of dancers using their movement experience and practice as a means of overcoming personal challenge. Both Ali et al. (2017) and Leseho and Maxwell (2010) researched female dancers overcoming hurdles in their lives through the use of world dance and creative movement practice, respectively. These phenomenologies were framed around dance engaged in as a creative outlet within a therapeutic and counselling context. In our own findings, examples of accomplishment through personal challenge are illustrated in the following quotations: “as a Hashimoto’s sufferer, [salsa] provides me with low impact exercise which is the ideal form to take. Having an underactive thyroid, which affects mood, salsa dancing provides a dopamine surge through the joy of accomplishing new movements” (male, 50s, 8 years’ experience).

I started dancing... after the sudden and traumatic death of my late boyfriend. I had always loved dancing (like clubbing) and Afro-Latin music but had never taken the steps to do it [properly] because I felt way too self-conscious. After his death, I was in some sort of state of ‘the worst has happened, nothing else matters’, which weirdly gave me the courage to start dancing. And from then onwards, dancing was the one thing that helped me through. It is where I could forget the pain for a moment and be in my body instead of my head. (female, 30s, 5 years’ experience)

I already knew that following choreography is good for rehearsing the nerve pathways/signalling from brain to movement, and having multiple sclerosis, I was keen to find different ways to exercise this. Trying salsa not only made me feel like I was developing those movement skills, but also gave me more confidence back in what my body could do. (female, 40s, 4 years’ experience)

Healthful Bodies in Harmony

Health and wellness through dance participation was spoken of often by the dancers. Salsa, as a community dance practice, was associated with confidence and resilience building, generally resulting in feelings of enhanced well-being for the participants. In both younger and older adults, Buck and Snook (2020) evaluated creative movement classes and observed improvements in confidence and psychosocial resilience. Similarly, Martin-Wylie et al. (2022) delivered classes of contemporary dance emphasising improvisation, choreography, and creativity to older adults and also reported improved psychosocial resilience and well-being. Denovan and Macaskill (2017) explored engagement in meaningful leisure activities and suggested that, in adults, participation may act as a means of coping with and buffering stress through “broaden-and-build mechanisms” (p. 462). When applied to dance, as a leisure

pursuit, this theory may explain resilience and well-being development through the broadening of thoughts and actions and building of personal psychosocial resources. Some examples of confidence and resiliency in the dancers are highlighted in the following quotations: “I was initially very shy and preoccupied by my lack of dancing skills but gained confidence over time and started understanding that... when dancing with the right partners, the sole achievement that matters is to enjoy oneself” (female, 30s, 8 years’ experience); and “community is essential for humans. [The] salsa community builds mental resilience and dancing activates dopamine, endorphins, and oxytocin” (female, 50s, 9 years’ experience).

Even after a fight or a long day, dancing salsa was the easiest way to connect to myself and make me feel better. [It was] kind of like meditation to me. It gave me confidence, which increased my self-esteem because I felt beautiful, I felt healthy, I felt fit, I felt sexy, and it just made me connect to myself in a way I never had. [Salsa] made me fall in love with myself and love even the bits about me that made me self-conscious and ashamed. (female, 30s, 13 years’ experience)

The dancers often described salsa as a shared experience—a place where solace, meaningfulness, and acceptance could be found. Pušnik and Sicherl (2010), in their ethnography research, described salsa as being a cultural community that played a therapeutic role for some dancers. Moreover, they went on to say how dancers “use salsa as a balm for their souls” (Pušnik & Sicherl, 2010, p. 120) when seeking health and finding solace following periods of uncertainty or crisis in their lives. The health and wellness elements of dance, we feel, are self-evident in terms of dance practice being a meaningful shared experience for the participants in our study. We demonstrate this in the following quotations: “salsa helps remove the anonymous feeling you tend to get when you’ve passed a certain age... you become identified by your dance ability rather than age, race, or looks. It enables you to stand out and be noticed” (male, 50s, 8 years’ experience); and “dancing salsa is a key pillar for my mental health... it recharges my batteries, helps me disconnect from work and from other problems... [and] gives meaning to my life” (female, 30s, 9 years’ experience).

I [have] lived in four different countries so far. I danced in all of them. In my opinion, people who dance share a lot more than people who don’t, and this is true for every country I lived in. Realising this gave me a sense of belonging... when I go dancing, I’m surrounded by like-minded people. I like to think of dancers, on average at least, as more open-minded and more accepting of differences than the general public which makes me feel safe and accepted. (female, 40s, 20 years’ experience)

I went from a divorcee who had considered whether they wanted to be alive, to someone who lived to go dancing. In finding a partner who dances I also found a connection unlike anything I had previously experienced. Both of these were life-changing... I find it’s very rare to come away from dancing feeling worse than when you arrived. Initially... there were some worries or insecurities regarding my dancing competence... but the good times have far outweighed the bad. The dance floor is a place to let all the other stuff melt away. (male, 40s, 15 years’ experience)

Steps, Hearts, and Spirits Coming Together

Community building and connection was experienced by the dancers, and the dancers often referred to their practice as time spent with *familia*. The participatory action research of Atkins et al. (2019) evaluated social impact and meaning through a community dancing for health programme. Similar to our own findings, dance fostered the building of meaningful personal connections and interpersonal relationships, leading to improved health and well-being. It was suggested that social network theory, as reviewed by Smith and Christakis (2008), may explain the adopted health behaviours and observed positive outcomes in community building and interconnectedness. It is likely the social support, social influence, social involvement, access to resources, and as Smith and Christakis (2008) described, “person-to-person contagion” (p. 417) provided by other dancers within the community that allowed for strong connections to be established by both the participants in our own research and those in the research of Atkins et al. (2019). The sense of community building is demonstrated in the following quotations: “becoming part of this amazing warm community which surprisingly wasn’t of like-minded people, but of people from many different cultures and backgrounds coming together for one common thing... there’s beauty in there” (female, 20s, 6 years’ experience); and “the community spirit of salsa dance is unlike any other activity I’ve been involved in and there’s a real energy and sense of unity within it” (female, 50s, 7 years’ experience).

I found a community that did not judge, did not need to know my past or present... I began to feel an endorphin rush which I had not really experienced before... [salsa involved] learning a new skill, having a sense of improvement each week, and interacting with others in a safe and welcoming environment. (male, 40s, 15 years’ experience)

Deep engagement is another element of salsa that we believe draws people together and leads to the building of a thriving community. Participation was spoken of by the dancers as sometimes being in a meditative-like state of full focus, immersion, and joy. Put another way, the dancers were experiencing flow sensations, which they described wholly in positive terms. Csikszentmihalyi (2014) wrote that “a central task of any human community is to make flow experience available to its members within productive, prosocial activities” (p. 218). We feel part of salsa’s attraction is that it is inherently prosocial, healthful, and experienced as intrinsically rewarding. Examples of dance being a place where consciousness and spirit run loose without challenge are illustrated in the following quotations: “every time I danced salsa, I got completely lost in the music and dance. My mind went blank and there were no thoughts, which totally relaxed my mind and soul” (female, 30s, 13 years’ experience); “when I’m completely connected with the dancer and the music I let go and it’s such a peaceful and happy moment” (female, 30s, 15 years’ experience); and “[salsa] allows me to be in the moment, connect with my dance partner and the music, and pause the thinking brain. It feels sacred and spiritual when the music takes over and you are dancing like one moving body” (female, 30s, 5 years’ experience).

Limitations

We feel our research is novel in its presentation of salsa as an aesthetic, artistic, and creative practice that contributes to a sense of flourishing in experienced dancers. Despite this, however, there are some limitations that we feel must be noted. Although we have undertaken a rigorous interpretative analysis of our data and realise that the experience of dancing salsa is complex and personal, we do

not provide generalisable findings outside of our specific participant group and situational context. Instead, we have made attempts to map out an understanding of the experience of participation in salsa dance in adults who primarily live in the United Kingdom and have provided this through rich description in our reflexive thematic analysis. Secondly, we feel our research is limited in the sense that the main questions in our survey were worded in a way that the readability may have been difficult for some participants due to the academic nature of the language used. Hence, this may have excluded some people from taking part in this research. We acknowledge that creating a survey with wording that requires an above average reading comprehension level may exclude certain participant groups and is not best practice in terms of inclusivity or accessibility. Therefore, to be as transparent as possible, we have included the survey questions in their entirety as part of this research.

Conclusions

Salsa dance is multisensory and comprised of somatic, cognitive, and affective components. As qualitative researcher-explorers, we believe we have been able to demonstrate that salsa—said to be the world’s most popular partnered social Latin dance—fosters a sense of flourishing, or holistic well-being, in experienced dancers when engaged in by adults within a community dance setting. Moreover, we believe we have shown that practice is aesthetic, artistic, and creative. Flourishing, as a well-being theory posited by Seligman (2011), and its constituent parts of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, we believe, is significantly contributed to through salsa when dancers participate for leisure and socialisation purposes. We have illustrated this in our research by our constructed themes that focussed on: emotional and physical benefits; cognitive and learning aspects; health and wellness; and community building. This research, therefore, provides useful qualitative evidence that contributes to the non-clinical literature on dance for health in a positive psychology context. Furthermore, the practical application of our research in terms of promoting dance for health, and as part of a wider programme of the role of arts in improving health and well-being, we feel, is aligned with government policy documentation in this area, such as the recent evidence summary published by Fancourt et al. (2020) for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport. Recommendations in this document are based on strong and promising evidence to suggest that arts can indeed play a health-promoting role in enhancing social cohesion, improving well-being and positive psychological factors in adults, and reducing physical decline and supporting cognition in older adults. In terms of arts on prescription, our dance-based evidence presented here could contribute practically in a social prescribing context. Jensen et al. (2017), extending the United Kingdom-based work of Bungay and Clift (2010), reported on the growing awareness and increasing evidence base, in a Scandinavian context, of social prescribing for the promotion of mental health outcomes, such as increased self-esteem, confidence, mood, and social contact. Inclusive programmes centred around dance for health could potentially be both practical and efficacious if included as part of arts on prescription interventions for adults. Additionally, our recommendation for dance instructors and promoters of salsa would, therefore, be to engage people of all ages and abilities in a participatory dance context and focus primarily on aspects around leisure and socialisation to promote holistic well-being.

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