

PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF BELLY DANCING:
A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

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Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Psychology

by
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PREVIEW

Approval of the Dissertation

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This dissertation by Bonnie Paul has been approved by the committee members below, who recommend it be accepted by the faculty of Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Psychology

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AbstractPHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF BELLY DANCING:
A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

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Belly dance is the common name of a Middle Eastern dance form that has been gaining popularity in the United States and around the world. Historically, belly dancing was a form of entertainment and celebration, along with preparation for childbirth. In modern times, belly dance has been reported to enhance physical fitness and also offer psychological benefits such as increased self-esteem, improved body concept, and enhanced creative expression. These reports appear to be anecdotal. The research question for this study was, “Among women who describe changes after taking belly dance classes, what physical and psychological changes do they report experiencing?”

The design was an exploratory multiple case study. Six participants were chosen from Southern California and the Hawaiian Islands. The participants were women ranging in age from 17 to 70, representing a variety of professions. The participants had spent between 1.25 and 9 years participating in weekly belly dance classes and performing on an amateur basis. Each case consisted of a female participant, a person of significant relationship (SR), and one of the student’s primary teachers. Three main data sources for each case provided data triangulation: 2 interviews with each participant, 1 interview with the SR, and the researcher’s observations. Additionally, a brief phone

interview with the participant's main teacher provided background on the teacher's philosophy.

Data consisted of transcribed, audio-taped interviews with the participants and SRs, and the researcher's written notes. Data analysis focused on content analysis and identification of major themes for each participant and across cases. Major themes were chosen based on commonly reported themes or those that had the greatest impact on participants' lives. The 15 major themes were: acceptance of self and others, improved body image, costuming enjoyment, enhanced creativity, support through group connection, expanded relationships, improved self-confidence, sexual stereotyping, importance of teacher's influence, stress reduction/fun, comfort with femininity, enhanced fitness, expanded personal growth, value of culture/history, and enhanced spirituality.

Because this field of dance expression is increasing in popularity, exploring its potential value offers insight for those who may choose to participate in belly dance for reasons beyond entertainment and fitness.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Belly dance is the common name of a Middle Eastern dance form that has been gaining in popularity in the United States and around the world. It goes by several different names, including Middle Eastern dance, *raks al-sharqi*, *raks al-baladi*, *oriental dance*, *danse du ventre*, and the popular name: belly dance (Buonaventura, 1994). Belly dance was transported to the United States in the mid-19th century and enjoys a highly romanticized history, which stands in contrast to its tradition as a folk dance in its countries of origin. The performing of belly dance in the United States engenders conflicting feelings from many different cultural viewpoints. Belly dance is often negatively associated with sexuality and striptease and devalued because of this. Shay and Sellers-Young (2003) pointed out that it is partly this view that has caused scholarly avoidance.

My interest in this subject is borne out of my personal experience as a student and teacher of belly dance. I have found great personal value and witnessed many women blossom and lead more creatively fulfilled lives seemingly as a result of belly dancing. This has piqued an interest in the potential therapeutic value of belly dance as a vehicle for personal growth.

Belly dance is often referred to as having a therapeutic or healing benefit, though research appears to be primarily anecdotal rather than scholarly. This dearth of research was noted by Franken (2003), who went so far as to identify belly dance as “one of the least analyzed and investigated aspects of dance scholarship” (p. 111). Numerous books

and articles on the value of belly dance have been published recently (Al-Rawi, 1999; Flandez, 2003; Lakin, 2004; Lenz, 2004; McGeer, 2003). I found only a single scholarly quantitative study that indicated that belly dance enhances self-esteem in women (Alves-Masters, 1980); however, the results were based on an author-created instrument and were not statistically significant. Research in the related fields of dance/movement therapy (D/MT) and the therapeutic value of various forms of dance lend credence to the postulate that belly dance could offer a therapeutic benefit. Exploring the therapeutic value of belly dancing may provide valuable insight for those who choose to participate in this dance form for reasons beyond entertainment and fitness.

Research Question

This research explored the range of changes that belly dancers reported experiencing, both as a result of taking classes and as amateur performers. The research question for this study was, “Among women who describe changes as a result of taking belly dance classes, what physical and psychological changes do they report experiencing?” There is relatively little research in the field, so a broad question was chosen to allow for multiple experiences to emerge and to begin establishing a foundation for further research. It is clear that there must be individuals who do not experience changes as a result of belly dancing (or experience negative results); however, at this fledgling point in belly dance research the more pressing question is *what types* of changes are experienced, if any. So the research question bracketed the participant pool by working with individuals who claimed to have experienced some type of changes from belly dance. Because physical changes are commonly expected from an exercise

class, individuals who have also experienced some type of psychological changes were sought.

Rationale for Research

This research study was motivated by interest in furthering credible research in what appears to be a valuable and burgeoning field. In modern times this dance form has become popular in the United States. In fact, according to Sellers-Young (1992), in the 1970s more than one million women were belly dancing. Cruz and Berrol (2004) mentioned that research is a key component for informing clinical approaches. Although belly dancing is not a clinical intervention, pilot studies and anecdotal findings have indicated that it may offer some psychological benefits (Al-Rawi, 1999; Paul, 2005a; Paul, 2005b). Considering the gap in the academic literature of this increasingly popular dance form, this research was deemed to be relevant and foundational (Franken, 2003; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003).

Although there was no scholarly research found that specifically indicated healing effects from belly dance, there was substantial evidence in tangential fields, which indicated that research in belly dance was warranted. This research is discussed in detail in later sections. Research in dance/movement therapy (D/MT), which is typically practiced only in a therapeutic setting, has demonstrated effectiveness for normal persons (Ritter & Low, 1996). Additionally, research on the therapeutic value of dance classes offers promising results, indicating that dance classes can offer benefits such as increased self esteem, reduced anxiety, and improved self-concept and body concept (Minton, 2000; Overby, 1992). Those studies have been almost entirely quantitative and have not

clarified which type of dance is more effective. This qualitative study was intended to contribute to illuminating the causative elements involved.

Also, many of the studies done on the therapeutic value of dance have covered a short duration: 5 weeks to 3 months. In my professional experience, lasting change develops for most women over a much longer period of time, and this was acknowledged as a design weakness in several of the studies (Minton, 2000). Therefore, women who had been belly dancing for a year or more constituted the participant pool in the current research. Arguably, anyone who sticks with something for over a year does so because of some perceived benefit. The intent with this study was to begin to reveal the nature of those changes. This may then inform future research and also assist people who teach or take classes in understanding how this activity may impact their lives.

Case study offers a way to communicate the results in a way that the primary teachers and participants of belly dance (i.e., laypersons) can readily understand. Additionally, the two pilot studies conducted indicated rich value for the participants of belly dance, including changes such as healing of performance anxiety, enhanced self-acceptance, improved body image, improved self-confidence, redefinition of femininity and sexuality, enhanced creativity, enhanced fitness, enhanced technical competence, unexpected friendships, group connection, personal growth, spirituality, and stress reduction.

Definition of Terms

Belly Dance

The first challenge was choosing an accurate term to represent the dance form popularly known as “belly dance.” What to call this dance form is a hotly debated topic

among dancers. For example, Dinicu (1964) considered the terms *belly dance* and *danse du ventre* (dance of the stomach) both vulgar and wrong. The dance appears to be an amalgam of dances that originated in several countries including Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (Osweiler, n.d.). Therefore, assigning the form a title such as “Middle Eastern” or “Oriental” brings with it a Western perspective; the dance is thus named based on a Western viewpoint. There are at least two common derivations of the term *belly dance*. One originates from the translation of the French term, *danse du ventre*, and was promulgated by the entrepreneur Sol Bloom in the 1890s (Carlton, 1994; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003). Another derivation, which Osweiler credited to Ibrahim Farrah, is that it came from the Arabic word *beledi*, which is an Egyptian term for the common people. Names for the dance that are common in the Middle East today include *raks al-sharqi* (dance of the East) and *raks al-baladi* (dance of the people; Buonaventura, 1994). Osweiler also noted that a common term is *raks al-Arabi* (Arabic dance). Because there is no agreed-upon accurate term, for simplicity, this research uses the popular term *belly dance*.

Therapeutic

Because this research sought to attribute therapeutic value to something that is not traditionally considered “therapy,” it seemed valuable to explore the definition of the term *therapeutic*. For the purposes of this research, because it explored dance, which is a physical activity, therapeutic changes were considered along two parameters: physical health and psychological well-being. These definitions are necessarily brief as a complete exploration of the topics is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Physical Health

Achterberg (1994) offered a progressive definition of healing as “any ritual whose purpose is to make [a person] whole The goal is to become better, more enlightened, or stronger than before the problem existed” (p. 9). Similarly, for the purposes of this research, any beneficial changes to the body are considered therapeutic. Common examples of benefits reportedly experienced include increased muscle tone, reduction in obesity, reduced hypertension, reduced blood lipids, and possibly other positive effects (Vicario & Chambliss, 2001).

Psychological Well-being

The basic goal of any therapy is to assist a person to become a more effective, functional person. Bartenieff and Lewis (1980) defined therapy as helping “a patient find an acceptable identity and [a] satisfying mode of behavior for himself and in his society” (p. 144). D. Halprin (2003) said, “Seen from the widest view, the process of therapy includes all of the ways people become conscious of themselves and are able to change” (p. 83). Specific goals can include greater self-esteem, self-acceptance, a greater predominance of positive feelings such as joy or happiness, better communications, improved relationships, and so on. Carl Rogers (1980), one of the founders of humanistic psychology, identified several traits of a healthy individual: (1) unconditional acceptance of self; (2) empathy, or sensitivity in understanding one’s own feelings and inner experiences; (3) congruence, or self-perception aligned with actual behavior and inner experience; (4) nonjudgmental, or not judging one’s inner feelings and experiences but allowing them to flow and as a result experiencing greater self-understanding; and

(5) awareness, or the ability and choice to experience one's inner climate, rather than avoiding it or pretending that it does not exist.

These definitions have nothing to do with a particular setting or modality. They speak of qualities that are enhanced within an individual as a result of a process.

Bartenieff and Lewis (1980) also maintained that any therapeutic change, no matter how small, is valuable. Thus, any context that enhances the characteristics described above can be argued to offer therapeutic benefit.

Rogers (1980) felt that personal growth was an inherent longing of life: "We can say that there is in every organism, at whatever level, an underlying flow of movement toward constructive fulfillment of its inherent possibilities" (p. 117). His view was that it was not so much the process that determined therapeutic outcomes; it was the conditions that were important: "Individuals have within themselves vast resources for self-understanding and for altering their self-concepts, basic attitudes, and self-directed behavior; these resources can be tapped if a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided" (p. 115). He identified three conditions of a therapeutically supportive environment. These were contexted as traits of an effective therapist; however, he also noted that these were important traits of teachers. They include "genuineness, realness, or congruence," "unconditional positive regard" toward the client or student, and "empathic understanding" of the individual's experience (pp. 115-116).

In this research, in the absence of contrary delineation, the term *therapeutic* used by itself refers to enhanced psychological well-being. If the meaning pertains to physical health, this is specifically stated.

In summary, this study explored the range of changes that women reported experiencing as a result of taking belly dancing classes and performing on an amateur basis. Literature in tangential fields indicated that there may be substantive value both physically and psychologically along parameters such as enhanced self-esteem, improved self-concept and body concept. The intention of this research was to advance the understanding of this dance form for both researchers and laypersons.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature reviewed is drawn from several fields beginning with the history of belly dance. Because belly dance does not have an official therapeutic tradition, two other fields are also included: a brief description of the background and applicability of expressive arts therapy, a review of the clinical applicability of dance/movement therapy (D/MT), and research on the therapeutic value of various forms of dance.

History of Belly Dance

A Mixed History

One of the challenges of this research was that “the” history did not seem to exist. There was a range of dissenting opinions and statements of “fact.” One perspective on this phenomenon came from Alexandra King. With only an Associate of Arts degree, she has cultivated an entire department of Middle Eastern Dance at the University of California, Santa Barbara. When asked about the history of belly dance, she said that there was not much documented information because it was a woman’s dance and women were not highly valued in Arabic societies (A. King, personal communication, May 14, 2005).

King’s statement was substantiated by the dearth of written historical accounts. Those found were often made by European or Western men who traveled to the Middle East (Buonaventura, 1994; Nieuwkerk, 1995). Shira (2001a) stated that by the time travelers were entertained by Middle Eastern dancers, the dance form had already been adulterated. In another example, Shay and Sellers-Young (2003) pointed out that, from their point of view, it is impossible to state whether or not belly dance has spiritual roots:

There is simply no way that we, as dance historians, can discuss practices that occurred thousands of years ago. Dance may not have been a feature of religious life throughout the entire Middle East, much less the Orient. As any student of Iranian history is aware, prior to written history there is archaeological evidence of many groups and cultures on the Iranian plateau, but we know little of their ethnicity, languages, and religious beliefs and practices. This is true of many areas. (p. 23)

One of the challenges of constructing an accurate historical account is illustrated in Nieuwkerk's (1995) book. She detailed what sounds like a very thoroughly researched account of the history of belly dance, including many details not found elsewhere.

However, on one point, there appeared to be an information gap. She credited the first belly dance performances in America to a dancer named "Little Egypt." There does seem to be evidence that the dancer Little Egypt existed; however, Carlton (1994) focused her book, *Looking for Little Egypt*, on this topic and found no pictorial or written evidence of the dancer's participation in the infamous Chicago World Exposition of 1893 (discussed in detail in a later section). Nieuwkerk is not the only author who used this popular but unsubstantiated reference; Corio and DiMona (1968) also did. Perhaps because Nieuwkerk's book was published only a year after Carlton's, that information did not inform her treatise. In any case, it is illustrative of the challenge of discovering what is historically accurate and what is not.

Many authors themselves noted the challenge of constructing an accurate history of belly dance (Carlton, 1994; Croutier, 1989; Dahlin, n.d.; Nieuwkerk, 1995; Stewart, 2000; Waldie, n.d.). Prior to the 18th century, history was rarely considered an important aspect of any culture, and even less important were explanations of why things occurred (Historiography, n.d.). Many of the historical records to which we have access were kept as part of religious traditions or literature. Most of us have played the child's game

“telephone” in which one child says a phrase and it gets passed on through a line of children until some other (often hilarious and completely unrelated) phrase comes out at the end. Imagine this kind of storytelling magnified over centuries, and you have some idea of the challenge in constructing an accurate history of belly dance (Buonaventura, 1994).

Ancient Origins of Belly Dance

Athotus, an ancient Egyptian, has been credited with being the originator of dance, but Mourat (2000) noted, “Cave paintings depict ritualistic dancing 7,000 years earlier” (p. 44). The *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* indicated “considerable agreement” that belly dancing originated in Africa (Ancient Egyptian Dance, n.d.). A sketchy trail was then traced from the tomb paintings of scantily clad sensual dancers of ancient Egypt to modern day belly dance. Although this seems to be a reputable source, no other references credibly linked belly dance with ancient Egyptian dance. Indeed there are paintings of ancient Egyptians dancing; however, the dance steps described do not definitively identify ancient Egyptian dance with its modern counterpart (Mourat, 2000).

Several authors traced the origins back to matriarchal societies (Al-Rawi, 1999; Buonaventura, 1994; Dinicu, 1964, 2000; Stewart, 2000) and described a time when women were celebrated as archetypes of the Great Mother, when dance was a central part of all ritual and celebration. Dance was more than simply movement; it was a pathway to connect with the divine. “Dancing is the oldest and most elementary form of spiritual expression” (Al-Rawi, 1999, p. 29). Body and spirit were considered one, rather than separate, and sexuality was seen as linked to spirituality. Buonaventura (1994) traced the origins of belly dance to pagan ritual dances that were found in numerous cultures, before