

## Why Dance? The Motivations of an Unlikely Group of Dancers

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the motivations of adult amateur tap dancers to gain insight into how they construct their social reality, what is the significance of this activity to the dancers, and how does it relate to the dance “culture” more broadly. The research was done as a participant observer amongst a group of primarily middle-aged women in six different locations over a period of five years. These amateur tap dancers are strongly motivated in spite of their minimal talent and the lack of support they might experience when compared to professional dancers. Their often-labored explanations, while unable to enunciate the essence of the sensation they experience, describe what they are doing as a group ritual of emotional renewal. By examining what is said and not said, I additionally uncover social constraints that shaped their explanations. Performance emerges as a game in which the amateur challenges the socially constructed norms of legitimacy in art culture. This “scary” feat of performing is worth the effort because of its innate thrill and the expectation of applause from an audience largely outside the group.

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## INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, I enrolled in a dance class at a local dance studio. I was on my way downtown when I glanced up at the window of a second-floor dance studio. I had seen that window for many years before I realized that I wanted to see what went on there and that perhaps I too wanted to dance. I did not want to do just any dance, however; I wanted to tap dance. Tap does something exciting for me that I cannot easily explain; it always makes me feel like dancing when I watch others do it.

I felt joy when I danced with this group. Yet I was not well-coordinated and had difficulty remembering the steps. And, as time went on, I didn't get much better. The rest of the people in the class were not much more talented than I. They were mostly middle-aged women with children. There was no gold ribbon waiting at the end, and this was not going to be our vocation. When one of us did "break a leg", or rather her arm, before a recital she went to the hospital and returned with a cast - to perform on stage in front of a live audience. Despite setbacks like this, she and the majority of us continue. And so, four recitals and five years later, we call ourselves "tap dancers." Are we tap dancers? This question of our legitimacy raises questions about the legitimacy of the amateur in general. Becker (1982) says dance as "art" has been given a socially constructed reality within the individual society where it is performed and only certain people in this society are given the right to define, classify, and rate its goodness. So, I undertook this study because I wanted to know why we were doing this and what the significance of this activity was within our own social space as well as how it related to "dance culture" within our culture. I wanted to find out what sociological lessons could be learned from this experience.

Thomas (1993) did a similar study of women in an informal amateur dance class for the purpose of exploring the role of dance in women's lives. Her subjects differed from those in this study: they were younger, more ethnically diverse, more urban and more uniformly of the working class. Thomas' subjects derived a pleasure from performance-based dancing that they could not adequately describe. They also showed concern over body type and skill. They described ways of blocking the performance anxiety that they took for granted. Dance emerged as linked to their gender identity. My study has similar findings; however it also examines what participants leave unsaid. Pierre Bourdieu (1977), in constructing a model of a complete theory of practice, observes that those engaged in a practice are unaware of the existence of social structures that affect their perceptions and strategies. Such doxic ("taken for granted") constraints and implicit motivations shape decisions and *habitus*, as used by Bourdieu to mean the collection of beliefs, thoughts and actions that allow a social group to routinely negotiate daily life. The perceived motivations, the motivations expressed through respondents' narrative and a fully-explanatory motivation model are likely to all differ from each other. Similar to the respondents in Thomas' study, my respondents could not be precise about why they were dancing. A prominent explanatory feature becomes the question of the legitimacy of the amateur. Can a dancer be a dancer without skill or appropriate body type? What will the audience think? How much can the dancer rely on amateur status to confer a license or excuse for the illegitimacy of not meeting professional standards? While I am primarily concerned with characterizing the place of motivation in dancers' *habitus*, this cannot be done fully without giving some attention to structure. Fortunately for amateur dancers, the structural constraint of legitimacy is lessened by the special status accorded to amateurs in a consumerist society. Amateurs, being the aficionados of commercial culture, are leaders. As observed by Antoine Hennion

(1996) in the related industry of popular music, being an amateur does not prevent one from being an artist.

## METHODS AND SAMPLE

Because I wished to understand the motivations of some dancers in detail rather than define what is typical for a large group of dancers, I chose to use qualitative methods. The research for this paper was based on strategies of qualitative methods found in Denzin and Lincoln (eds., 1998). Data collection was ethnographic; I was a participant. This was a unique opportunity for me because I was not just an observer; I also was a bona fide member of the group I was studying. This also implied that I would be subject to the same blindness as the other practitioners in my study. Following interviews I typed, coded and analyzed the responses in accordance with grounded theory and the use of thick description. My interpretation of my observations was dynamic and adaptive in that it was ongoing and at two points in the course of the study, my results caused me to extend my data collection by interviewing other dance class groups apart from the one in my core group. My research design reflects Janesick's metaphor equating dance with research. She says, "The qualitative researcher's design decisions can be thought of as similar to the dancer's three stages of warm-up, exercises, and cool-down." (Janesick, 1998, p. 53) Both the dancer and the researcher make a series of decisions at the beginning, middle, and end of the project. "Just as dance mirrors and adapts to life, qualitative design is adapted, changed, and redesigned as the study proceeds, because of the social realities of doing research among and with the living" (Ibid.). This metaphor was applied in the context of grounded theory wherein theory evolves through direct observation. "Generating theory and doing social research [are] two parts of the same process" (Glaser, 1978). Participation in this case provides direct experience, the touchstone of epistemological validity needed for interpretation. As data and provisional theory accumulated, I became concerned about issues suggesting that my respondents were not always giving me complete explanations but rather socially acceptable ones. This ultimately led to my adoption of the practice model of Bourdieu (1977). Being a practitioner myself, I needed to develop reflexivity in order to separate myself from the mindset of my subjects. I used discussions with non-participant colleagues for this purpose.

This study is part of a larger project that involves dance teachers as well as students. The core group was my class at a private dance school in Bradford, Pennsylvania; it consisted of nine other students besides me. In order to broaden my understanding of tap dancing experiences, I visited other private studios across the country to compare and contrast adult amateur tap classes to see if location or size of community might be relevant factors. As a result, my total sample included 75 adult dance students. For the larger study I also interviewed 10 dance instructors, 40 parents of dance students and 40 children (ages 5 through 15), taking dance lessons. While not discussed in this paper, these auxiliary interviews helped me understand the habitus within the social space of small dance studios and were thereby useful to this paper.

Most interviews took place in the studios. However, eight interviews were held at respondents' homes. I observed and interviewed these adult tap dance students at six small dance studios in north-western Pennsylvania; western New York State; Redondo Beach, California; Nashville, Tennessee; and Chicago, Illinois. All these studios were associated with middle-class neighborhoods. Those in Pennsylvania and

New York were upstairs in slightly decayed century-old buildings on main streets in downtown areas of semi-rural cities (pop. 10,000-30,000). They were large halls with varnished hardwood floors, typically ornamented sheet iron ceilings and somewhat improvised dressing rooms. The studios in Nashville and Redondo Beach were in outdoor malls. They were new and the floors were typically rubber tiled concrete. The studio in Chicago was in the far north where the city merges into the suburbs. It had a hardwood floor and was built in the 1930s. Although all the students were middle-class, the students at Redondo Beach differed in that they were richer than those in the rural Northeast and more retired people participated. All schools put on public recitals and advertised them. These studios were chosen by snowball sampling initiated by recommendations from relatives who live in Chicago and California and a research assistant who took tap lessons as a child. This study and my participation in dance classes have been ongoing for over five years. This duration has allowed me to observe students both entering and dropping out of dance classes. Throughout this research, the style of dance has been exclusively tap. I did not concern myself with dance in other cultures or other types of dance such as ballet, ballroom or hip-hop.

My interviews were based on asking one open-ended question: “Why are you coming here and taking these lessons?” This one question became the seed for continued conversations over a period of years. The students I interviewed were reticent. They answered my question with short phrases lacking feeling and depth. When I said, “tell me more”, one student offered to write her thoughts on why she had enrolled in the class. Other students followed her lead. I received twenty essays, some as long as four pages, which respondents told me took “lots of thought” and “soul searching.”

The dancers I interviewed, with the exception of two teenage boys at a school other than my own, were almost entirely middle-age middle-class women either of childbearing years or older. Students aged 18 to 25, single women, ethnic minorities and men of all ages were under-represented. Body types were varied and some students were quite heavy.

Throughout this research, I was troubled by the absence of men taking tap dance lessons. I had encountered only two teenage boys taking tap. I found myself asking the husbands of students if they would join their wives’ class. I asked fathers escorting their daughters to dance class whether they would join a tap class. I got looks of horror and disbelief. I got laughter. They told me that they couldn’t even if they had wanted to. Because these studios’ tap classes turned out to be exclusively attended by a white clientele that reflected the demographics of the neighborhoods of the schools, my results speak only for that social group.

## STUDENTS DISCUSS THEIR MOTIVATION

There were many explanations students gave for taking a dance class. All the respondents had enjoyed watching either current television dance programs or musicals with such performers as Gene Kelly or Richard Gere. One respondent said, “My daughter and I watch ‘Dancing with the Stars’ every week. It is our favorite program.” Some had children enrolled in dance classes and gave that as a reason for their participation. However, respondents had difficulty coming up with instant answers other than that it was “fun”. I felt this was an indicator that their motivation was not conceptualized or reflected upon before the question was asked. What they said and wrote could be grouped into six categories: Keeping fit, seeking stability,

seeking a sense of community, seeking to capture life, seeking to free one's spirit and seeking a new identity.

### KEEPING FIT

Because dance is athletic, it is not only a form of exercise but also an assertion of mental and physical fitness. Thomas finds that “in the current era of the body beautiful, dance, from jazz to ballroom to ballet, has come to be seen as a means of keeping fit, in addition to any consideration of the particular aesthetic components involved” (Thomas, 1995, p. 2). Dance routines are basic to the popular “aerobics” classes held in leisure centers and fitness clubs throughout the country. Ellen, a Pennsylvania health care worker, explained:

“You read in the literature about the effects that the lack of estrogen has on a woman's body and you think it can't be bad. I have found most frustrating the effects menopause has on your thought processes. I find myself not able to remember things. In my job as a health care professional, I make decisions every day, so it had me concerned. When I saw the ad in the newspaper about adult tap dancing lessons, I thought it would be something I have always wanted to do and plus it would make me use my brain to think and remember.”

Ellen's narrative suggests that she is actually seeking a form of mental renewal more than improved muscle tone or reduced low-density cholesterol.

Judy, a short, heavy woman recently retired from teaching elementary school in Tennessee, said she too was doing it for the exercise. Yet, during a break she took a scarf and twirled it and then shook her hips in very sexual movements. She was very agile and got great joy from these motions as if saying, “Look at me; I am a sexy dancer.”

### SEEKING STABILITY AND RELIEF FROM DAILY STRESSORS

As the sociologist Randy Martin says, “Dance generates a sense of being in the midst of a crisis, a break, a rupture, even a loss and a prospect at the same time; thus while dancing may appear to be a series of stops and starts, for the dancer, next steps are already in motion, already passing from one (im)balance to the next” (Martin, 1998, p. 1). It replicates a stressful situation but turns it around into something positive.

Andrea, a dance student from New York and the mother of two boys who also dance, agreed that dance takes concentration. It relieved her stress from family and work pressures:

“It is a good stress reliever. A lot of people do yoga, but I like to go out into the garage and start dancing. I think about the steps, my movement and I lose myself. Family and work pressures are common sources of stress that motivate my dancing.”

Her 16-year-old son, John, also danced to relieve stress:

“You can do it anytime, no matter where you are. Like, say I'm here in the kitchen on the hardwood floor, and I'm a little stressed out and no one else is around; I can just go at it.”

Another working parent from California, Arlene, told me:

“This is my escape from life; this is my stress relief. This is the one place I can come to and everything else disappears. I have a hard time stopping thinking [sic] about my

job, and I'm always on the go, and the stress level is really high. So this [dance class] is where I come."

Leila, a 38-year-old administrative secretary who dances with my group, is raising three children on her own and has two jobs to make ends meet:

"I wanted to do this my whole life and I never had the chance. We had no money when I was young. My mother never took lessons, and some of the other kids in my classes did, and I wanted to, too. I don't know why. Why am I taking dance lessons now? Because at this time in my responsible grown-up life of no husband and three kids, I'm tapping for mental stability. Keeping something, the something being, I don't know what — possibly my life — under control: maybe another form of finding me. For the years I've given up for the sake of taking care of my kids. So this dance class is something for me because I never do...for me. Forty-five minutes of 'just me' time. You know, men are so 'me' and women are 'everyone else'. So, it's a temporary fix for the time being. My kids will grow up and move on, as I have. Then I can start over...God willing!"

Her words, "I have wanted to do this my whole life", suggest the opportunity of returning to a previous state, as was the case for Ellen, a renewal.

Martin sees in the dance metaphor an opportunity for people to resolve problems that prevent them from moving on with their lives: "Taking dance seriously...helps us to see beyond the despair of an arrested present to the opening that any present forges for enhancing social life, as activity done together" (Ibid. pp. 1-2).

## SEEKING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

For most respondents the dance class is a community. In rural areas, the dance studios are an integral part of the community at large—often one with a tradition spanning generations. Each specific adult dance class is also a community for those that belong. Mary, a 45-year-old California student, said:

"There is so much you can get out of dance class that's not actually related specifically to dance. The women in this class are truly terrific; there is no competition, no meanness; they are all supportive and encouraging. There are no stars or great beauties, just all ages and body sizes, and they keep coming to class. We're a strange family of different social classes, ages and lifestyles, yet somehow the same. I have trouble memorizing the steps, I can't lift my legs very high, I get dizzy when we turn around a lot, but so does everyone else."

A Pennsylvania college student taking classes remarked:

"It's a nice camaraderie you have with everybody, and it's not competitive. And that's what you want. You compete with yourself."

Similarly, a retired woman who recently moved to Florida and was visiting the New York studio during a trip back, viewed her dance lessons as a way to find community:

"I started to dance as a social thing when I moved because it was a connection I could make...a whole new opportunity to meet people. I have one teacher in the winter time at one of the studios that I go to, and she is probably 80, and she has danced all her life, and she is wonderful. These people are in wonderful shape, and none of them are particularly young."

## SEEKING TO CAPTURE LIFE AGAINST MORTALITY

Dancers perceive dance as renewing body, mind and spirit. The identity of being a dancer can substitute for one that is lost or worn out. Dance appears as a remedy at times of transition, perhaps because it boils off the emotions of transition. It need not always remediate something. Because life is a continuity of transitions, a movement from one balanced pose to another, dancing is an expression identified with living and life itself. To possess dance is, in a way, to possess life. Said one woman about an adult tap class, “It’s kind of like you are older, but you can still do things that you wanted to do as a child but couldn’t. Now you can. You still can, you know; don’t die, just do it!”

Older dance students in our class, such as Margie, talked about feeling young when they dance:

“So why am I taking this dance class? Because I’m 67 and I’m afraid I won’t be able to use my legs or be able to dance. My ex is ten years older than me, and he can’t walk more than a quarter block without sitting down, but that’s so depressing. Also because I have so much fun when I put on taps and make noise with my feet. Because everyone always made fun of my skinny legs when I was young, but now I say, “I’m a dancer; skinny legs are good.” I actually forget my problems when I dance. I don’t think about anything but the steps. I never knew it was so hard to move your feet and hands to organized steps and to keep a smile on your face all at the same time. I know I am not very good. I’m stiff, klutzy and not particularly graceful, but who cares. It’s fucking magic and my words cannot in any way express how I feel when I move fast or remember all the steps. So, I guess I dance because I can and I have to before it’s too late.”

## SEEKING TO FREE ONE’S SPIRIT

Dance can be akin to a religious experience related to the emotion of joy. Coeey considers the theological implications of the verve of dance, both the pain and the joy of those who dance. She says, “Joy[...]co-participates in the social construction of reality. Because joy is tied to distinctive symbol systems - religious, political, economic, and socio-cultural - those who seek, explore, and cultivate various forms of joy” experience a mature joy similar to a religious revelatory transaction (Coeey, 1998, p. 5).

Renita is an administrative secretary in a local Pennsylvania hospital. Although she is very quiet-spoken, she moves with a passion:

“Why do I dance? I dance because the passion of music moves me almost as needing to breathe. I suspect my Irish heritage to be the reason. I’ve always had to have a foot tapping or hum or sing. The pulsing rhythm taps [into] the very core of my being and I’m almost unconsciously drawn to the beat of the music. I almost feel a freedom when I dance, because of the cleansing of my soul from the ability to let my natural inclination to music rule.”

Mark creates his own steps and has starred in recital performances. He described his Zen-like experiences:

“Whenever I dance, I don’t usually think about dancing, I just listen to the music and do it. My body knows what to do. Like steps, I have absolutely no idea in my head what the heck I’m doing; I just do it. My body knows what to do; it’s done it, and I just do it. It’s good because, I don’t know, it’s easier, I guess.”

Another western New Yorker put it like this: “Your freed personality comes out in your feet. It comes out when you dance.” It is interesting that one dancer describes dance as something that prevents her from thinking about life and another says it is life. I don’t think that there is any disagreement on an emotional level. Rather, the narratives seem constrained by the words available.

At the core, dance is an emotional experience akin to spirituality that has been described as defying rational discourse. Langer describes dance as something mythic opposed to and unrecognizable to the rational and scientific: “The dance creates an image of nameless and even bodiless Powers filling a complete, autonomous realm, the ‘World’” (Langer, 1953, p. 38). These “Powers”, she contends, ceased to be recognizable once *discursive form* broke the mythic mold upon which language was founded.

### SEEKING A NEW IDENTITY

Even though the adult students are socialized and locked into particular work and family roles, Henslin argues that, as with all people, they are not “prisoners of socialization.” He says,

“we can purposely expose ourselves to groups and ideas that we prefer. Those experiences, in turn, will have their own effects on our self. In short, although socialization is powerful, within the limitations of the framework laid down by our social location we can change even the self. And that self - along with the options available within society - is the key to our behavior” (Henslin, 2001, p. 91).

Dancing can function both inwardly as a way to achieve a feeling and outwardly as an identity or even as defining an occupation. While none of the people interviewed in this study had any intentions of dancing professionally, some sought the mark of the dancer’s identity. This identification is not a mere label since dancers regard dance as something they possess and own. Martin (1998) would agree that dance belongs to everyone, not to just certain people or certain body types. The dancers in the classes I interviewed often expressed their possessiveness in words similar to what one told me about her class: “This is my night, and you don’t mess with my night!” (Classes are at night.)

Many explicitly seek a renewed identity as a dancer. Janis, a 55-year-old Pennsylvania preschool teacher, said she was depressed and was finding herself through dance:

“I feel like I have a whole new identity. I am someone else. When my students see me [in recital], they are so excited. I’m thrilled to be dancing again; I appreciate it so much. When I was fifty years old, my girls were off to college, going to their own dances, having fun. No one was at home to dance with. My husband said ‘no.’ I was depressed, oppressed, suppressed, ugh. I said, ‘What is this feeling? Low, dark, ugly, choking, sick, sleepy, hard to breathe, sad, the tears won’t stop, and my energy tank is on empty.’ When I turned 54, I was watching Dr. Phil, and he said, ‘Find your passion...what makes you tick.’ I didn’t know and didn’t care. I thought, ‘Oh, hell, what is passion anyway?’ So I went back to my 20s, 30s, and I thought, ‘Why, of course, I was the dancing queen. I could dance all night; I loved it, I missed it. Why did I stop?’ I thought I’d give it a try. But my head, my feet, my arms, nothing goes together. I’m a little out of breath, but I’m breathing. I can’t always remember the steps, but I’m thinking. My feet aren’t fast, but they aren’t hurting. Good grief...I’m having fun!!”

Francis, a 46-year-old recently divorced and unemployed woman from Nashville, was making major changes in her life:

“There is much change in my life. I’m moving to Chicago to live with my mom to work on my mental and physical health and pursue my passion - dance, not performance. It is kind of like starting over.”

However, no identity worth its salt is accepted without a contest. Marge, a 50-year-old secretary from Chicago, said:

“I work in an office. I tell everyone I’m a professional dancer and they laugh at me. I went to the office once and they had this whole thing with like, ‘Tell someone about yourself that no one in this room would know about you.’ And, I’m going, ‘I tap dance.’ They told me I’d be the entertainment at the Christmas party and I said, ‘No, no.’”

John, the teenage male tap dancer from New York, gave the conflict some thought and resolved the identity contest thusly:

“It’s just something that you can say is special about you, something no one else can really do or wanted to. Sets you apart a little bit. The guys and girls will kind of make fun of it. I got the nickname, ‘Tappy.’ They aren’t being mean about it. It’s the guys on the baseball team.”

Being male and a stage dancer transgresses the accepted norms of male behavior. Yet for this person there seems to be an excitement in it. To be “a dancer” is to belong to a special group. Burt (1995) finds that gender stereotyping of dance as feminine discourages males from dancing. However, the higher echelons of the dance hierarchy, such as major choreographers and producers, are occupied almost exclusively by men—thus confirming another gender stereotype.

## THE RECITAL

The recital solidifies the dancers’ identity. Getting ready for the recital is a major part of dance classes. The recital becomes the goal, however stressful. Some students do not perform in the recital. Jean, who was using the dance class as a place just for herself and away from family responsibilities, could not be in the recital one year because she could not afford a costume for both her daughter and herself. So, she chose to spend the money on her daughter. Choosing costumes is a major hurdle. Most of the women constantly complain about their breast, leg and body size, either too large or too small, and that limits the type of costumes they are willing to wear. Even when the costume is chosen and the jitters overcome, friends and family often do not appreciate the significance of the undertaking. One woman remarked, “I said something to my mother about the recital, and she said ‘I’m not going to your dance.’ And I said, ‘You went to my brother’s football games.’”

Anne, a long-experienced amateur dancer, sees another side of the recital:

“Parents and adults push kids to get up on stage and perform because that’s what they want them to do. But, when you turn it around, how many adults are willing to get up on stage and perform and make a fool of themselves?”

Charlotte’s description fits that of many first-timers:

“All I could think was that I was forty years old, about to go on stage and dance in front of 1,400 people, something I would never, ever have dreamed of doing at any earlier point in my life, and how wise that had been: my arms and legs were now paralyzed, as if they had rusted in place. It was like those dreams where you try to run from a pursuer but you simply can’t move. The music was starting. The bright lights obscured all view of the audience, but I knew they were there, 1,400 people

whose expressions I couldn't see—no friendly or familiar faces to calm me down. The music was playing, and there was no way I was going to be able to budge.”

After the performance, there is a great release of tension and emotion. After her first recital, Charlotte realized that she was fortunate enough to have her troupe receive “the most applause of the night.” Her daughter’s teacher told her, “I was bawling my eyes out.” Later, on her answering machine, she received another message from a friend, “I cried and gave you all a standing ovation.”

All adult dance students that participate in recitals experience an emotional roller coaster, as did Charlotte. Veterans enjoy what they have achieved:

“Even if I’m not that great at this, it makes me feel good. I get compliments and stuff and I eat it up. It makes me feel wonderful because I don’t feel like that all the time, so I love it.”

The mother of a performing family talks about her own view of the audience when she performs:

“I like performing. Plus, you could see their faces and see that they were enjoying what you were doing. They weren’t bored or upset. If you could see that they were happy, I get positive reinforcement.”

In the wake of the performance, the performer often gains a philosophical attitude epitomized by this woman’s understatement:

“I couldn’t tell my grandchildren that I wouldn’t be in a performance and expect them to do it. So that’s why I’m in the performance.”

[\(View video “The Tribe in Action”\)](#)<sup>1</sup>

## DROPPING OUT

Over the years the composition of the core group changed. Comparing the performance video of the class today with that of the original class shows that, for one reason or another, the heavy dancers have dropped out. As she left, one heavy-set dancer in our group said that she was pregnant and leaving the dance to protect her unborn child. Other reasons given, those by interviewees discussed earlier in this paper, included these:

Janis, one of the original members previously quoted as “seeking a new identity”, was in a commuter marriage during the first four years while her husband worked on an out-of-state project. She was very enthusiastic. When her husband returned permanently from that job, he came to a dress rehearsal (husbands rarely do this) and expressed his displeasure as he watched his wife perform. Soon after this, she remarked to the class members that she “was making a fool out of herself”. Then she quit.

Judy, whose teenage daughter also took lessons, quit when her daughter began attending a studio for professional dancers in New York City. She stopped discussing her own experiences with the group. Instead she spoke repeatedly of her daughter. Her husband also lavished praise on the daughter.

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<sup>1</sup>This dance video is one produced by Lawrence Lawson in the early days of the core group studied. It is the first dance video of the group and is not copyrighted. It shows the group as it appeared initially and represents a point of comparison mentioned in the paper. In recent years, the same school has produced a series of semi-commercial videos on DVD.

Leila came and went from the dance class several times over a period of years. She said that her “feet were bad” and “I cannot afford dance class for my daughter and myself.” She was very critical of herself over her minor mistakes in recitals. In one period she quit dancing but assisted the teachers in bringing child dancers on and off the stage.

## DISCUSSION

There is something about the feeling dancing evokes that cannot be explained but which needs to be addressed because it is essential to understanding why amateurs of this caliber want to dance. When the amateur tap dancers in this study were asked why they took dance lessons, their immediate answer was almost invariably because it was “fun”. When I asked them what “fun” meant, forcing them to think about what they were communicating, they gave answers that reflected their acquiring a new social identity or gaining spiritual renewal. I still wondered how it could be fun to do something one was not proficient at. On one hand, I sensed that there was something left out. On the other hand, something was added to increase the social acceptability of the explanations.

Looking at the reasons that dancers gave for quitting dance class was helpful to understanding the meaning of the motivations dancers had given for dancing. Janis had dropped out when her husband told her that she “was making a fool of herself”. None of us are highly talented and she was in reality no worse. She had said that she was finding a new identity in dance. She had been “the dancing queen” when she was young, but now had an “ugly” feeling. She was finding “her passion” although her absent husband had discouraged her previously. Apparently her grip on her dancer’s identity was fragile and shattered when he returned.

Judy had said that she was doing dance for the exercise. She was the one that liked to ham it up with moves that contained sexual innuendo. She had actually said, “Look at me!” She quit when her daughter upstaged her in the family spotlight. She was one of the heavy women who quit. If she had truly been doing dance only for the exercise, her daughter’s success as a dancer should not have affected her.

Leila, who was seeking stability through dance said she had problems with stability in her life that forced her to leave and return. She really liked being in the dance class group. However, she was one who had difficulty participating in recitals. Although gifted with an extraordinarily beautiful physique, she was very hard on herself about her minor mistakes on stage and would rather give the money for the performance costume to her daughter than to herself.

Clearly the reasons the dancers gave for dancing had been molded by social constraints. Looking into myself and my group, I notice that, although we enjoy compliments when we get them, we never say that we want attention, applause, to be called “pretty” or even say we are proud of what we do. Instead, when asked, I say, “I have fun even though I am not any good at this.” Saying things like this prevents us from offending the judgments people make through their taste. This is something that is taken for granted, since we are amateurs; we are not legitimate in the same sense that professionals are. Dance is an art form and is therefore governed by an aristocracy of culture (Bourdieu, 1984). Our culture, in the anthropological sense, is always under threat from culture in the aesthetic sense. Dancers are expected to conform to certain ideals in body type and skill that vary somewhat depending on the type of dance. Tap dance is one of the least restrictive as to body type, but all

dancers not taking “character” roles are expected to fit the cultural norm for the stage performer’s body type. While the audiences for these recitals are not likely to distinguish the subtleties of skill, having the wrong body type is easily spotted even from the back row. It is no wonder that many heavy women dropped out. Approximately 60% of the dropouts in the core group were heavy.

The groups I observed have formed a social space based on interest in dance, social class, gender and age group. Each individual dance class is like a little tribe. It has a fragile solidarity so long as it is respected or at least ignored by potential critics. The recitals are the ironic twist. In the recital we defy outsiders to attack our identities as dancers. Of course, if the attack is absent or ineffective, we have legitimated ourselves. In this sense it is a test of achievement in performance of the dancers’ art. We often ask ourselves why we do this, that is, why it is so much fun when there is so much embarrassment, pain and suffering. I contend that there is something in the emotion of dance that is socially molded but not entirely socially constructed. It is an irreducible building block, the material out of which the emotional experience is made. It is the ineffable piece at the center, the core affectual element, around which the envelope of social construction wraps itself as a phenomenological context. It is the most internal driving force, the one needed to propel us amateurs through the recital. This affectual element is not alone within each of us. It ramifies. It develops ties among the participants and serves social ends. The dancer and dance student become members of an “affectual tribe” (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 6) of other dancers. The collective need to enjoy, manage and make presentable this envelope and its unspeakable content explains both the solidarity of the dance group and through the group’s defiance of norms, its fragility. What we do as a group I can describe but the “why” in the center of our feelings I cannot. An incident in a recital illustrates this. At the end of our routine we all had to lift our legs and join them together in a long chain. We held each others legs up. Each dancer was dependent on the next. If one slipped, the entire line could have fallen. The audience held its breath. We were terrified and thrilled at the same time. We were concentrating so hard that we could think of nothing else. This description fits that of a general process examined by Bataille (1987, pp. 63ff) if we see the public performance of dance by these amateurs as a form of transgression of the ordinary, akin to riots and festivals.

Re-examining the dancers’ motivations, I see that they, through the agency of an evolved affect, experience a documented exhilaration (Thomas, 1995, p. 6) from dancing together and especially from public performance as a troupe. This phenomenon is short-lived and apparently indescribable by the participants in this study other than as “fun”. Requiring further explanation brings the respondent into conflict with conventions of description: the describer must use words and ideas that have commonality and will not expose her to ridicule. I sense that this leads the respondent to refer the exhilaration onto more durable social objects such as health and spiritual well-being.

There is a constant tension between joy and humiliation that is especially present in amateur dance performance. The ever-present chance that something will go wrong during the show and spoil the thrill makes it into a game of chance. The player exhibits her skill and her body in a public challenge—a socially and sometimes physically dangerous activity. It is the exhilarating affectual element at the core which both compensates for the risk and is intensified by the chance of earned applause from an audience much larger and greater than the troupe. This dance experience is thus an example of one of those collective effervescences as observed by Durkheim (1965, p. 426) that are persistent features of most all societies.

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