CultureCase

Dance classes allow people to test themselves and explore new identities

This research was conducted by **Helene M. Lawson** at the **University of Pittsburgh, USA**

Summary

The paper reports the results of in-depth interviews with participants in a tap dance group in Pennsylvania, USA. The interviews suggested that people dance for the following general reasons: keeping fit (both physically and mentally), seeking stability and relief from the day-to-day, a sense of community, capturing the vitality of life (even when old), freeing one's spirit and inhabiting a new identity (and conspicuous ownership of that identity).

The researcher put herself in the midst of her subjects

The author took an ethnographic approach: becoming an active member of the tap dance group that she was studying. This meant that she was able to elicit detailed and authentic data (rather than being viewed as an outsider asking probing questions). Participants in the tap dancing (and by extension the research) were mostly white, middle-aged, middle-class women.

People found it hard to articulate why they danced

Participants struggled to articulate what motivated them to attend the dance classes. The author had to work hard to get people to expand on short general answers to her questions. In the end, many of the tap dancers chose to reflect and then write down their thoughts, rather than answer the questions in person.

Performing is very different to practice or rehearsal

Reflecting on the moments of recital and performance, interviewees expressed how they challenged themselves to take part and put themselves before an audience, and then derived a large release or emotional payoff for having done this (further enhanced by a positive reaction from the audience). This was in contrast to classes in a studio, which invoked a mental space that was separate from the everyday real world.

Keywords

tap **amateur** **USA** **interview** **dance** **motivation** **performance**

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