

Dance as a form of emotion-sensitivity training

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This research was conducted by **Julia F. Christensen, Antoni Gomila, Sebastian B. Gaigg, Nithura Sivarajah** and **Beatriz Calvo-Merino** at **City University London** and **University of the Balearic Islands**

Summary

Expertise in the arts is known to be associated with changes in the structure and function of the brain, leading artists to show different behavioural and emotional reactions than non-experts in response to their craft. How artists respond to depictions of emotions is less well understood. This research examined how expertise in dance influences responses to emotive movements, and showed that experienced dancers exhibited stronger sensitivity to the emotions embodied in human movement.

Experienced dancers are more sensitive to emotions expressed by others

Two groups of young women – one group of undergraduate students untrained in dance, and the other group professional ballet dancers (or those in training) – watched a range of five-second clips of ballet movements depicting happiness or sadness. Researchers measured skin response as a subconscious measure of emotions and asked participants to describe how each clip made them feel. Not only were the dancers able to discriminate more clearly between ‘happy’ and ‘sad’ clips, their conscious and subconscious responses were more closely related. Playing the clips backward dampened the dancers’ responses, suggesting that familiarity with the movements is an important influence on the emotions they elicit.

Dance and movement as ‘emotional training’?

Future research could examine whether dancers have a natural predisposition to understanding the emotional content of movement or whether this develops with increasing expertise. If the latter, the authors suggest that training in expressing emotions through bodily movement and dance could be used as a way of enhancing emotional sensitivity in certain groups of people, such as those on the autism spectrum.

This summary is by **Vicky MacBean, King’s Knowledge Exchange Associate**

Keywords

ballet **experiment** **UK** **dance**

Title	Dance expertise modulates behavioral and psychophysiological responses to affective body movement
Author(s)	Christensen, J. F., Gomila, A., Gaigg, S. B., Sivarajah, N. & Calvo-Merino, B.
Publication date	2016
Source	Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance, Vol 42, Iss 8, pp 1139-1147
Link	http://doi.apa.org/getdoi.cfm?doi=10.1037/xhp0000176
Open Access Link	http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/13002/
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By **Culture.Case** | 30 January 2017 | **Intrinsic impacts of arts and culture** |



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