

# New review sheds light on why dance is not only about sex and beauty

18 August 2017, by George Wigmore

In a biological sense dance has many more benefits for our mental and physical health than solely being an asset for looking pretty or increasing the odds of attracting a partner, according to a new review from researchers at City, University of London, the University of California Irvine, and the University of the Balearic Islands in Spain.

The study, which is published in *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, suggests that these beneficial functions of [dance](#) – which include aspects such as enhancing people's communicative skills, their attentional focus and the social cohesion within groups of people who dance together - are biologically at least as important as any beauty or courtship benefits.

Dr Julia F. Christensen, from the Cognitive Neuroscience Research Unit in Department of Psychology at City, University of London and lead author of the study, said:

"Dance is not just for pleasure. In a dance, beauty and sex are in fact merely 'the icing on the cake'. Important biological effects happen in our body while we dance and while we watch dance. These are far more important than the aesthetic beauty that dance produces for our visual system."

The review is one of the first attempts to systematically assess the available evidence which demonstrates measureable biological effects of dance practices, with a view to offer a road map for future work in this domain.

Due to the centrality of dance to human experience, the authors suggest it is these noteworthy, deeper neurobiological effects - such as how dance focuses the body and the mind, and also how it enables the communication of thoughts and feelings - which explain the pervasiveness and presence of dance all around the world in all cultures and throughout time.

The authors argue that this psychobiological and mental health dimension is basic, and that other benefits derived from dancing (e.g., pleasure and sexual success) are related to the deeper psychobiological effects that drove the evolution of dance because they made it intrinsically rewarding.

In particular, the review suggests that there are six functions of human dance which go beyond the most common modern interpretations of the purpose of dance, and offer a better understanding of how it evolved and why it is so central to human experience. These are:

1. Attentional focus/flow - Dancing or watching dance allows the individual to enter a state of flow; a way to focus the mind and the biological systems of the body into a singular coherent state
2. Basic emotional experiences - Dance, in any of its forms and styles, is a powerful elicitor of basic emotional experiences with potent psychophysiological effects in the body
3. Imagery - Dance can elicit complex [emotional experiences](#) through imagery – again with psychobiological effects
4. Communication - Dancing and watching dance is communication. Any art can be used as a means of communication of emotional states, intentions, complex states, and even stories and new knowledge by acting on the underlying systems in the brain
5. Self-intimation - Self-intimation refers to a process of self-realisation through self-observation during artistic activity and enjoyment. So to speak, individuals train in their own emotional expressions and facial and bodily movements and learn to understand and use these as indicators of their own inner bodily and affective states and intentions
6. Bonding/social cohesion - Dances are used

at the community level to promote bonding within a social group, to solve social problems related to aggression or desires, and to provide a platform to channel interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts to the benefit of the community

Evidence indicates that each of these functions triggers important body processes that can contribute to biopsychological and neurocognitive health of dancers and dance audiences.

Dr Christensen said:

"Dance moves us, and many derive aesthetic pleasure from it. However, in addition we believe that dance has noteworthy, deeper neurobiological effects. What our review suggests is that instead of primarily being related to mating and courtship, dance is primarily a way of regulating the processes which underpin our mental and [physical health](#).

"Other benefits derived from dancing, such as pleasure and sexual success, are correlates of these deeper psychobiological effects which drove the evolution of dance because they made it intrinsically rewarding. Fundamentally, dancing is just good for us, which explains why it is seen everywhere around the world, in all cultures."

The review and its extensive supplementary materials also contain a selection of images from cross-cultural comparisons of dance practices, and some archaeological examples of depictions of dance practices from different parts of the world.

Provided by City University London

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