

The wheelchair dancer within the context of spectacles

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Os dançarinos em cadeira de rodas no contexto dos espetáculos

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to reflect about wheelchair dancer participation and social inclusion within the context of presentations and spectacles open to the public. We adopt qualitative research to enhance and complement investigation concerning study subject, analyzing interview applied to a group of twelve wheelchair dancers. We utilized analysis proposals to make discussion and reflexion about the dancers answers. The result of the worked out in details discussions about the dancers speech in wheelchairs detach the dance as artistic product and don't put in focus the deficiency of the dancer but fortify in the stage context and in one who has spectations relationship, a new social identify, the artistic identify.

Keywords

Disability; Wheelchair dance; Social inclusion.

Resumo

O presente artigo tem como objetivo refletir sobre a participação e inclusão social dos dançarinos em cadeira de rodas no contexto de apresentações e espetáculos abertos ao público. Utilizamos a pesquisa qualitativa, com entrevista aplicada a um grupo de doze dançarinos de cadeira de rodas que participaram regularmente de apresentações e espetáculos. Recorremos aos procedimentos de análise de conteúdo a fim de classificar indicadores para uma discussão e reflexão acima das respostas dos dançarinos. Os resultados acerca dos discursos dos dançarinos em cadeira de rodas destacam a dança como produto artístico não enfocando a deficiência, fortalecendo no contexto do palco e na relação estabelecida entre dançarino/expectador uma nova identidade social, a identidade artística.

Palavras-chave

Deficiência; Dança em cadeira de rodas; Inclusão social.

INTRODUCTION

Disabilities that are felt and perceived in individuals' lives are the product of the interlinking of these individuals' personal histories with the social environment in which they live. Moreover, the stigma of "incapacity" or "invalidity" falls on these individuals who are considered to be disabled¹.

With regard to physical disability, body signs that provide a connotation of difference from "normality" are particularly visible. In thinking of bodies with disabilities, Miranda¹⁶ stated that when an individual's body form does not correspond to the current body ideals, it is also rejected and regarded "from outside" as an enemy that challenges the community's ideals. In this sense, the politics of exclusion start with exclusion of the individual's own body.

People with physical/motor deficiencies have been regarded over the course of time as incapable of carrying out simple everyday activities⁵. Dance was ideologically regarded as an art form that would be impossible for such individuals to perform.

According to Ferreira⁸, in relation to dance, a specific ideology has been constructed historically and culturally in our society regarding the ideal type of body for carrying out this artistic activity, which has always valued the idea of excelling in relation to bodily beauty and plasticity of movement. Considering that disability signifies the cultural antithesis of a healthy and fit body, it has to be emphasized, in a situation in which a disabled person is presented in the role of a dancer, that this role has historically been reserved for the glorification of an ideal body.

However, what is seen in wheelchair dancing is that the disabled and excluded body is expressed through broken paradigms, destandardized movements and construction of a new identity, as well as accomplishing choreography through transforming gestures into the language of dance. In this type of action, the wheelchair is transformed from a symbol of impotence into an object providing a challenge, thereby ceasing to be only a means of locomotion and becoming yet another possibility for creation and a new esthetic proposition.

In this regard, Tolocka²² stated that the possibility of dancing in a wheelchair has been contributing towards social changes relating to participation of people with physical disabilities in community life, and also to modification of the meaning of wheelchairs within society, away from the earlier view of wheelchairs as synonymous with immobility and incapacity.

In reporting the impact on society of a dance show done in wheelchairs and the interaction of dancers with and without disabilities who were on the stage simultaneously, these contexts can be seen to present opportunities for inclusion in and expansion of the social relationships of the individuals involved in such situations. Shows are seen as spaces for interaction and social inclusion between dancers and spectators.

From the perspective of Araújo²¹, inclusion is the result from the sum of successful opportunities that are made possible for any citizen. Likewise, wheelchair dancing is an opportunity for people with motor physical deficiencies to show their potential for forms of artistic expression¹².

Johnstone¹¹ considered that inclusion is a feeling of belonging to a social group or place. According to this author, humans have a "sense of place": this is a concept that includes feelings about where each person belongs, in relation to others. It is a concept that simultaneously has objective and subjective components and, thus, the contemporary concept of place is connected with the notions of inclusion.

In this regard, Mattos¹⁴ stated that even with different choreography and styles, dance may consist of an exercise of seeking to achieve harmony with the expression of a group through sensory and emotional perceptions. Thus, with every member included, dance consists of learning to respect the diversity and particular features of each participant. In this manner, it might be said that wheelchair dancers are able to find their place within the category of dance artists belonging to dance groups.

Wheelchair dancing can be understood to be a type of activity that uses the wheelchair as an instrument, and it may be of artistic/recreational or competitive nature. The dancer does the movements with the aid of this instrument, in interaction with other dancers, who may or may not be in wheelchairs¹².

The present article reflects on the feelings and perceptions of dancers with motor physical disabilities in social relationships that are established within the context of rehearsals, presentations and dance shows that are open to the public and in contact with spectators.

METHODS

The present study was characterized as a qualitative investigation in which we sought to reach our objectives through research in the literature and in the field.

The field investigation was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Campinas States University (CEP/FCM/UNICAMP), under opinion report number 910/2009. This part of the study consisted of conducting interviews with 12 dancers who were using wheelchairs.

To carry out a detailed analysis on the data gathered from the interviews, we used the method for content analysis on narratives that was put forward by Bardin². Through this systematized scientific technique, we sought an alignment between the theoretical reference point and the oral source.

Population

To apply the technique chosen, the research population was defined as 12 dancers of both sexes, who were in different age groups and from different regions of Brazil.

The study subjects were grouped as follows:

- Individuals presenting congenital motor deficiencies;
- Individuals presenting acquired motor deficiencies.

All the dancers needed to be members of wheelchair dance groups or companies, and they needed to have participated in shows or competitions that had been open to the public.

Procedures

The corpus of this investigation was formed by oral material that was gathered in interviews that were conducted by means of direct contact between the interviewer and the study population described above. An open question was used, and the oral material was recorded and transcribed in full.

The locations for the interviews were the headquarters of the Integrated Dance Center (CEDAI) of the city of Campinas, the place where the wheelchair dancers developed their activities and rehearsals every week, and the Fifth Wheelchair

Dance Symposium in the city of Juiz de Fora, an event that brought together a large number of wheelchair dancers from different regions of the country.

Below, we present the question used in the interviews with the dancers:

- *Question:* What are your perceptions about your inclusion and participation in society in the context of wheelchair dance shows?

RESULTS

To better present the methodological processes carried out during the data analysis, the information characterizing the profile of the 12 dancers selected were organized as Table 1 (Annex). The interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 71 years, and 58.3 were female.

Table 1 – Representative profile of the 12 dancers interviewed

Dancer	Age	Sex	Disability
1	34	Male	Acquired
2	19	Female	Acquired
3	29	Male	Congenital
4	22	Male	Acquired
5	42	Male	Acquired
6	36	Male	Acquired
7	71	Female	Congenital
8	28	Female	Congenital
9	27	Female	Congenital
10	23	Female	Congenital
11	19	Female	Congenital
12	22	Female	Congenital

From surveying the indicators based on the dancers' testimonies, the categories presented below could be selected. These categories, which were found in the dancers' discourse, allowed us to delineate the methodology of the content analysis² and to interpret the data gathered on the basis of the theoretical referent points.

Categories

- Social recognition
- Excellence
- Normality
- Recognition of potential and competences
- Interpersonal relationships.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to reflect on the participation and social inclusion of wheelchair dancers in the context of presentations and shows that were open to the public, starting from the opinions and feelings of the dancers who were the protagonists of this study.

Because of the richness of the issues raised during the interviews, it was decided to present the discussion of the results based on the categories found through the testimonies.

Social recognition

Social recognition was manifested through the discourse of interviewees 1, 4 and 7, who said that they were viewed not through their condition of disability but, rather, as artists. In other words, they had started to be known through the identity of dancers and to be recognized for their artistic potential. The perception of feeling socially recognized by means of dance can be highlighted through the affirmations below:

There's a change in social views when people see a disabled person dancing. If he can dance, he can do everything that he wants. (Dancer 4: male, 22 years)

Today, people know me as HP the dancer. They might have known me as that disabled girl in the wheelchair. (Dancer 7: female, 71 years)

Wheelchair dancing is a form of artistic activity that places value on differences, interpretation and creativity. The artistic shows emphasize art and the artistic product, and do not focus on disability. Although the disability exists, the dancers strengthen a new social identity within the context of the stage, i.e. an artistic identity.

According to Ferreira⁷, when dancers make their body gestures, they are constructing themselves as less impotent in relation to reality. Thus, the importance in the disabled individual's decision to perform dance activities is connected with the feeling of competence and the construction of new meanings and identifications in relation to the society to which he belongs.

From the interviewees' discourse, it could be seen that dance gave rise to a new view of society among them, and from society towards them. These disabled dancers felt that they were seen as people who were capable of accomplishments and transformations of their everyday realities.

Excellence

Excellence was clearly manifested in the discourse of interviewee 2, whose feelings were expressed in terms of mastering the limits and perseverance, in this manner:

"We were able to overcome many obstacles". (Dancer 2: male, 19 years)

According to Cunha⁵, the discourse presented by wheelchair dancers belongs to an imaginary that is predominantly heroic, in which the adventurous heroes go through a large portion of their lives fulfilling challenging tasks and surviving sacrifices, so that they can then return, feeling renewed, to their everyday lives. In this regard, it can be seen that individuals' capacity for self-influence, through challenges that are posed and evaluative reactions to their yield and accomplishments, constitutes a fundamental cognitive mechanism for motivation. In wheelchair dancing, the dancers take risks in searching for transcendence, face up to challenges, transpose limits and feed the desire to proceed²¹.

Normality

From the discourse of dancers 3 and 8, it can be seen that there is a desire to be “seen and treated” not only in terms of their condition of being different, but also as human beings who have feelings and capabilities. Dancer 3 used the concept of equality and dancer 8 used the concept of normality to express that idea that they were able to lead lives within the standards. In the discourse of both of these dancers, it can be seen that there was a need to transpose their differences so that they could lead lives full of accomplishments, just like people without disabilities in their everyday lives.

“I feel that people start to see disabled people as equals”.

“People see that there isn’t any difference”. (Dancer 3: male, 29 years)

“When I’m dancing, I try to express the idea that there’s an individual inside the disabled person who has feelings and can live a normal life”. (Dancer 8: female, 28 years)

The theoretical reference point regarding the concept of normality is based on the myth of the perfect body. The terms “deficient”, “deviant”, “different” and “abnormal” translate many things beyond the gestures and behavior usually imposed for maintaining the lives of any human beings.

According to Sasaki¹⁹, people are believed to be “normal” if they do not have any conditions of deficiency. This author also adds that in society there is a division between what is “normal” and “abnormal”, between “common” and “uncommon”, between “equals” and “people with differences”. Carmo⁴ attributed the concept of disabled to anyone who presented incapacity to make gestures, do activities or behave in a way that was considered “normal”.

Among the theoretical concepts that exist, we have chosen to present the concept of disability as a variation that is integral to the human species. In this concept, according to Diniz⁶, “being disabled is to experience a body that is outside of the norms”, i.e. the idea of disability only occurs or is presented as “a representation of what the body would be without the deficiency”.

This is because, as indicated by Goffman¹⁰, this difference has a markedly social content: “the difference in itself derives from society, since before a difference becomes important, it has to be collectively conceptualized by society as a whole”

According to Diniz⁶:

Contrary to what is imagined, a body presenting disability cannot be described as abnormal. The abnormality is an esthetic judgment and therefore a moral value placed on lifestyles. It has to be accepted that a blind body is a tragic event, but it also has to be born in mind that this is one among many possibilities for human existence.

It was observed from the dancers’ discourse that the belief of the majority of society, which defines what is “normal” and “abnormal”, “different” and “unequal”, had been incorporated by the disabled dancers and formed part of their everyday lives, such that the notions of normal and abnormal were not found inside the individual, but outside. Thus, these notions were what other people perceived in this individual.

It was seen in this discourse that the wheelchair dancers provided new meanings for their deficiency and a new way in which spectators could regard disabled people. However, it has to be acknowledged that the discourse of the interviewees showed that they had a great need to “feel that they were seen and treated with dignity”, like all human beings who have feelings, anxieties and potential, given

that looking at differences and making reference to normality are still widely present in our society.

Recognition of potential and competences

Recognition of potential is directly linked to social recognition. In this study, we observed that when the dancers demonstrated their corporal artistic abilities under the spotlight, they felt recognized socially. The testimonies of dancers 4, 10 and 11 highlighted the importance of showing to society that they were people capable of dancing and performing many activities.

... If he can dance, he can do everything that he wants. (Dancer 4: male, 22 years)

Dancing allows me to show my cultural possibilities and movement possibilities.

(Dancer 10: female, 23 years)

I have the capacity to do this and much more. (Dancer 11: female, 19 years)

Beppler³ pointed out that individuals have a need to be recognized by the group, because from this recognition, they are capable of forming an image of themselves.

According to Poloni¹⁷, although the importance of feeling recognized is more commonly expressed among men who continually live under the tension of needing to be valued for their function and performance, it seems to be more accentuated among disabled people.

According to Gaio⁹, people who were born or became different in their body structure are equally capable and cry out for moral and social freedom. They want to demonstrate that they can accomplish all the activities that are possible and imaginable.

Thus, in wheelchair dancing, through being under the spotlight, the dancers were able to show their talent, expression and potential, thereby placing value on their personal and artistic aptitudes. This potential is constantly confirmed and reinforced by the positive reaction from spectators, such as through the intensity of the applause and dialogue that might be established within the after-show context, between the artist and the public who saw the show.

Interpersonal relationships

The indicators from the discourse of dancers 9 and 10 expressed an improvement in interpersonal relationships, sociable living and perception of the world.

When people see you after the presentation, they give you feedback.

You're shut off in your own little world at home.

You go out and start to be a different person, and start to see things differently.

(Dancer 9: female, 27 years)

Dance opened doors to other people for me, and even opened them to myself.

So that I would know how to deal with the whole world around me.

I became loosened up and started to talk to people more. (Dancer 10: female, 23 years)

Regarding these affirmations, Sato and Tolocka²² stated that people practicing wheelchair dancing started to experience the world in a different manner, given that the movement became a mediator of the possibility of inclusion. It could be seen that there was a positive change in the dancers' behavior after coming into contact with this type of activity and the whole context surrounding it.

This change in actions and behavior also influenced their everyday lives in situations outside of the context involving dance. In this regard, Michener et al.¹⁵ stated that through experiencing success and positive feedback from their performance, there was an improvement in their self-esteem and consequently in their social behavior.

From the testimonies above, it could be seen that the oral reports of these dancers with congenital and acquired motor disabilities expressed feelings and perceptions and varied according to their life histories and experiences. However, we did not find any significant differences in the discourse of these groups in relation to the context of dance and the fact of having a condition of congenital deficiency or a deficiency acquired as an occurrence at some phase of their lives.

In reflecting on the responses of the dancers interviewed, it can be seen that independent of variation in age group and sex, there was no divergence of opinions and feelings among them. We believe that this was associated with the pleasure and complexity of the dance activity. This was mainly within the sphere of feelings of accomplishment, given that in most cases, these people had been deprived of various corporal, cultural and artistic opportunities and experiences in their everyday lives.

It can be affirmed that the categories extracted from the testimonies and the divisions made were capable of supporting the notion that the wheelchair dancers' participation within the context of shows and presentations that were open to the public were of importance. The social recognition, interpersonal relationships, excellence and recognition of potential can be highlighted.

CONCLUSIONS

Through reflecting on the participation of the wheelchair dancers in shows, it was found in this study that the act of dancing transformed the relationships of these artists between themselves and consequently their relationships with spectators and with society. Since dance is an activity that does not aim to segregate, it is constructed and reconstructed from its practitioners' reference points, thereby providing a space for communication, affectiveness and possibilities that favored recognition and social inclusion among the dancers interviewed. In this sense, it can be seen that dance frequently went beyond the stage and was reflected in the dancers' everyday lives because of the benefits that practicing this activity provided for this population, within the scope of their physical, psychological and social integrity.

It was observed in this study that the spectators and dancers came together within the after-show context. This usually took place based on dialogue in which the artists could receive praise and congratulations, which would confirm the success of their actions and the recognition of their art. These convergences between the dancers and their spectators positively influenced the actions of these artists' everyday lives and their social activities, given that they often bore the marks and stigma of their disabilities within their life histories.

In this regard, it can be said that the actions of the disabled dancers in their shows transformed dance into a public political space from which the artists' social identity emerged. This identity transcended the limits of the private space and the dancers' intimacy, to enter the public space and sociability.

Dancing, in its wide variety of forms expressed or manifested, carries meanings that can only be identified by the parties involved. These usually enable many readings and are also a way of shouting out for freedom through body expression, thereby experiencing and feeling every moment of the music, bodies that interlink,

discovery of the individual and collective, applause, performing of shows, being a subject in shows and having the identity of the artist's role. These are present through the subjectivity of the context of dance and disability.

Authors' contributions

All the authors collaborated in compiling, critically reviewing, analyzing the content and approving the final version of the manuscript.

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