

Review of: "Flourishing in Salsa Dance: A Qualitative Investigation of Aesthetic, Artistic, and Creative Contributions"

Annalisa Burello

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this article. As a dancer myself, I was not surprised by the findings in the very least. In fact, most amateur dancers would attest to those benefits, otherwise they wouldn't keep up dancing. This is not to dismiss the findings, nor the rigour of the approach. It is surprising to me that so little literature exists not only about the health benefits of the arts in general, but of dance in particular. It is a timely contribution to an art which is often considered 'low', unless we are talking about ballet.

My research field is the interconnection or overlap between spirituality and the arts, dance being one of them. It was interesting to me to read that some of the dimensions that are usually considered 'spiritual' are included in positive psychologist Seligman's well-being theory, PERMA. It seems to me that PERMA bridges positive psychology with transpersonal psychology. I am referring particularly to two constituents: relationship and meaning. This is because both of these constituents point to going beyond the ego or the self, a personal growth that correlates to Abraham Maslow's extension of his pyramid of needs into Transcendence. As the story goes, Maslow added Transcendence after discussing his model with Viktor Frankl, one of the founders of Transpersonal Psychology (with Maslow) and a holocaust survivor. He observed that the ones who survived the Nazis extermination camps were those who found a reason to live that transcended their own self, like himself. Frankl believed that true meaning came from being of service to others or being driven by a purpose beyond the self. However, Maslow died before he could fully develop this last part.

Seligman's description of meaning explicitly contains 'applying our strengths and developing our virtues towards something that is ultimately *larger than ourselves*' (Domene and Domene, 2023, p.4/15, my emphasis). Further the authors add 'This route to a deeper and more enduring happiness comes from the *sense of belonging to and being in the service of an end bigger than one's self*' (p.4/15, my emphasis). These dispositions or behaviours are generally attributed to spiritual, religious or awakened people (see also the Spiritual Orientation Inventory developed by Elkins et Al, 1988)(1).

While the quest for purpose and meaning is a well-known 'trope' of spirituality, less known or discussed is its connectivity aspect. Very often, awakened, spiritual or self-actualised people are described as people who do not identify with any specific group of people, but have 'transcended' their own original identity to embrace the whole of humanity. They are their own individuals, with no particular loyalty or affiliation to any identity group. This description is somewhat deceptive

because it paints spiritual individuals as ‘loners’, people who are disconnected from their own community and in fact are mentally stateless or unrooted. Whilst this is generally an accurate description of the mindset of such individuals, it forgets that one of the effects of a spiritual mindset is to feel strongly connected to *everything*, hence nothing in particular. However, religious and secular rituals evolved for precisely the opposite aim. They were designed to connect people at an emotional and irrational level, so that they developed a sense of group belonging that protected their fragile psyche from fears of separation and isolation. Rituals’ intent is to make people feel connected at a spiritual level, rather than a transactional or utilitarian one. Regarding the relationship's constituent, the authors describe that ‘relationships that are positive are those that *establish and maintain mutually beneficial interpersonal connection with others* Positive relationships are characterised by appreciation, support, and value. (p.3/15, my emphasis).

They further cite a study that found that

‘involvement in dance led to a strong sense of social connectedness to individuals and the wider community Dance cultivated feelings of belonging within the local community that reached far beyond the dance floor Moreover, the participants described “the potential of Latin dancing as a bridge between cultures and generations” (Iuliano et al., 2017, p. 143) that permitted valuable interaction and fostered the building of positive relationships. (p.3/15).

This connectivity is indeed a spirituality’s outcome, as theorised by Jorge Ferrer’s Participatory Spirituality (2011). Ferrer has taken Transpersonal Psychology from an individualistic perspective to a prosocial one. He contributed to the so-called ‘participatory turn’ in transpersonal studies in 2002 (2011, p.1). He stated:

Revisioning [Transpersonal Theory] reframed transpersonal phenomena as pluralistic participatory events that can occur in multiple loci (e.g., an individual, a relationship, or a collective) and whose epistemic value emerges—not from any pre-established hierarchy of spiritual insights—but from the events’ emancipatory and transformative power on self, community, and world. (p. 1)

He defines Participatory Spirituality as such:

the participatory approach holds that human spirituality emerges from our cocreative participation in a dynamic and undetermined mystery or generative power of life, the cosmos, and/or the spirit.⁴ More specifically, I argue that spiritual participatory events can engage the entire range of human epistemic faculties (e.g., rational, imaginal, somatic, vital, aesthetic, etc.) with the creative unfolding of reality or the mystery in the enactment—or “bringing forth”—of ontologically rich religious worlds. In other words, the participatory approach presents an enactive⁵ understanding of the sacred that conceives spiritual phenomena, experiences, and insights as cocreated events.

From time immemorial, the arts have been the technology through which such participatory spirituality emerged. In a

secular context, as the one chosen for this study, it is evident that the participants' intention was not to apprehend the 'mystery or generative power of life, the cosmos and/or the spirit', but they certainly experienced the mental state that in a religious context could give rise to such interpretation (interpretations of ineffable and transcendental experiences are always an afterthought). Dance and music are well-known to induce ecstatic states of mind in the participants, should the conditions and the intentions be right.

Ferrer continues in explaining that there are three interrelated dimensions: intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal (p.2). Regarding the intrapersonal dimension, he writes:

Intrapersonal cocreation consists of the collaborative participation of all human attributes—body, vital energy, heart, mind, and consciousness—in the enactment of spiritual phenomena. This dimension is grounded in the principle of equiprimacy, according to which no human attribute is intrinsically superior or more evolved than any other. As Romero and Albareda (2001) point out, the cognicentric (i.e., mind-centered) character of Western culture hinders the maturation of nonmental attributes, making it normally necessary to engage in intentional practices to bring these attributes up to the same developmental level the mind achieves through mainstream education (see also Ferrer, 2003; Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, 2005). (p.2)

Hence Ferrer develops a concept of spirituality which is embodied, rather than mental. The above corresponds with 'dance's cognitive embrace' described in the qualitative surveys (2023, p.9/15). This allows for dance to be used as a transcendental technology.

Regarding the interpersonal dimension, he writes:

Interpersonal cocreation emerges from cooperative relationships among human beings growing as peers in the spirit of solidarity, mutual respect, and constructive confrontation (Ferrer, 2003; Heron, 1998, 2006). It is grounded in the principle of equipotentiality, according to which "we are all teachers and students" insofar as we are superior and inferior to others in different regards (Bauwens, 2007; Ferrer, Albareda, & Romero, 2004). This principle does not entail that there is no value in working with spiritual teachers or mentors; it simply means that human beings cannot be ranked in their totality or according to a single developmental criterion, such as brainpower, emotional intelligence, or contemplative realization. (2011, p.3)

This also ties up with Salsa's 'community building and connection' described in the paper (2023, p.11/15). Here the authors report feelings of meaningful personal connection, 'person-to-person contagion'. These quotations are particularly salient to demonstrate the point:

"becoming part of this amazing warm community which surprisingly wasn't of like-minded people, but of people from many different cultures and backgrounds coming together for one common thing... there's beauty in there" (female, 20s, 6 years' experience); and "the community spirit of salsa dance is unlike any other activity I've been

involved in and there's a real energy and sense of unity within it" (female, 50s, 7 years' experience). (p.11/15, my emphasis)

I found a community that did not judge, did not need to know my past or present... I began to feel an endorphin rush which I had not really experienced before... [salsa involved] learning a new skill, having a sense of improvement each week, and interacting with others in a safe and welcoming environment. (male, 40s, 15 years' experience) (p.12/15)

Furthermore, anthropologist Victor Turner, who developed a theory of rituals, describes the concept of existential or spontaneous *communitas* as 'a state of equality, comradeship, and common humanity, outside of normal social distinctions, roles, and hierarchies' (Olaveson, 2001, p.93). Turner believed that that 'communitas is 'a fact in everyone's experience' and 'it is central to religion, literature, drama,

and art' (p.103). Such practices exist in a liminal space. Olaveson provides a succinct description of Turner's concept:

Communitas is an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and undifferentiated communion or community of equal individuals. It is an essential and generic human bond; "it involves the whole man in relation to other whole men", and is the "quick" of human inter-relatedness, devoid of judgementality; it is comprised of egalitarian, direct, nonrational bonds between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals who are equal in terms of a shared humanity; it is a modality of human interrelatedness, "human beings stripped of status role characteristics – people 'just as they are,' getting through to each other . . ." The experience of communitas is also usually a "deep" or intense one, and belongs in the intuitive or emotional realm, as opposed to the rational one. Turner defined communitas as fundamentally opposed to what he called "structure." (Turner quoted in Olaveson 2001, 104).

In summary, the secular activity of Salsa dance can be interpreted through Ferrer's participatory spiritual lens and Turner's anthropological lens of cocreative rituals as forms of antistructure *communitas*.

Given the secular context of this study, the transpersonal dimension is not particularly relevant, however hints to a transpersonal state of consciousness are reflected in these quotes:

Examples of dance being a place where consciousness and spirit run loose without challenge are illustrated in the following quotations: "every time I danced salsa, I got completely lost in the music and dance. My mind went blank and there were no thoughts, which totally relaxed my mind and soul" (female, 30s, 13 years' experience); "when I'm completely connected with the dancer and the music I let go and it's such a peaceful and happy moment" (female, 30s, 15 years' experience); and "[salsa] allows me to be in the moment, connect with my dance partner and the music, and pause the thinking brain. It feels sacred and spiritual when the music takes over and you are dancing like one moving body" (female, 30s, 5 years' experience). (p.13/15)

As a last extension to the study, I would like to bring to the reader's attention the effects of dancing on the physiology of brain. The rhythmic action between two people dancing together, just like playing music or singing, is likely to synchronise not only their heartbeat and breathing, but also their alpha brain waves. Alpha waves are the low wavelength (8-12Hz) brain waves associated with calm, meditation and visualisation. When the brain is in an alpha state, 'we are in the best state to learn new information, perform intricate tasks, learn languages and analyse complex situations. The alpha state is where we find 'The Zone' (greatly improved focus and performance levels when participating in sports) (Mind Body Education, Module 6, p.6). The alpha state is what Dr Lisa Miller describes as 'the wave we ride to unified awareness- to awakened connection' (2022, p.199). In other words, Salsa is likely to induce a brain state which is analogous to a meditative state. This is confirmed by the above quotes.

In conclusion, this paper was extremely thought-provoking for me, because it challenged the academic or artificial separation between positive psychology and transpersonal psychology on one hand, and hence whether my conception of secular spirituality belongs to the domain of positive or humanistic psychology rather than Transcendental Psychology. On the other, it informed my own research about the correspondence between spirituality and the arts. As the authors correctly positioned it, Salsa dancing is very efficacious for achieving holistic well-being. However, its spiritual dimension could have been further developed. I hope that my review has been constructive and potentially it is adding a new the dimension of this research. It is with this spirit that I would like to invite the authors to join our initiative, Spirituality and the Arts Special Interest Group (<https://spiritualitystudiesnetwork.org/sys/website/?pageId=1075389>).

NOTES

(1) The theory-based SOI has nine scales focusing on cognitive, experiential, and affective aspects of spirituality: (1) Transcendent dimension, (2) Meaning and purpose in life, (3) Mission in life, (4) Sacredness of life, (5) Material value, (6) Altruism, (7) Idealism, (8) Awareness of the tragic, and (9) Fruits of spirituality. (https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-52140-0_11#authors, accessed 10.12.23).

REFERENCES

Pablo A. Domene, Laura Jackson de Domene. (2023). Flourishing in Salsa Dance: A Qualitative Investigation of Aesthetic, Artistic, and Creative Contributions. *Qeios*. doi:10.32388/C3WYND.

Elkins, D. N., Hedstrom, L. J., Hughes, L. L., Leaf, J. A., & Saunders, C. (1988). Toward a humanistic-phenomenological spirituality: Definition, description, and measurement. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 28(4), 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167888284002>

Ferrer, J. (2001). 'Participatory Spirituality And Transpersonal Theory: A Ten-Year Retrospective'. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 2011, Vol. 43, No. 1

Frankl, V.E. (1946/2004). *Man's Search for Meaning*. London, UK: Rider.

Maslow, A. (2014). *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences*. USA: Stellar Books.

Miller, L. (2022). *The Awakened Brain – The Psychology of Spirituality*. Penguin Random House UK.

Cunningham, M. (2018). *Mind Body Education*, Module 6 (not published).

Lazar, A. (2021). The Spiritual Orientation Inventory (SOI): A Multidimensional Measure of Humanistic Spirituality. In: Ai, A.L., Wink, P., Paloutzian, R.F., Harris, K.A. (eds) *Assessing Spirituality in a Diverse World* Springer, Cham.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-52140-0_11

Olaveson, T. (2001). “Collective Effervescence and Communitas: Processual Models of Ritual and Society in Emile Durkheim and Victor Turner.” *Dialectical Anthropology* 26: 89–124. [https://](https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020447706406)

doi.org/10.1023/A:1020447706406

Turner, V. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. London: Aldine Transaction.