

Acute Awareness of the Self and Interaction: Responsive Embodiment among Dancers and Sociologists

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ABSTRACT

My experience and observation of the physical manifestations of insecurities as a dancer and sociologist led me to develop questions surrounding kinesthetic intelligence, critical cerebral processing, the concept of a “self,” and feelings of embodiment. I became interested in how these reconcile under structures that promote external validation, alienation, and logical thought. This article describes a research-creation project that I began by choreographing a dance with six conservatory students researching themes of alienation, socialization, and scripted behavior. These dancers were individually interviewed about the creation process as well as their experience of dancing. I also conducted a contact improvisation event and group interview with the six dancers and three sociology students. An analysis of the results revealed that they felt a pervasive sense of monotony and disenchantment occurring with routine behavior and interaction in everyday life. They were able to disrupt this disenchantment by working to generate a sense of their own embodiment. Specifically, this entailed attending to concrete details, personal responsiveness, and acknowledging their own impulses toward and away from others. This allowed them to connect to a “self” and to others. In addition, novel physical interactions helped facilitate an understanding of where attention lies, amplified social connection, and combated alienation and disenchantment.

Keywords: alienation, arts-based research, attention, contact improvisation, (dis)embodiment, self, sentience.

believe that intellectualizing and cerebral analysis is more valid than corporeal knowledge, that hypothesizing is better than experiencing. However, what is one without the other? Both modes of thought need to exist in order to understand one's self and interactions with others. Can they even be separated? But what is the experience of understanding "self" and attention? Is it different for people who spend more time on discursive or kinesthetic modes of communication?

I am interested in looking at subjective experiences of cognition, movement, embodiment, insecurity, and how these concepts affect the sense of self. This led me to construct a research-creation project using dancers and dance as the reference for physical observation and sociologists as the reference for discursive thought. I use these two cohorts because they both seek to understand interaction, one from a more theoretical cerebral place and the other from a more physically focused place. Sociology is the study of the forces and structures that maintain and change social order and affect human behavior and interaction. Dance is a place where movement and images are made through the interaction of bodies in space, where interactions serve as metaphors to understand personal and social phenomena through highlighting the physicality of different human patterns. Looking at the two fields of practice in relation to each other led me to several areas of scholarship.

Understanding the Literature

The Self Amongst Others

All humans exist in relation to an intangible shaping force, culture. Culture is a perspective that allows individuals to understand and categorize behavior. It is a socializing force that, through its ideology, shapes the nature of a community and its inhabitants. People's habits and interactions are by-products of the values and ideologies of the dominant culture; people's habits are developed through exposure and repetition of behavior in response to their surroundings. Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty claims that as socialized beings, we are comprised of the combinations of our various experiences (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Within the context of cultural influences,

The Beginnings

The sparkly costumes were the lure. Like many young dancers, I validated my decision to dance by saying that I wanted these exciting costumes. A similar justification occurred later, when I told myself that I was dancing to stay in shape. These ideas were initially cute, but upon reflection, they became disconcerting. Where was the concept of "self" in these explanations? Like many of my friends, I had been identifying as a "female," a "dancer," and a "student" for years. My perception of myself was defined in relation to the expectations, social validation, and positive attention I received in relation to these terms. But how was I understanding my choices? What agency was I giving myself to understanding my own experience? This way of identifying myself in relation to proscribed identities began an alienating process dependent upon external validation. I felt both myself and my peers seeking this validation.

The experience of identifying myself based on other people's observations – external validation – makes me feel disconnected from my own thoughts and ability to understand. I sense that I can comprehend things from an intellectual, cognitive, cerebral, top-down standpoint or from an intuitive, physical, embodied, bottom-up approach. Intuitive ideas come to me more rapidly than words but by questioning their validity, I cannot effectively articulate myself. Instead I try to deconstruct my intuition. In my experience, an imbalanced focus between the sentient body and cognitive mind leads to immobility, inflexibility, and reduced productiveness. Is this a universal experience?

My experience with a western academic school system in the United States leads me to

our unique history shapes our presentation of self as well as our perception of any situation. Our perception is inevitably influenced by relative social inequalities, due to the different conditions of our upbringings (Wong 2013). As each of us develops our concept of the self, we begin expressing it through our actions, making culture by interacting with one another. These actions are physical, emotional, and intellectual in nature. Our own and others' perception of our actions and thus our presentation of self is of utmost importance to how each of us relates to the world socially (Merleau-Ponty 1962).

Erving Goffman describes presentation of self in his concept of the imaginary social script. Goffman theorizes that cultural ideologies form an assumed normative script where actions can be judged by adherence or deviation from these norms. Deviations result in feelings of alienation and disenchantment (Goffman 1959). The subtle differences in each human experience determine the nature of the self that Goffman theorizes. In this way, we situate ourselves as cultural objects through our "relative otherness" (Goffman 1959).

The Body Sponge

The self goes beyond the conceptual realm. Bodies are an essential, ever present aspect of the self. Michel Foucault argues that the body is marked by social norms (Ehrenberg 2015). The physical nature of culture means that our bodies are essential to how we understand, comprehend, and form meaning (Assaf 2013). Our bodies act with embodied knowledge: pre-thematic and pre-reflexive understandings of social scripts. Teoma Jackson Naccarato, a dancer/choreographer studying embodied cognition and memory, expands upon Foucault's theories, arguing that felt experiences mean that the body is not purely social (Naccarato 2004). Bodies "acquire understanding and skills through sensory experience and practice before we are able to theorize about what we have learned" (Naccarato 2004, 4). Therefore, because the body and the senses are constantly present throughout a person's daily life, all knowledge is embodied.

This sensation of embodied knowledge is the precursor to all critical, abstract, and theoretical thinking (Merleau-Ponty 1962). The implication

of existing in this embodied state, in one's "responsive intelligent body" (Novack 2016, 6) is that we know more and retain more knowledge than we are aware of or can verbally articulate. It further implies that critical analysis and cognitive thinking associated with intellectualism are not the only forms of processing or knowledge (Merleau-Ponty 1962). This non-cerebral type of knowledge has been studied by different disciplines under different names: embodied knowledge, implicit knowledge, muscle memory, tacit knowledge, kinesthetic intelligence, affect, affective information.

The inclusion of the physical body in the concept of the self is an essential but often missing portion of intellectualism. Merleau-Ponty postulates that critical analysis and cognitive thinking would benefit from including affective information. The error in dissociating the body and mind is exposed:

All human 'functions' from sexuality to motility and intelligence, are rigorously unified in one synthesis; it is impossible to distinguish in the total being of a man a bodily organization to be treated as a contingent fact, and other attributes necessarily entering in to his makeup. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 197).

This call to reintegrate various aspects of the self, including 'subjective history and embodiment, has been approached in feminist, post-humanist, and critical animal studies. Feminist researchers often acknowledge their past and their perspective in their writings. Post-humanist and critical animal studies utilize Merleau-Ponty's theories of phenomenology, prioritizing the sensory experience as a tool to effectively bridge the species divide and comprehend the sensorium of another organism (Chaudhuri 2017). In critical animal studies, the exchange of implicit information is highlighted because verbal language cannot facilitate the transference of information. For example, researchers studying bees found that information such as temperament and agitation could be transmitted interspecies, between bees and humans, by humans increasing their awareness of the intuitive, physical, sensing self

and cultivating the exchange of affective information (Moore 2013). In fact, psychologist Albert Mehrabian finds that, even between humans, only 7% of communications involving emotion and attitude occur through semantic language. Most communication occurs through body language (55%) and the voice's tonal quality and inflection (38%) (Mehrabian 2016).

Because the entire history of the self is included, exchange of affective information is described by Merleau-Ponty as, "the upsurge of a *true* and *exact* world" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 62, emphasis in original). Affect is continuously present in the body and experience; it is inseparable from perception. Leading dance philosopher and phenomenologist Shantel Erhenberg postulates that to access this non-cerebral, kinesthetic intelligence and intuit others' emotional states of being, one must expose the proprioceptive, sensuous sense of an embodied self (Ehrenberg 2015). An example of this can be found in Assaf's research (2013). She references an audience member who was used to keeping a critical and analytical mind active when watching live performance. While watching Assaf's dance, this individual found themselves compelled to stop their analysis to leave space to experience the full magnitude of the performance (Assaf 2013). The experience of leaving space to just sense what is happening can feel as if one is "present in the body and mind" (Moore and Kosut 2013, 91).

Dancers' Understanding

While many researchers agree on the existence of embodied knowledge, studies of how it is accessed are scarce. Researchers such as Cynthia Novack and Randy Martin address theories of embodiment and kinesthetic intelligence from the perspective of bodies and movement. Their research is based on the premise that, like embodied knowledge, in all situations, "movement is possible and unavoidable" (Martin 1998,1).

In fact, movement is essential to revealing the tacit knowledge from both our bodies and from the culture in which we are situated. On a macro level, Novack claims that "through movement we reinforce, participate, and create culture" (Novack 1990, 7). This claim is supported by recalling Goffman's social scripts

and remembering the physicality of socialization. Martin asserts that through movement, people form more comprehensive understandings of themselves as well as learning new skills and influencing the world (Martin 1998). Through moving, we are able to understand and navigate more fully within ourselves and within the ambiguous situations in which we exist.

Dance is a form of movement that may yield interesting insight into kinesthetic intelligence. Dancing explicitly trains bodies for moving and in the process trains a hyper-sensitive awareness of the self, of the potential for movement in space, and of one's relationship to others. Moreover, dance is experiential, subjective, and qualitative, relying on a phenomenological, non-objective, lived, historical body. It draws on a deep well of inarticulable experiences (Naccarato 2010). Dancing explicitly trains one to access empathetic and kinesthetic intelligence. Studies of mirror neurons, neurons that activate both while doing and while observing actions, suggest that dance is able to tap into other bodies' memories of lived experience (Naccarato 2010). Accordingly, dance has been explored as a means of "constructing subjectivity, inter-subjectivity, and reality in a manner that strongly relies on the embodied and experiential as well as pre-reflexive" (Ehrenberg 2015, 47).

Many dancers study contact improvisation, a technique that explicitly trains kinesthetic listening. Created by Steve Paxton in the 1970's, contact improvisation focuses on communication between moving bodies in relation to gravity and momentum and encourages responses to literal and abstract points of contact. It encompasses different kinds of somatic energies, appearing both "wild and athletic, sometimes quiet and meditative" (Contact Quarterly 2014, n.p.). The movement language of this technique results in dancers being vulnerable, exploring physical, non-sexual, intimacy with others as well as placing themselves in risky situations (Novack 1990). Dancers roll, fall, hang upside-down, fly in the air, suspend themselves precariously, support heavier individuals, and enter many unpredictable situations. The physical precariousness of these situations requires that

dancers be “constantly in the crisis they appear to be in” (Martin 1998, 1). Dancers must quickly and tacitly listen to the needs of the space and others, adapting themselves to keep safety a priority.

Contact improvisation is about the constant flow of energy and negotiation, the physical dialogue between two or more individuals, and their reading of each other’s responses and impulses through the senses. However, because of the speed and risk involved, filtered, top-down analysis is not fast enough. Dancers processing situations must primarily depend on kinesthetic intelligence, fully immersing themselves in the moment. Dancers exist where “reflection and embodiment meet” (Martin 1998,1).

Synopsis

The literature suggests that everyone exists in social settings, in relationship to others and to scripts created by cultural norms. These norms are historically situated and, along with personal experiences, integrated into the self. This integration is physical as well as cerebral. Research has also shown that movement, particularly dance, can help one access and understand this embodiment through training attention to sentient awareness. The practice of dance can allow individuals to be in touch with the constantly shifting sense of self, create awareness of others, and enable the kinesthetic transference of ideas (Martin 1998).

Martin suggests that by studying dance one can more easily “mobilize” or be responsive in any given situation (Martin 1998). In my research, I examine contact improvisation as a place to be present cognitively and affectively, to be attentive and responsive. I delve into individuals’ experiences with Goffman’s concepts of social norms and the resulting feelings of disembodiment and alienation. I investigate how the language people use in recalling their experience of movement relates to these concepts. Finally, I explore the feelings that dancing generates in relationship to understanding the self and others. Ultimately, the purpose of my research creation study is to go beyond theories in the literature and utilize the movement of dance to heuristically explore attention and how people understand their experiences.

Methods

My research is situated in the context of arts-based research and sensory ethnographies. My ethnography uses classic qualitative interview methods from Earl Babbie’s *The Practice of Social Research*, auto-ethnographic reflection, and research creation. As arts-based research-creation, my work focuses on uncovering complex, nuanced, and subtle interactions instead of reaching precise conclusions. Throughout the interviews and improvisation event, I utilized Weber’s concept of *verstehen*, empathetic understanding, to record, gather, and analyze the material. Accordingly, I noted filler words, pauses in the conversation, and memorable gestures. I focused on the verbal articulation of feelings of mood, physical tension, and texture to explore sociologists and dancers’ perception of their affective experiences and their rationalization of the ability to perceive their emotions.

I first investigated how dancers relate physical gestural movements and emotion. Beginning by reading Goffman and Merleau-Ponty’s theories of the self, social norms, alienation, and embodiment, I then choreographed a dance with dance conservatory students from Purchase College, SUNY based on these themes. In my choreography, I used arts-based research’s values of “attending to the dimensions of the physical and social world” (Eisner and Barone 2011, 4) and “creating a more refined experience” (Eisner and Barone, 4) to reframe how the dancers and audience experienced particular gestures in movement. In March 2016, I interviewed these dancers individually about their experiences of the process.

In addition, I explored contact improvisation as a heuristic method for discovering how discursive minds interpret and practice attention to embodiment. I structured a contact improvisation event with my dance cast and with sociologists. Interviewing the group before and after the guided movement, I again paid attention to changes in the physical tension, texture, and mood in both myself and the other participants in conjunction with the concepts that were discussed.

Interviews with The Dancers

My open-ended interview questions created space for the conversation to develop and specify to the individual being interviewed. After introductory demographic information, recurrent questions of interest were:

1. Have you ever taken a prolonged break from dance? If so, how did you feel limiting your movement?
2. Do you find there to be social benefits to dancing?
3. Has being in a dance piece ever changed your opinion of a social issue or norm?
4. Are you providing or accomplishing something larger than simply performance through dance?
5. Can you describe the experience of creating and performing my piece?

The personal interviews with the dancers were detailed, lasting between 20-60 minutes. I recorded the interviews and took minimal notes, transcribing the interviews afterwards. In two situations, the recordings were erased and the content was reconstructed from memory and interview notes. Analyzing this interview material, I determined patterns in how dancers related to and communicated about subjects they were speaking about.

Heuristically Exploring Attention

To explore how dancers and non-dancers respond to, verbalize, and interpret their subjective understanding of their embodiment — embodiment defined as feeling receptive and able to respond to affective information — I needed to find a way for everyone to connect with their ability to perceive and feel their sentience. Connecting to an analytic responsiveness required creating a space where people could play with their thoughts,



Figure 1: Photo of Contact Event by author

feelings, and actions: a stimulating contact improvisation event (see Figure 1, a moment from the event where sociologists and dancers are moving together).

I arranged for four dancers from my cast (Alana, Ronnie, John, Ellie), three sociology majors (Terry, Becca, Victor), and a moderator (Karen) to meet in a spacious mirrorless dance studio for ninety minutes. (All names are pseudonyms.) The sociology students were not taking dance technique classes; they were interested volunteers recommended by the sociology department. While their interest may have introduced a bias, I thought that enlisting inquisitive individuals in the project would create a non-judgmental space and increase the likelihood that the participants would be open to attending to their own sentience and exploring their impulses.

We began in a semi-lit studio in a tight circle, I briefly introduced the participants to each other and to the concept of my project. Spreading out horizontally on the floor, Karen began verbally guiding the unspeaking participants through a physical exploration of releasing places of excess tension, finding places of contact, discovering supportive surfaces. Participants slowly generated self-awareness of physical movement by being prompted to attend to their sensations and weight by pushing and pulling and measuring tension, both utilizing the floor as a "partner" and engaging with a human partner. The thoughts softly articulated by Karen became abstracted, talking about acceptance and connection. What started individually on the floor developed into standing and engaging each other.

After the guided movement, Ellie left and another dancer, Billy, joined, and I conducted an open-ended group interview. The interview flowed without many prompts from me, revolving around similar themes as in the individual interviews: movement, alienation, identity. I asked general questions: "How do you feel right now?", "What were your experiences?", "How was it moving by yourself in comparison to moving with others?", "Why are you studying sociology?", "How do you relate to cerebral analysis/movement?" Again, I recorded and transcribed the group interview, noting when

and which participants seemed to feel uncomfortable speaking or moving.

As a participant in both the fields of dance and sociology, I could relate to the unique language, references, and physical expressions of both groups of participants. The small sample size in the contact improvisation event and choreographic process allowed detailed intimate conversations. With the dancers, this trust had also been established over three years of working together daily as conservatory students in technique classes and rehearsal processes for others.

Throughout the interview process, I became more confident phrasing and delivering the questions. As I relaxed as an interviewer and learned how to manage the flow of the conversation, the interviewees seemed to deepen their linguistic exploration of their experience. Also, pulling from my own experiences seemed to make conversation more comfortable, allowing the interviews to lead to a more personal, almost casual place. However, to my disadvantage later, being so personally involved with the subject matter allowed me to take what participants said for granted, rather than pushing them to articulate themselves with more detail. Any lack of clarity coming from my questions was more evident in the responses from the dancers than the sociologists, as the sociologists' language is inherently more linguistic and hypothetical. Therefore, the sociologists would continue theorizing without prompts from me more readily than the dancers. My findings are not generalizable, due to the small sample size and homogenous participant population. However, as an exploratory, creative research study, my aim was not to achieve generalization but rather to gain insight into a little-studied phenomenon.

The Findings

In working with my participants, I uncovered themes in the potential for monotony in vocabulary, insecurity in relation to acting according to scripts, disembodiment resulting from a constant analysis concerning adherence to a perceived script, and feelings of alienation from the self and others resulting from this analysis. In connection to the contact

improvisation event, I found there was reenchanting excitement and energy generated by attending to others actions in the group and paying attention to ones' own sentience and impulses.

Experiencing Vocabulary

Every field has its jargon, a repetitive vocabulary enabling a consistent, efficient, form of comprehension, fluency, and communication. In the sociology department, students utilize specific terminology to assist them in analyzing interactions and deconstructing social power dynamics; this language provides the "ability and access to talk about [disheartening] things," Terry explained. Dance also has its own movement-oriented vocabulary. In both fields, while the use of appropriate vocabulary is essential, the language can also become repetitive, routine. People begin communicating on autopilot, without really understanding or listening to the other person; there is no longer a push for total comprehension, action, or response. The conversation develops into a "monologue" and the language loses its subtlety as we get accustomed to the shortcuts in vocabulary. While appreciating the necessity of their field's vocabulary, both sociologists and dancers at times describe their respective languages as rigid and repetitive, monotonous, and disenchanting.

The sensation of feeling unproductive and disconnected from a field's vocabulary was spoken about similarly by sociologists and dancers as having a "fog in your head." Sociologist Terry (whose preferred pronoun is "they") clarified their experience of producing language but not actively attending to the impact of the words: "Using the same language every single day, every time I write a paper and it doesn't feel real anymore. It feels disembodied and it feels like I've reached my capacity." Karen, a dancer as well as moderator, described this sensation in the context of dance similarly: "I feel like I'm often doing these same moves over and over and I can't stop... same words, same movement words, every day."

These feelings of disembodiment, inactivity, and inattentiveness to the language of a field manifest themselves in several ways. The sociologists described the results of being in a "disembodied" state by saying they weren't as

productive or effective in comprehending new material, participating in the classroom, or writing papers. For dancers, the sense of monotony and disenchantment from their kinesthetic vocabulary felt like succumbing to patterns the body had learned. Billy fought to articulate this, "These are set um pathways of communicating an idea. But that can get stale or feel like they can lose their meaning." Beyond feeling stuck or immobile, Billy described this as feeling similar to losing consciousness, similar to losing the "realness" referenced by Terry. These sensibilities are consistent with Ehrenburg's (2015) description of embodiment, being present in the body and mind; they simply describe the opposite sentiment. This disembodiment makes responding to physical tension or texture difficult.

Acting on Scripts

As language and practices recur, a script begins to emerge. People active in a field begin to articulate and incorporate its norms, both consciously and subconsciously. The expectations that members of the sociology and dance communities have of themselves to be articulate and effectively communicate an idea (conceptual or movement-based) within their language calls to mind Goffman's concept of acting in relation to scripts. Accordingly, having this structured vocabulary also involves having a level of self-doubt about the correct use of this language and the implications of not utilizing the language appropriately. What is it to "fail" at using a language?

Whether consciously or subconsciously acting in relation to scripts, a person often has the desire to achieve the "expectation" set by the script. The result of not successfully producing the desired idea is evident throughout my interviews. Ronnie pushed herself to explain the disappointment that occurs when she acts in relation to a script:

Sometimes I feel really stuck in movement in my body. Like there is a right and wrong, very clear ... even within this, in contact improvisation. Because I have knowledge of my experiences with it, I see something that I think is an opportunity, and already I'm like out of the moment.

I'm ahead of it. And if I don't achieve what I think I should achieve, I, I missed something that could have been equally as amazing or better. Do you know what I mean?

The disenchantment resulting from the disappointment in not fulfilling her expectation is highlighted by the way she subtly hesitates before talking about the missed opportunity.

Past socializing experiences have taught people the patterns of language that have previously been successful in communicating an idea. In the quotation above, Ronnie talked about feeling "ahead of it," that is, about how acting from her expectations of what outcome should occur, what idea should be communicated, prevented the actual fulfillment of her idea. Her inattention to the present took her out of production and, upon reflection, generated anxiety about failure, even in a context where there was no right or wrong. We can feel, not that the script failed, but that we failed in fulfilling the script. This "failure" is anxiety-provoking because, as Goffman (1959) explains, measuring oneself against the script is a way to identify with one's "self."

This anxiety created by relating an identity to a script can also be seen in how dancers spoke about taking a prolonged break from dancing. In their personal interviews, dancers discussed feeling "bad." Prompted by my question about how it felt to "not be moving," dancers often cited and exuded anxiety and insecurity relating to their "identity as a dancer." After admitting that it can feel good to take a break from technique classes, Ronnie backtracked, reemphasizing that not taking dance technique classes, "just makes me anxious. Is that the answer? Is that an answer?" Even after acknowledging a positive result from not complying with the "script," Ronnie still tried to align herself with her conception of what a "dancer" does while seeking my validation about the correctness of her response. Ellie also explained how she felt when she was not dancing due to an injury. In the months of recovery, comparing herself to her peers and other "dancers" made her depressed:

I start getting like, super self-conscious just with like everything I do with myself when I stop dancing... [I was] jealous of what everyone else was doing. I had to shut down all social media. I like though if I like. I don't know, if I cut myself out this past summer cause I was like I can't know what everyone else is doing 'cause I'll be super behind and fat so I unfollowed everyone.

Ellie's level of discomfort was palpable; she was laughing uncomfortably, as she remembered how it was to not follow the script of a "dancer." Her perception of herself was integrated with those expectations.

Alana had a similar anxiety-inducing experience with a prolonged break due to injury. She saw a sports psychologist and referenced this period as a time of "crisis." However, later, Alana explicitly chose to not take technique classes for a summer, "taking a step away from dance" and disentangling herself from the "identity" of a dancer. She cited being much happier when actively choosing not to follow the conceptual script, saying it was "the most amazing decision I think I've made."

Scripts, Disembodiment, and Alienation

The prevalent ideology and pedagogy of western society encourages bifurcation between thought and emotion, devaluing sentience by discouraging the acknowledgment of feelings in cognitive thought and, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) postulates, dismissing the physical body entirely. Western pedagogy does not address the embodiment of one's subjective history and knowledge. Participants in my study, therefore, turned to external parties for justification, validation, and feedback as insecurities arose as a result of perceived deviations from the expected script. This quest for validation generates feelings of alienation from having a concept of one's self, which in turn furthers the quest for validation. While this cyclical phenomenon frequently arose conversationally during the interviews when we discussed acting in relation to scripts, it was explicitly apparent in the contact improvisation event, where nervous glances (showing the need for validation) were quelled by the prompt that "there is no right or wrong."

The sense of disembodiment resulting from this separation or even alienation from one's own sensory observations was quite clear in the context of the Dance Conservatory. Beyond the disembodiment created by not fulfilling the technical expectations of their script, the dancers were not even sure whether they were developing in a way that would lead to success. For myself and my peers, as dancers, even kinesthetic understanding of our own bodies feels like it needs to be validated by an external authority, a teacher. Alana described her experience in class: "I am just striving for acceptance all of the time from teachers and peers. All I want is to be told I'm good." However, what is it to be good? To be told "you are good"? What is external validation helping a person to understand or feel? Alana's speech softened as she recalled a time when two people asked her if she was a dancer while she was waitressing at a café. Something about being identified as a dancer, as a person outwardly fitting the concept of a dancer, felt grounding to her. She felt her identity was validated by having external observations align with her concept of herself as a "dancer." Alana believed that she was successfully fulfilling the script of a dancer by being outwardly observed as such.

Alana also spoke about her ability to "emit insecurity" when feeling tired, unsure, or disembodied. She described this nonverbal communication with those observing her, "a teacher will address you and say, 'oh you're too in your head.'" She went on to say that actively attending and responding to different sights and textures is "a completely different physicality for us, when we're too in our brain space and not just trusting our natural facility... it's all energetically what you emit to other people and what you are seeing." She felt a difference and claimed teachers can see a difference when she can connect to a responsive embodied practice. Ironically, Alana is giving the power of determining what is embodied away to a teacher who validates her "embodied" movement, potentially further alienating Alana from her own understanding of herself.

In addition, the sociologist Terry addressed their feelings of alienation from others as they focused on the results instead of the process of communicating an idea: "I feel like a lot of the time we're so like in our own heads we don't know how to like communicate with other people a lot of the time." Trying to clarify the concept, their attention is not on the receptivity of the other person. As Alana said, "being in your brain space" constrains the listening and thus communication ideas (verbally and physically). Conversation becomes about conveying a point, not about how much the other understands, thus leading to feelings of disconnection and alienation. In both instances, being "disembodied" and "too in your head" can alienate a person from their sense of self and from other people.

How Do You Feel?

Interestingly, in the contact improvisation event, simply talking about connecting to a sense of legitimacy in one's body seemed to allow participants to attend to the physical details in the space instead of whether what they were doing was "right" or "wrong." The participants began the process of alleviating their insecurities. Becca described feeling the shift from her analyzing mindset to a mindset of observing the space as a sense of "surrendering." Focusing one's attention on concrete physical experiences such as weight and touch enabled feelings of fun, looseness, catharsis, exploration, and curiosity to emerge. The participants' physicality visibly shifted during the event, becoming less hesitant to interact or generate movement the more they attended to these physical prompts. After improvising, positive energy was emanating from people in the room; I could see it in the casualness and lightness in peoples' bodies and conversation. "As soon as it was over I said I wanna throw a party," Ronnie recalled.

Focusing attention on one's sentience can be a personalized, welcome relief from the impersonal practice of analyzing abstract cerebral concepts and scripts, which, as we have seen, can result in feelings of monotony, disenchantment, and alienation. The overwhelming response by participants after

the contact improvisation event was that people “felt better about themselves,” enchanted and less alienated. Dancers were energized by dancing with new people, which demanded that they be more physically observant and responsive. Sociologists appeared to be affected by the novelty of the movement itself.

When I asked Becca to articulate what it was to “feel much better,” she responded, “I think it’s umm. I don’t know like it’s just like to me moving is like a really connective experience and like so much of our culture like we’re living in our heads all the time and we’re always taught like to like almost bow to our brains.” Becca was unsure of how to specify the feeling, and so this sociologist fell into her pattern of removing her “self” and her personal experience with these phenomena by switching to a theoretical instead of corporeal analysis. The shift in her physicality was visible as she focused on cerebral analysis as opposed to kinesthetic memory; she became more upright and looked around at others less. Becca was not insecure discussing theories and felt comfortable looking and explaining her concept directly to me. However, before, when I prompted her to talk about her feelings, something more personal or sensory, she was less comfortable and unsure of what to say.

Academia prioritizes a kind of logic, objectivity, and cognition that does not reference the “self” or its “embodied knowledge” in the analysis. Sociology students in particular, who spend most of their time in this setting, seemed surprised and very much affected by their residual feelings after attending more to their sentience during the contact improvisation event. Several people described the ability to “open up” and feel vulnerable and safe within the space as cathartic. Becca felt secure and liberated by having permission, knowing that in the context of the improvisation event, “you can do whatever feels good for you.” Expanding on her experience with academia, she said that sociology work does not “value intimacy or connection or vulnerability at any level, so to be in a space where you are allowed to be intimate and are allowed to trust and let go and surrender is really radical.”

The sociologists were very taken by letting themselves be emotional during and immediately after the movement portion of the contact improvisation event. Interestingly, as soon as we reintroduced verbal language and they began deconstructing the experience and sociologically analyzing the structures that prohibit them from attending to their physicality, a bifurcation happened. Becca described her experience of attending to her responsiveness in her interactions with others as a “potentially transformative” way to look at relationships. However, a bifurcation existed between the “revolutionary” experience recalled and the unaffected and dispassionate nature of her speech. This happened for both dancers and sociologists as they abstracted their experience, but was more noticeable in the sociologists. Their immediate descriptions were energetic and emotional and personally invested as they described their feelings and encounters. Then their “sociological language” crept in. The sociologists’ emotionality lessened. They became audibly less passionate and physically less emotive as their vocabulary became more abstract and the content of their observations became more hypothetical. While Terry cried multiple times dancing with people, they were able to speak quite unemotionally about the cathartic experience of moving in a group. Terry said afterward, “There is something really powerful about being able to be vulnerable in spaces and being able to feel everything you’re feeling and just release it and let it go and maybe have another person carry it for a second and then releasing that.” Yet I noted an extreme physical difference between watching Terry move and hearing them speak. Dancing, Terry was incredibly playful, lively, and initiated games with other participants; while speaking, Terry was still energetic, although they were slightly slouching and were not gesticulating as much as I would have expected.

Towards the Group

The contact improvisation event was a place where everyone involved attended to sentience, a place where their own bodies, the space, and the other people in it were prioritized. This awareness of details of touch and feeling arose, in part, from novelty of the event. For dancers, this situation was new because of the different bodies in space. As John articulated, “we’re with

the same students for four years... so it's just so nice to share new energy." For the sociologists, novelty came from moving and being aware of others in an unfamiliar, physical way.

Opening up to a new kind of physical listening and responsiveness resonated with all of the participants in the improvisation. The attention paid to physical impulses and desires was an important practice to generate feelings not only of self-worth but also of group care and support. Excitedly, dancer Alana struggled to describe the feeling: "I don't know I felt like I was, like I was so giddy. Like I had a smile on my face the whole time and my eyes were closed. I was just like [pause] but it was quiet. It was like it was kind of heartwarming. I don't know just to feel like she could hear me." She was smiling with the recollection. This kind of attention was similarly difficult for sociologist Becca to explain:

It felt very nurturing. I don't know why it's just like um like someone was listening to you and like almost hearing you and seeing you in a way that you're not seen and heard every single day um and putting attention on you in like a very specific way. And um uh and we don't receive.

Becca became more confident, clearer, using fewer filler words, as she began to theorize:

Or I feel like we have trouble more receiving attention a lot of the time. Like we always put attention on other people so there was something really nice about this understanding and like giving and receiving and putting attention on the other person and them putting attention on you. It just felt very caring.

Dancer Alana described her physiological response, a smile, while sociologist Becca uses an abstraction, "nurturing." Alana was more gestural but seemed happy with the point she conveyed. Becca seemed less confident in what she said about her experience.

The contact improvisation environment highlights a specific responsive kind of listening and attention between people that made participants feel responded to and cared for.

Becca described her experience connecting with another person in the contact improvisation event:

It's more of like a listening exercise than like. Cause I felt like when I was alone I could just do whatever felt good but like when you're with someone else like listening to them and what their body needs while also paying attention and being aware of what your body needs. So like it kind of. I don't know it was kind of it was like a conversation that you were listening and receiving and giving and it was almost cyclical.

Trying to move with another body forced Becca to be more perceptive not only of the space and the physical sensations occurring within herself but also what was potentially within the people around her. Her awareness of her body connected her with the attention of others in the space.

The participating sociologists observed that attending to movement and highlighting responsiveness to others helped them dissociate from overwhelming, disheartening subject matter studied in classrooms. Sociological theories link feelings of "alienation" and "disembodiment" to feeling oppressed by power structures under which we live. Unable to take action to change things, this abstract theoretical concept of oppressive structures "overwhelmed" the sociologists as they felt "powerless." Talking about an assigned sociological reading, Terry said, only somewhat sarcastically, "I want to like set it on fire and drop out of school." What is the benefit of being so theoretical? Moving so far away from specific concrete problems can leave students feeling powerless and stagnant.

Redirecting sociologists' habits of observation and focus from intangible abstract concepts to more concrete elements such as physical tension, touch, and change in themselves and others highlights their own responsiveness and individual choices. Feeling the ability to physically initiate and respond to people reduces their alienation at a tangible micro-level of interaction between individuals.

The connections generated in the contact improvisation event were initially obvious in the more casual, gestural, and group-focused body language and banter in the discussion following the event. Participants used terms like “emotional”, “energized”, “heartwarming”, “reckless”, and “cathartic” to describe their experience of dancing together and attending to each other, not to a script of right or wrong. Ronnie spoke of the enjoyment of “working towards something together.” Ultimately, this connectivity addressed feelings of isolation and alienation. As Becca stated, “we’re so disconnected from each other and to actually feel connection and feel genuine connection is so impactful. Really all people want is connection.” This connection seemed to come from the ability to be aware and responsive to physical stimuli coming from the self and from others. Ronnie understood the experience in relation to ideas and feelings of hers, to a direction, to working with other people towards something. Becca expressed her understanding in a way much less personal and specific manner, an alienating manner that removed herself or her experience. Her method of speaking itself seems to encourage alienation and dissociation from the self.

Billy theorized that by actively participating, “it shows that you are a part of something bigger than yourself and that you are an important part of this larger thing. Just by being yourself.” Billy’s thought speaks to the value of listening and responding with the physical components of the self, to the connectivity between one’s body, ideas, and others fostered by focusing on concrete not abstract attention.

Accessing Sentience and Emotion

The intensity of emotions experienced while feeling embodied and attending to one’s impulses while moving can be quite unexpected. The sociologists experienced this catharsis in the contact improvisation event. Catharsis also occurred for the dancers while engaging in the piece that I choreographed. Alana described how, unknowingly, the physicality of my dance emotionally affected her when transitioning between my piece and another; “I was like [gasp] I can’t think about anything... I don’t want to talk to anyone else. I just wanna think about what just happened. It

hits and I don’t want to do anything else. Just need to process.” Alana described this experience as “traumatic.” She was very taken aback with her experience that “someone could actually physically respond and like be upset” simply from the movement. Even while talking about it, Alana seemed to be recalling how it felt, eyes widening and using vocals to help communicate what she recalled feeling. I felt drawn to what she was trying to communicate and also a bit guilty for the intensity she felt after my piece. The experience of feeling an emotional response to the movements in my piece was not unique to Alana; other dancers expressed their emotional reactions both in their interviews and physically in the rehearsals (see Figure 2 for a resonant moment for one of my dancers).

This intensity of feeling is not confined only to the dancers performing the movement. The sociologist, Terry, admitted to crying often in watching live theater and dance. Simply recalling their experience watching my piece being performed brought tears to their eyes. They wanted to take a moment before attempting to articulate themselves: “I would talk but I will cry. Like swear to God... I’m so unprepared. I’ll gather my thoughts first.” I didn’t press here because Terry felt so uneasy and nervous. Instead of continuing to say what they felt and speaking through the emotions they were feeling, Terry took a second to compose themselves and resorted to more general theorization, saying:

There is something about watching other people move and having it be an emotional piece and watching an ending to a piece that’s very emotional. There’s something. I can feel it. But I don’t know how to articulate it. It’s pre-linguistic. And I think that’s why it affects me so much.

Terry’s initial physical response to recalling my piece was clear and visceral, but subjective experience and emotion are not experiences that academia views as “valid” thought requiring articulation. But that is where the nuance, detail, and texture lie. The theoretical is helpful, safe, and impersonal. Unconnected to “the self,” Terry is not the focus in their abstract

thought. Their thought can exist without any personal effect on Terry, generating feelings of alienation and impotence that their sociological vocabulary can promote.

What It Means

Like other arts-based research studies, my ambition is not to enhance the certainty of the subject matter researched. In my research, I set out to explore how people relate to a concept of themselves, how they understand and attend to the world. While the literature covered theories of cognition and physicality as well as disembodiment and alienation, I found that focusing on concrete ideas generated more pertinent results. Inspired by theorists Goffman and Merleau-Ponty's ideas of the self, social norms, alienation, and disembodiment, I examined how attention contributes to these discussions.

Dancers and sociology students became my research subjects because they both explore the "self," but with different ambitions. Sociologists seek to understand the self, while dancers seek to utilize the self. Sociologists focus on comprehension and communication of abstract theories through attending to discursive cerebral vocabulary while dancers focus on comprehension and communication through empathetic understanding of physical images through attending to kinesthetic practice. In the contact improvisation event, I attempted to provide a heuristic space to explore how sociologists and dancers perceive, understand, and interpret textures and qualities elicited from attending to physicality (concrete detail, textures, and tensions in space) and cognition (abstract concepts, generalizations, and theories.) It was an intersubjective space to play with thinking, feeling, and doing.



Figure 2: Photo of author's choreography by Umi Akiyoshi Photography

Many interesting thoughts and patterns emerged from my research. Vocabulary, both verbal and physical, can feel rigid, repetitive, and monotonous as it loses nuance while trying to communicate previously learned and experienced ideas if the “speaker” is not actively attending to the responsiveness of the subject to whom they are speaking. Sociologists expressed these sentiments in relation to writing papers and in classroom participation.

The vocabularies of both fields also generate scripts. Defining oneself in relation to a seemingly definitive identity created by these scripts, such as “dancer,” generates anxiety as one tries to act in relation to these imaginary scripts. People seemed to identify feelings of “alienation” and “disembodiment” when they failed to adhere to the steps and achieve the anticipated outcomes of these scripts. This was most strongly articulated by dancers when they discussed prolonged periods when they were not taking technique classes.

To get participants, especially the sociologists, to attend to concrete physical emotions, impulses, feelings, and textures, I needed to validate their subjective experience, to shift their attention away from concepts of right and wrong. Attending to the subjective details in the contact improvisation event highlighted personal agency and responsiveness to their sentience; as the event progressed this made the sociologists feel “liberated” from disheartening impersonal and abstract sociological theories. Both sociologists and dancers felt “better” about themselves. The novel group movement appears to have created feelings of “embodiment” and responsivity. This increased responsiveness was clear in the participants’ adaptive physical relationships with each other, acting on impulses towards and away from each other. All the participants understood this physical “listening” to potentially generate care, intimacy, and vulnerability.

Ironically, the discussion of intimacy and feelings occurred without eliciting much excitement, speed, or urgency from anyone. People were animated or emotional in discussion only when recalling specific

memories or experiences with others in the space. Even then, as the discussion of their phenomenological experience became more abstract, the intensity of the conversation lessened; the bifurcation between the emotionality of the actual experience and the calmness of the concepts being discussed became apparent. Terry didn’t cry while theorizing; they cried while moving and recalling details and textures.

Sociologists retreated to understanding their experience in the contact improvisation event through the language of their field. The language of sociology gives one the ability to gauge oneself in relationship to scripts, to understand “the self” within the context of larger structures and abstract concepts with little room to attend to nuance or detail. The sociologists understood tension in relation to power structures, in an impersonal way that was disconnected from physical responsiveness. In the interviews, it was easier for sociologists to omit discussing their physical experiences and place their experiences in relation to theories, rather than articulating concretely their impulses or feelings. The dancers were more likely to talk about the viscerality of their experiences and the language of their hypotheses was generally less clear and more colloquial than the sociologists. This behavior is consistent with the demands of their “movement language.”

If allotted more time and resources, I would expand my research. I would explore Marcel Mauss’ work on giving, receiving, and reciprocating embodiment. I would also research how students from other majors attended to micro-interaction and detail. Additionally, I would spend more time individually with the sociologists to see if this could open up discussion in different ways.

As talented students in their fields, both the dancers and sociologists were enchanted and inspired by listening and attending to one another through novel movement and discourse. Other people can also benefit from this research on embodiment, consciousness, and attention. Integrating physical and cognitive interdisciplinary experiences into a

system of education and work could benefit many individuals, as this balance is enchanting and motivating. Encouraging people to attend to their own senses and impulses, as well as the sensitivity and physicality of others could lead to less insecurity, more responsive and productive relationships with others, and a less binding concept of “the self.”

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