

Careers transitions in professional dancers: Reflections and adaptation during and post- COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic brought several challenges to the ballet dancing profession and performing arts in general. Whilst several professional dancers have embraced these challenges as opportunities, others have faced an abrupt decision to transition to alternative careers either voluntarily or involuntarily. This paper discusses ballet dancers' retirement, by revisiting the Retirement Transition Model (Roncaglia, 2006; 2008) and by proposing additional reflections and adaptations in accommodating the new challenges brought by COVID-19. The reflections explore dimensions of the reasons for retirement and some new themes that aim to inform future practical implications for health professionals in career guidance by using a positive psychology framework of PERMA (Seligman, 2011) and Ryan & Deci (2020) social determination theory (SDT). Questions are raised about the theoretical implications behind the concept of career transition and the discussion aims to further challenge the understanding of intricate and hidden issues in this area of psychological and social enquiry. Finally, it attempts to nurture reaffirming thoughts about transitions, well-being, and purpose and their relation to career change development, thriving and lifelong learning.

Keywords: career, career development, career transition, retirement, self-determination, well-being

In the last decade the notion of retirement has fundamentally been re-shaped, with an extended body of literature in sport and exercise science (Esopenko et al., 2020; Filbay et al., 2019), but to the author's knowledge scarce research in the field of dance and specifically the ballet genre. Retirement continues to be an unusual feature in the dancer's thinking process, and this is not exclusively because there is a will to ignore the subject as a premature process when all attention and focus ought to be directed to the development of a performing career (McMahon et al., 2004). Some individuals might even be in denial when faced with the reality of retirement because of its undesirable outcome: having to leave something that they feel is part of who they are and what defines their identities (Roncaglia, 2006; 2008; 2010). We have probably and fortunately moved from empirical evidence from sport literature which suggested that thoughts about retirement and career transitions, are explicitly avoided by athletes because it would imply possible defeat in their purpose and/or admitting a foreseeable ending and failure (McLaughlin, 1981).

While the retirement age of ballet dancers' can be very subjective according to several internal determinants as well as several external factors, career transitions have seen an increase from late 20s to late 30s and even late 40s depending on the demands of the repertoire and choreographic styles. Advancements have also been made in the way discussions and education is presented at formative and training levels, where some dance companies do now promote open and educational conversations in developing the dancer's identity as a whole person first, rather than exclusively focusing on one identity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has unquestionably brought an additional challenge for dancers who, at the beginning of the pandemic back in December 2019, might have already found themselves towards the last stages of their careers. Additionally, those dancers who have been impacted the most, namely freelancers, who might have not benefitted from a large dance company with its support structure and systems, might have been faced with greater challenges including but not exclusively financial hardship, and lack of social support.

As previously questioned, and considering these additional challenges, can previous model of career transition from dancers' retirement be applied in understanding career change in the 21st century post Covid-19 pandemic? What adjustments, if any, do we need to consider ensuring that dancers' career transitions are explored and effectively supported as an opportunity to generalise a breath of career-specific skills that support the individual in achieving their purpose beyond dance? How can we ensure that the support provided is both addressing individual strengths, and needs but also collectively ensuring that these transitioned dancers are reaching optimal well-being and satisfaction throughout their journeys, addressing potential physical and mental ill health issues whenever they occur because of challenging and at times traumatic transitions? What additional training or changes in cultural practices might we consider in achieving the above-mentioned process goals?

METHOD

The Retirement Transition Model for ballet dancers (Roncaglia, 2006) was adopted to re-explore the main themes of: (1) Reasons for retirement: why dancers retire with a subdivision in involuntary and voluntary reasons; (2) Emotional states: how the experience is lived; (3) Coping within and without; (4) Sources of support and types; and (5) Floating resolutions: the sequels

The contextual factors – and in this case the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted situations around the transition, before, during and after retirement, which have some direct and indirect influences in the way retirement is experienced. The personal resources which include values, belief systems and experiences of the individual within which the themes develop, have also been revisited in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The PERMA model (Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and the three psychological basic human needs of autonomy, belonging and competence by Ryan & Deci (2020) have been used to guide these revisions and re-evaluations. The author is also drawing from her practitioner experience as a registered psychologist in the last 20 months.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Autonomy: The event

It was previously highlighted that the reasons for retirement can be several, but they can be distinguished between voluntary and involuntary dimensions. Amongst these, deselection, change of interests, age, physical abilities, family priorities, injuries (Mainwaring & Krasnow, 2001), and redundancy have been previously discussed as the main ones. Whilst some of these are still very applicable to individual dancers' decision-making process in embracing their retirement, the COVID-19 pandemic has in some cases helped to

inflate the situation and speeded-up the process of realization. Therefore, rather than this process being seen through some sense of control, and level of choice which have been previously identified in the sport literature and the few studies in dance, as key elements for a positive experience by the transitioning dancer, it is potentially perceived out of the dancer's control. It remains valid, that the extent to which this perception is evaluated and assimilated by the transitioning dancer, it will also determine how they will potentially cope with the change both in the short- and long-term timelines. The fundamental need for a sense of autonomy and competence that are part of extrinsic and intrinsic motivational skills ought to be addressed when involuntary decisions for transitioning to alternative careers are thrust upon dancers and sensitive individualized support and training offered to counter the challenges of a perceived out-of-control decision to retire.

Emotional states: Lived experiences

The lived experience of having to "retire" from a performing dancing career can mean for many having to cope with a range of emotions, previously explored in loss and bereavement literature and discussed through psychological stages of denial, alienation, letting go, isolation, severance, acceptance, renegotiation, and reconstruction (Roncaglia, 2010). Within the context of COVID-19 pandemic and the contextual landscape in which decision-making processes had to be made for different reasons, these psychological stages continue to be experienced not sequentially but dynamically, more as a process where the individual dancer must call upon coping resources available through the change, providing an element of continuous movement in a situation that is never static. The role of positive emotions (Seligman, 2011) and emotional self-regulation strategies can in this process play a crucial role in the individual ability to recover, reconstruct and reframe challenging and even traumatic situations (Chavez et al., 2019).

Coping within and without: The role of personal resources

In any given event, situation or experienced trauma, coping is best thought of as a process rather than a single response in time (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The notion of coping as a dynamic movement between the situation-person-situation, the psychological distress experienced as a result, and the interactions between cognitive processes, coping appraisals, and available resources is well established (Ogwuche et al., 2020). Folkman et al. (1987) also provide a distinction between primary and secondary appraisals as well as the process of re-appraisal and suggest the distinction between emotion-focus and problem-focus behavior responses. The internal process of coping (within) and the external adjustment (without) are ever more necessary for optimal functioning throughout the transition post COVID-19 pandemic. The transitioning dancer must adjust as a person – the "I" – and as a dancer – the "me" – and take into consideration the processes of change occurring through his/her social structure. The dancer's identity depending on how significant and bounded this has developed through their performing careers at the expenses of other identities, will influence the way transitioning dancers cope with the change and their adaptations to alternative working environments. Here the role of meaningful social support, sensitive to the individual needs of each transitioning dancer, play another crucial role through the transition. It is common knowledge that to combat the risks associated with Covid-19 pandemic, remote training, practice, rehearsals, learning, and consequent isolation had to be adopted. In some cases, personal resources have been depleted and ineffectively implemented to counter the potential psychological consequences experienced through high levels of stress and anxiety leading in some cases to mental ill-health. For each individual transitioning dancer, it will be important to support and collaborate in the identification of their abilities, strengths, and sense of purpose; it will be important to look at how the individual can re-discover internal and external motivation to nurture a sense of achievement and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011) that departs from the notion of fixing something that is "broken" or "ill-shaped" but thrives on individual intentions.

Relatedness and belonging: The role of social support

Another fundamental psychological human need in Ryan & Deci's (2020) social determination theory is relatedness and a sense of belonging. Social support must foster emotional connectedness. In this instance emotional support can involve the opportunity to vent emotions, have one's feelings recognised and validated (rather than downplayed), opportunities to re-evaluate the severity of one's losses, or through targeted social and individualised support nurture the experience of positive emotions that can derive from sources which have not been lost because of the occurrence of the stressful event. Social support components can also foster informational and self-esteem support.

Informational support aims to provide relevant and reliable advice and information which can as a result nurture an individual's level of competence. Unfortunately, all too often, transitioning dancers might suffer from the absence of a support system outside their working environments, which further highlights the

crucial importance of fostering multiple identities, interests, passions, purposes throughout a ballet dancing career rather than await the end of a one's performing career.

Competence: Floating resolutions-opportunities for life-long learning

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered the unquestionable opportunity to "pause" and create a space for reflections which can be both seen as either a challenge and a loss of time or as opportunities for growth and achievements. It is well evidenced that trauma can bring what is known as transformational post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). While not all transitioning dancers might have experienced high levels of trauma throughout the pandemic leading to their retirement, reflections and lessons can always be learnt despite a significant sense of loss. Time cannot be regained, but what can be re-gained is a more balanced, and renewed sense of self through acquired and transferable skills that can be implemented in future life changes. Floating resolutions was identified in the previous retirement transition model as indeed opportunities for the process to continue and evolve, perhaps in exciting new roles following the retirement from a dancing career. Managing careers, planning, training, and preparation for longer working life continue to be essential in our society (Baruch, 2004). The notion of protean and portfolio careers is ever more prominent; but highlighting, investing, and retaining transferable skills and qualities that each individual dancer has developed throughout their dancing careers is crucial. For those transitioning dancers where retirement was not an option but a necessity, support can be provided after a period of recovery, where the realization and acceptance of the situation can lead to new discoveries about oneself and eventually others. Cognitive reconstructions and reframing can support the transitioning dancer in nurturing the ability to build their resilience and other adaptive skills that will support them in the exploration of new competencies and personal assets (Relajo-Howell, 2020).

Practical implications

The post COVID-19 pandemic has brought a range of challenges for ballet dancers and performing artists in general where adaptations to unprecedented circumstances had to be applied through an ever-changing landscape. For some dancers, already experiencing the last phase of their performing careers, this period has meant that transitioning to an alternative career had to be embraced in some cases unexpectedly, involuntarily and with little sense of choice or control. The celebratory passage, also known in anthropology as "rite of passage" (Savishinsky, 1994) has in some cases not taken place at all or shortened or for some dancers, they might have been unable to experience the transition through time and meaning making. This can potentially add negative or maladaptive responses or leave the dancer with a significant amount of experienced loss, denial or even void. Some dancers because of a lengthy period of remote training, virtual rehearsals and/or classes with far from ideal spaces available, they might have returned to performances for a short period of time, to then be faced with potential re-occurring injuries (Pollitt & Hutt, 2021) that might have led to the decision to retire perhaps pre-maturely from their original planning. Psychological techniques ought to be taught and used through educational programs early-on in support of holistic care and in reducing the risk of injuries. The high prevalence of stress and mental ill-health in response to the Covid-19 pandemic has also been a compounding factor in some cases to positively and effectively implement coping strategies that have supported dancers in their ability to cope with the experienced adversities. The lack of appropriate social support or the challenges associated with strong ballet dancer's identities, are also other significant factors that need to be taken into consideration when supporting transitioning dancers.

CONCLUSION

The article aimed at revisiting the Retirement Transition Model (Roncaglia, 2006; 2008) and questioned and added some further reflections and dimensions linked to the current post COVID-19 pandemic. It is therefore important that appropriate understanding, specialist guidance and psychological support, continues to be offered to transitioning dancers that might have not had an opportunity to live the transition as indeed planned or wished for. It is through existing performing careers and through educational programs, that a range of skills ought to be taught in order to equip dancers for the next phase of their fulfilling lives.

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