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# Building bridges not silos: Accessible theoretical knowledge that continues to inform practice

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A recent editorial on Psychreg Journal of Psychology (Lane, 2018) makes an argument for the importance of accessibility distribution and impact of scientific and psychological knowledge. Ultimately, academic and scientific knowledge ought to advance our practices and aims to make a meaningful difference in people's lives, improving their overall well-being as well as developing an ability to recover, if illnesses have been experienced. This paper aims to explore and infiltrate reflections around the issue which necessitates the promotion of building bridges between these two areas: theoretical knowledge and practice, where all too often silos of academic and scientific knowledge have little or no effect at all in the real world. As highlighted by Lane, the rise of open access journals and social media platforms ought to be seen as a way to facilitate this process of dissemination and impact, helping to address some of the barriers that have historically prevented a vision of organic and interlocking systems working really together – rather than often seen working alongside in parallel – for and towards a shared aim. The thematic analysis identified four main themes: (1) promoting physical and psychological strengths; (2) promoting integrative educational services; (3) encouraging active engagement; and, (4) promoting relevant accessibility. Barriers and enablers are presented and discussed and how these main themes can be a starting point in guiding future discussions, research topics and ultimately more effective and affordable positive practices.

**Keywords:** clinical practice, dance science, mental health, psychological skills, theoretical knowledge

Applied sport and exercise psychology has received in recent years much wider publicity and recognition not solely within the field of competitive sport but also in other areas which include education, performing arts, health and special educational needs. Elements from the dance discipline such as music, artistry, balance and exercise can be a tool in which the non-dancer can benefit from modified dance programmes. Individuals can be addressing emotional, physical and social integration to reach benefit within physical and mental health, promote stress reduction, promote and stabilise mood adjustment, and support with increased strength, flexibility, coordination, agility and mobility (Lavine, 2018).

Furthermore, the misconception of sport psychology as solely relevant within competitive sport has sparked interest in human performance and its related necessary skills to reach an optimal level of output both under pressure or when systems experience a level of unmanaged level of stress and anxiety leading to underperformance and eventually to ill-conditions. However, as previously suggested, stress and arousal are not always bad news (Roncaglia, 2014). In fact, it was recently argued that cognitive restructuring and reappraisal of a stressful situation can help in adopting level of arousal and stress to the performer's advantage (Turner & Braithwaite, 2018).

The way we think and believe about a specific 'stressful event will be affecting our responses, and ultimately what we do. Therefore if we support the teaching and practice of reconstructing our thinking and core beliefs we might be able to better adapt and adopt positive response and ultimately manage performance more successfully.

The same process could be explored when trying to challenge current gaps within professionals in elite performing arts by looking at ways in which narratives and discourse can inform and improve current practices. What would be the point in investing in further advancement of knowledge in any field if not to promote change, improve our human performances and ultimately our lives? I propose that bridging – rather than the building of barriers or silos – maybe thought as a way to address some of these knowledge gaps by determining how to integrate education and training across the fields of elite performers and performing arts studies and by supporting companies, and individuals with expertise in the field, to working together in providing more effective and impactful practices. This process can be drawing on the specialised knowledge and expertise in each field and gain from their unique perspectives to improve and enrich existing practices.

In order to open up the conversation and discussion regarding the argument for current theoretical knowledge to be not only relevant but practical and applicable to existing practices in performing arts and elite performing, a focus group discussion was facilitated during a network event.

## METHODOLOGY

Participants ( $N = 15$ ) attending were from a variety of health-related professional practitioners, professional performers, as well as students and academics in the field of dance science, dance medicine, performing arts and education. The aim and objective were to initiate and facilitate some thinking on how to explore ways in which current knowledge in the field of dance health, sport and exercise psychology, psychiatry and academia can visualise and initiate ways to create discourse which enables bridging between areas of expertise and strengthen and widens knowledge in improving practice. In no particular order, three open-ended questions were presented for discussion and exploration. These were meant to promote initial thinking in the field of positive and adaptive health behaviours, looking at exploring existing knowledge and how it can be more widely presented and more significantly implemented. Consideration of barriers to current practice in the discussion in promoting healthier and preventive measures within professionals and their organisations were explored. Participants were invited to make their contributions through a one-hour session. A thematic analysis of

the date was performed (Clarke & Braun, 2013) in order to highlight core themes. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase was adopted in guiding the thematic analysis (see Table 1). Questions were as follows:

1. How can dancers be referred to mental health services more effectively?
2. What actions can be taken to reduce stigma and labelling around mental health?
3. What strategies can be implemented to ensure injured and rehabilitating dancers are supported physically and psychologically?

Table 1

Braun and Clarke's six-phase frame work for doing a thematic analysis

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6
Become familiar with the data	Generate initial codes	Search for themes	Review themes	Define themes	Write-up

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All too often, we seem to perform within isolated walls of knowledge and it is only in recent years which we have witnessed the emergence of trans- and multidisciplinary approached in the pursuit of better understanding of a range of human issues. Within the field of elite performers, dance and a variety of its genres, mental health-related issues and conditions have rarely been explored and openly discussed, despite the assertion that our bodies as human systems are but the combination of body and mind.

The focus group facilitated an open discussion on themes around healthy positive behaviour responses, unhealthy behaviours, labelling, services, and four main themes from the analysis. These are presented with related discussion on how they can inform a way forward in our practices.

### Promoting understanding of physical and psychological strengths

Reflections on the data analysed suggest that current knowledge in managing long and healthy careers mainly continues to focus on the body and the mind as two separate entities which continue to function almost at different levels and as a result are seen and understood in parallel rather than as a unique and organic whole. The body as the main tool of a dancer is understood as a machine that functions separately or at least as a main driver for improvement, progress and maturity with little awareness of the mind's role in guiding and driving this tool. Furthermore, discrepancies between chronological and developmental age in young artists accentuate the divide between body and mind maturing and developing at different stages and pace (Mitchell, 2018).

Bodies and minds need to be presented, understood, conceptualised and taught as one interlocked system functioning in synchrony, balance and harmony. If these continue to be understood as separate organisms, functioning in parallel, and thought as divided systems, a very limited advancement can, and will be, achieved. Recently, top elite performers within competitive sport have confirmed that their recent successes were down to 70% mental preparation and 30% to physical training suggesting the significant role played by the mind and mental preparation in pursuing exceptional performance. The current perceived dichotomy prevents from embracing the whole body-mind as a system that will encounter pressure from the external (and internal) agents according to interactions between the individual-environment-individual (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). It is therefore narrowing the visualisation on how – when this system fails to function/perform well – different elements all linked together are being addressed. The body seems to be understood as an entity per se, which promotes a limited process of 'fixing' when broken, rather than exploring among other elements of this system:

ergonomics, motivational factors, self-concept and resilience (Relajo-Howell, 2017). Promoting an understanding of physical and psychological strengths might support the implementation of preventive approaches, which include acceptance, listening to the body and mind, assessment and evaluation.

#### Promoting integrative educational services

This other theme emerged from reflections and discussion regarding the value and importance of preventive and proactive measures which promote positive healthy behaviours that are assessed at and during the formative years of professionals. All too often, positive mental health and behaviours are sought at the point of crisis, or when the systems have been already broken or placed under extreme pressure. Integrative educational and informative services ought to be part of a curriculum that recognises ill health, injuries, maladaptive behaviours as part of a unique system which is the body and mind, and therefore recognising how extreme pressure combined with inefficient coping mechanisms and resources can lead to maladaptive and unhealthy behavioural responses. Participation and collaboration from parents within young professionals was also another suggestion captured in the theme.

Active collaboration that seeks parental involvement in young adolescents was thought to be an enabling factor to promote an educational environment which is all inclusive. This was more thought to be at university levels, where adolescents are required to follow specific programmes of studies and formation. Lack of psychological knowledge within the curricula was evident as there were the foundation for forming and developing the next generation of professionals would be considering being the key.

#### Encouraging active engagement

Another theme which has emerged from the analysis embraces the concept of a greater and more significantly active engagement from the dancing and arts community in recognising the need for more visible and accessible services. The stigma and labelling worn around mental health emerged through the analysis through it seems that since more recent public elite sport figures have exposed and shared their experiences of mental health issues, expressed experiencing depression at the heights of their professional achievements, there seems to be a better recognition, admission and acceptance of mental health related conditions.

Perfectionism emerged as part of the sub-themes as being in direct contracts and conflict with the notion of a system that is often that is often to recognise when support is needed. Being perfect and pursuing perfection is often mistaken as a healthy attitude to nurture. Perfectionistic tendencies will differently affect group of dancers on burnout symptoms and motivational regulation (Cumming & Duda, 2012). Encouraging engagement seems to stem from a recognised need for greater openness, transparency, courage and experience which becomes shared and informative. It seems to also challenge the notion of silos of silences when elements of the system starts to malfunction, or when injuries both visible and more significantly invisible are labelled as weaknesses and recognised as deficits.

Encouraging active engagement also captures the need for greater collaboration and openness when a specific narrative needs to become visible and audible. Active engagement could mean greater participation from individuals in sharing their experiences as a learning process rather than as an admission of weaknesses. It might mean to make better and greater use of open access forums, open access academic journals and social media platforms in providing safe, informational and educational tools for challenging current thinking and improving practices.

#### Promoting relevant accessibility

The previous themes open the pathway to a discourse that promotes an easier and informative access to appropriate services and organisations that support the physical and mental well-being of elite professionals in performing arts and competitive sports. Accessibility means initially reviewing existing resources, identifying current gaps in knowledge and the opportunity to further develop existing ones.

Lack of services which specialise in elite performance professionals was evident through the narrative. Although some forward organisations now recognise the value of transdisciplinary teams within their medical/health services, this seems to be far from common practice. Where it has been recognised a need for psychological support as part of preventive and proactive measures to tackle risks associated with both injuries and non-injury related problems, a clearer pathway ought to be available to sourcing information which can lead to a proper and relevant assessment, implementation of a programme of recovery, a monitoring and evaluation stage which becomes part of the package. Barriers identified were again related to the initial theme of understanding a system of physical and psychological strengths as being one whole.

## CONCLUSION

This brief paper aimed to open the conversation in identifying and mapping some initial evidence on how bridging will support delineate and help to draw relevant and useful tasks that can bring research, theoretical knowledge, education, training and service delivery, and ultimately policy on the agenda. Informing knowledge gaps, through the promotion of physical and psychological strengths as a whole, by promoting educational services that cover a whole range of psychological topics, by promoting active engagement from professionals and the wider-performing community and finally be evaluating and enriching existing accessibility in services that address mental health and well-being, will hopefully provide an initial open platform for further discussion and for driving a research agenda on this area.

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