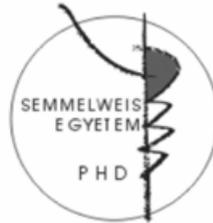


Coeducated sporting
The relationship of couples in ballroom dancing

Ph.D. Thesis

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Introduction

High technical skills and stamina are not enough to be successful in the world of ballroom dancing in competitions; one needs skills for artistic performance that is in tune with the music, elegant appearance and, last but not least, a high-level co-operation of with the dance partner. The lack of harmony between partners is immediately seen in the competition performance, furthermore a conflict between the male and female dancers deteriorates the effectiveness of the mutual training sessions. While dancing, man and woman get in close physical contact, through which a special and intimate relationship is formed between them. Its frequent consequence is that partners make a couple in the world outside the dancing floor as well, and this closer emotional relationship influences their dancing performance: it can either ameliorate or deteriorate it. In these cases the conflict between the roles of dance partners and those of the romantic relationship pose problems for the competitors. When their romantic relationship is over, mostly their dancing career ends as well, or they can only continue at the price of lots of conflicts and compromises. Effective conflict management skills are of paramount importance in how the dance partners can cope with the difficulties arisen between them, and conflict management can determine whether they can stay together and whether they can be successful in the future.

Aim of the study

The aim of my research was to gather information about a sport whose psychological background and factors leading to success have mostly been neglected so far. Both the Hungarian and the international literature contain rare instances of work that observes this sport from a psychological point of view, and none of the available research has concentrated on the relationship between the dance partners. This was why I found it important to examine how ballroom dancers think about the factors leading to and preventing success, and how important they consider in this respect the relationship with the partner. Further questions are how they define the dance partners' relationship, how close and intimate this relationship is, and how much the

partners in a well functioning romantic relationship resemble each other. It is important to examine how satisfied the competitors are with their partners and how they handle the problems between them, what conflict management skills they have. My research furthermore tries to find the answer to the question of how often dance partners become romantic partners, which means couples, and how this influences their performance in ballroom dancing, as well as what happens after their breaking up. I applied a new but at the same time accepted method in the research of romantic relationships: the Couple Rorschach Test to the field of the dynamics between dance partners, as I wanted to test the method on this target group too. I hypothesised the following:

- Ballroom dancing requires lots of practice, a good coach for success, and in higher categories also a lot of money. Besides, the quality of the relationship with the dance partner is also an important factor.
- The secret of long-run success is resemblance of the partners in personality and ideas about dancing (i.e. their goals), and that they should stay together (i.e. they solve the conflicts) and dance together for a long time.
- The relationship between dance partners is a close, intimate relationship, which is more than just training or doing sport together with someone, and this is true all the more if they have been dancing together for a long time.
- It is very frequent in ballroom dancing that partners make a romantic couple in the world outside the dancing floor, but this romantic relationship does not necessarily influence their performance for the better, and breaking up often means the end of their common dancing career.
- Dance partners often break up (whether they have a romantic relationship or not) and swap partners. Breaking up is forecast by a conflict-laden relationship, which can be shown by the Couple Rorschach Test.

Materials

My research method included a questionnaire, psychological tests and the Couple Rorschach Test (MRT). The questionnaire compiled by me included open and closed-ended questions, as well as ranking tasks. The questions targeted the following topics:

- dancing history (when and how did they begin dancing, who supported them, which dancing style and which category they compete in),
- motivation for dancing (goals, how much they train, how much they spend on dancing),
- the factors leading to success (what contributes to and what hinders good performance, as well as what relation can be discovered between the individual factors),
- the relationship with the dance partner (how long they have been dancing together, what is the relationship like between them, what they like and dislike in their partners, how often they have a row and how they solve these conflicts, what is the ideal dance partner like),
- the effect of the romantic relationship on the dancing performance (how long they have had the romantic relationship, how it influences their performance, what happened after breaking up).

Psychological tests measured the personalities of the dancers, their pre-competition anxiety level, emotional intelligence and conflict solving skills. I used the following tests in the research:

- TIPI (Ten-Item Personality Inventory) by Gosling et al. (2003), Hungarian version by Mirnics (2006); the test being a shortened version of the Big 5 questionnaires,
- CSAI-2 (Competitive Sport Anxiety Inventory-2) by Martens (1990), Hungarian version by Sipos et al. (1999) for measuring competition anxiety,
- the Bar-On Model of Emotional-Social Intelligence (ESI) by Bar-On (2006), Hungarian version by Budai (2005) for measuring emotional intelligence,
- and a test for measuring conflict management strategies by Teale et al. (1996), Hungarian version by Ternovszky (2003).

I used a refined version (the Integrated Code System by Mirnics et al., 2008) of the traditional Couple Rorschach Test (Bagdy et al., 2002) for the examination of the relationship dynamics of dance partners. I asked the partners participating in the study to formulate a mutual response to each of the ten Rorschach tables. The code system (still under refinement) is based on the findings of wide literature (Ferenc Mérei's individual Rorschach interpretation, Jürg Willi's collusion theory, Máth's decision making theory, object relations theories, and family therapy literatures) and on research, and constitutes an autonomous method in the field of interaction dynamics research.

Subjects

226 ballroom dancers (113 of which were male and 113 were female) participated in my research, all of them being adults (mean age: 22.16 years). They are currently active competitors in various dancing styles (standard and latin-american) and categories (D, C, B, A and S classes) and come from all over Hungary. The questionnaires and the psychological tests were done by all of them, while I administered the Couple Rorschach Test to 60 dancing couples in the following way:

- the best: the top 10 couples of the Hungarian Adult Standard Ranking List, as well as the top 10 couples of the Hungarian Adult Latin Ranking List (n = 20) (source: www.mtasz.hu),
- advanced level: couples competing in class B who have not reached excellent results in the Hungarian National Championship and the Ranking List Competitions (so they are not included in the top 10 of the list) (n = 20),
- beginners: couples competing in classes D and C (n = 20).

The dancers were chosen by personal contacts, internet ads and personal participation in competitions. Each subject participated in the research voluntarily and received no material reward in return. I assured anonymity for everybody in the processing of and presenting the data.

Method

The questionnaires and the psychological tests were done by the subjects individually. Couple Rorschach Tests were administered at a time allocated to this purpose: I went to the venue specified by the couple (usually to the dancing studio they were training in), where I showed them the Rorschach tables, recorded their verbal answers with a digital voice recorder and their non-verbal responses by written notes during the recording. A short discussion followed the administration of MRT, when we had the opportunity for clarifying questions and observations.

There was a follow-up period of one year after the administration of the MRT, when I observed the relationship of the couples participating in the study, and recorded whether they stayed together as dance partners or broke up and finished their common dancing career.

Results

I used the computer program ROPstat (Vargha, 2007) for the statistical analysis of the results provided by the research methods. All the results detailed proved to be statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$).

The importance of relationship for competition success is shown by the fact that dancers' rank lists (about the factors required for success) had the partner's skills and personality at the glorious second place (being more important for them than the quantity of training and money). 23 per cent of the competitors attribute success to a good dance partner, which is the fifth most frequent factor of the 15 factors appearing in the responses. 18 per cent of the dancers mentioned the lack of a dance partner among the factors hindering success, which is the third most frequent problem out of the 14 factors appearing in the responses. 14 per cent of the dancers consider their dance partners to be their most important personal and career support (which is higher than what their boy/girlfriends, club members or sponsors received in the responses). It means that competitors consider their dance partners and the good relationship with them as fundamental for success.

Most of the dancers (49 per cent) considered their partners good friends, but it was frequent that they had a closer emotional relationship, which means that they are coupled in real life too: 22 per cent had a romantic relationship, and relatively few (15 per cent) consider this relationship a work-type relationship, a kind of co-operation needed for success. 22 per cent of the dancer subjects in the research make romantic couples outside the dancing floor, and a further 6 per cent used to have romantic relationships with their partners but had already broken up. At the same time 48 per cent of the competitors had already had a romantic relationship with at least one of their dance partners, so it is a frequent phenomenon. The results show that the romantic relationships boosted their performance (according to 47 per cent of subjects), but 36 per cent mentioned the negative effects of the same phenomenon. At the same time breaking up deteriorated the dancing performance according to the majority (77 per cent); what is more, the end of the romantic relationship led to the end of the common dance career in 39 per cent of all the cases.

The fragility of dance partnership is further evidenced by the fact that the follow-up showed that 32 per cent of the dance partners gave up dancing with their current partners and began looking for a new one. 93 per cent of the couples having a romantic relationship at the same time stayed together during the follow-up period, while this measure was 50 per cent for couples that had had a romantic relationship but had already broken up, which means that while romantic relationships reinforce the dance partnership, breaking up threatens it. The MRT predicted which couples had a conflicted relationship, as the couples who broke up within a period of one year after the examination had shown more points of getting stuck and rejection, while the couples staying together demonstrated clarifying explanations, attention to the other and empathy. Similarly, couples who considered their relationship as harmonious had higher rates of verbal activity (i.e. they communicated more intensely), while bad relationships were shown by rejecting or sabotaging the partner's suggestion, as well as confusion (uncertainty of the response). Having compared the personalities and opinions about dancing of the dance partners, I found that partners who stayed together showed a similarity in what they thought about dancing (e.g.

motivation, difficulties), as well as about their own relationship; furthermore their personalities (emotional intelligence) showed more harmony than those of the partners who broke up within the one-year period of the follow-up.

After having compared the dance partners competing in various categories, I concluded that the best of them have been dancing together with their partners for the longest time, and it is most frequent for them to be having a romantic relationship with their partners, while they stay together most after a break-up and continue the joint dancing career. Besides, they have the most rows, but the follow-up showed that they stick to each other the most, which means that they handle their problems effectively (this conclusion is supported by the fact that they displayed the highest rate of problem solving based on compromises). The MRT showed that the best dancers communicate the most intensely and openly with their partners (they dare to criticise each other), and they show the highest rate of co-operation (number of clarifying explanations and integrating).

Partners who have been dancing together for a short time, as well as those who consider themselves beginners in dancing, consider their relationships with their partners to be more harmonious and mention less rows than those dancing in higher categories or have been dancing with their partners for a longer time. It seems that arguments and problems are inevitable during the joint work, and it is essential that the dancers should be able to solve these problems. Only those stay with their partners and are successful, who manage to do this.

I compared the MRT results of ballroom dancers to the results of married couples from older research data, and concluded that dance partners having a romantic relationship with each other at the same time show something most like newly wed couples' relationship dynamics: they co-operate, but are at the same time trying to dominate the relationship with their own ideas (ambivalent communication). As opposed to this, dance partners having a friendly relationship interact with fewer signs of power struggle, and dancers having a work-type relationship showed poorer, more distanced

message exchanges (less emotion involved). The dance partners who broke up after the end of the research showed the most marked dissimilarity to the interaction dynamics of married couples: they display a higher need for autonomy and less co-operation. Compared to married couples, ballroom dancers' communication is more initiating, active, performance oriented, more self-confident and aggressive, which is a good sign of their being sports people (competitors).

The results support my first hypothesis, as the dancers mentioned perseverance and hard work as the most important factors leading to success, and actually these are the ones needed for training hours and hours every day. The importance of a good coach was mentioned by those who dance in higher categories, so I have to modify my original hypothesis slightly, while money is really decisive for the best only for successful competitions. The importance of the dance partner is further supported by the data collected.

Hypothesis No. 2 could not be fully supported, as there is a weak correlation between the personalities of the dance partners and their opinions about dancing. At the same time, the results point to the fact that both male and female partners who stay together in the long run (which means that they are able to co-operate) are more similar to each other than those who broke up within one year after the study, meaning that this hypothesis was well founded.

My third hypothesis proved to be good, since most of the dancers considered their partners to be good friends, and work-type co-operation appeared mostly in the lower categories. Successful partners did not characterise each other this way. The good, intimate relationship may help the partners stay together, while partners following the work-type model broke up in higher percentage.

Hypothesis No. 4 was also supported, as 48 per cent of the dancers had already had a romantic relationship with at least one of their partners, and 22 per cent of them were together with their current partners outside the dancing floor too. Furthermore, the longer one has been dancing, the more romantic relationships they have had with their dance partners, and the longer a dancing couple has been dancing together, the more probable it is that they fall in love with each other. This means that dancing really brings the man and the woman together, and in an ideal case, forges them, both physically and psychologically. Romantic relationships between dance partners involve lots of tension, and its performance boosting effects usually last for a short time only (even this effect is controversial), and at the same time there is a great danger that they will stop dancing together after breaking up.

The fifth hypothesis was also supported by the data. 32 per cent of the dancers participating in the research broke up with their partners within a year after the end of the research, although only 4 per cent indicated in the questionnaire that they wanted new partners. It means that their opinions changed fast, their relationships deteriorated and they changed their partners. This is why it is important to recognise conflicted relationships between dance partners, so that they can receive help from (sports)psychologists, trainers and other dancers to solve the problems and prevent the decline of an otherwise promising dancing career. It can be seen that ballroom dancers have much to learn in the field of conflict solving (special emphasis on the fact that partners in a bad relationship applied avoidance the most). The Couple Rorschach Test seems to be a well functioning, reliable method for mapping the relationship between dance partners and their conflicts. Partners in a good relationship communicate more with each other and show higher rates of co-operation (accepting one another's response and building on it), while partners having a bad relationship try to rely on their own responses while providing responses to the test. The MRT shows good correlations with the tests applied in this research, so its validity has been proven.

Conclusions

The results show clearly that much training (perseverance and hard work), as well as a high level of technical skills (requiring a good coach) are complemented by the partner's importance (skills, personality) and the co-operation with him or her, which are all essential for the dancers' success in competitions. As for the quality of the relationship with the dance partner, which is much more than a pure working relationship: it requires a high level of co-operation and thinking together of the man and the woman, they need to solve conflicts effectively and be in physical and psychological harmony with each other, which has to be manifested not only in training daily for years, but on the dance floor as well, enchanting the spectators and prompting judges to place them well.

The relationship between man and woman in ballroom dancing follows both the traditional pattern (the man being the dominant one, controlling) and the more modern relationship pattern based on the equality of the partners (they set goals together and work for the success together and to the same extent). This kind of co-operation makes the dance partnership more difficult, but at the same time renders it more colourful and richer. The development of the relationship between dancers have the same stages as those of romantic relationships (marriages): from the initial harmony through the stormy period of distributing roles (dominance) to long-term, effective co-operation (or breaking up).

The results of my research outline the development of the dance partners' relationship. In the phase of getting to know and getting accustomed to each other, the partners try to maintain the illusion of seamless harmony, and do not discuss the appearing problems openly. If they fall in love in this phase, they own the conflicts even less during the romantic period, so they probably will not be able to continue dancing together after the break-up, as they will have accumulated a lot of hurt and resentment. In an ideal case the getting acquainted phase is followed by another one where the partners struggle for dominance; the most important task of this stage is for the partners to clarify the roles and expectations in the relationship. If they have

successfully negotiated this stage, they become capable of discussing the later problems openly. Romantic relationships that are formed after this stage are more profound, more intimate, and the relationship as dance partners has a better chance of surviving even the break-up. Effective conflict management skills and open communication (embracing even criticising each other) play an essential role in the longevity and in successful co-operation for dance partnership.

This is why I consider it significant for ballroom dancers (especially for the elite dancers competing in higher categories) to be prepared appropriately for effective and successful conflict management and co-operation with the partner, which requires a lot of knowledge of oneself. Another important factor is that partners in crisis need to receive help for solving their problems, for lowering the tension between them. Their coaches (and an appropriately trained dance teacher) can be of great help in this, but I think that in certain cases the professional help of a sports psychologist who is well versed both in counselling and in couple therapy is inevitable. As a result of a successful therapy, the partners who have the chance to dance at an international level may build on their careers, while many years of work may be wasted without such professional help if the partners break-up.

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