

Challenging dance hierarchies: perceptions of success in community dance practice

Drawing on the findings from recent research, the University of Bedfordshire's **Rachel Farrer**, Lecturer in Dance and **Imogen Auja**, Senior Lecturer in Dance describe how the value many dance practitioners place on their work in community dance settings challenges the traditional perceptions of success within the wider sector

The aim of this article is to explore how independent dance artists perceive and value community practice in relation to the wider independent dance sector. It is based on the findings of a larger research project that investigated the experience of independent dancers based in the UK.(1)

For the study, 14 dance artists at various stages of their careers were interviewed about different aspects of their work and asked to reflect upon their roles, the demands of the career, and their perceptions of success. The results demonstrated the multiple roles that independent dance artists undertake, the challenges that are inherent within freelance work, and how motivational factors and psychological characteristics help independent dancers to overcome such problems.

One of the issues examined was how independent dancers, who worked in different contexts and were at different stages of their careers, defined success. The results suggested that some of the traditional hierarchies of the dance industry, which appear to favour choreographer-led or performance work over participatory arts, still exist.(2,3) The participants in this study indicated that this hierarchy was unfounded however. Their criteria for success were achievable in all of the work that independent dancers undertake, including in community dance settings.

Despite artists, organisations and academics alike calling for traditional hierarchies and career ladders to be dismantled(2,3,4), there remained

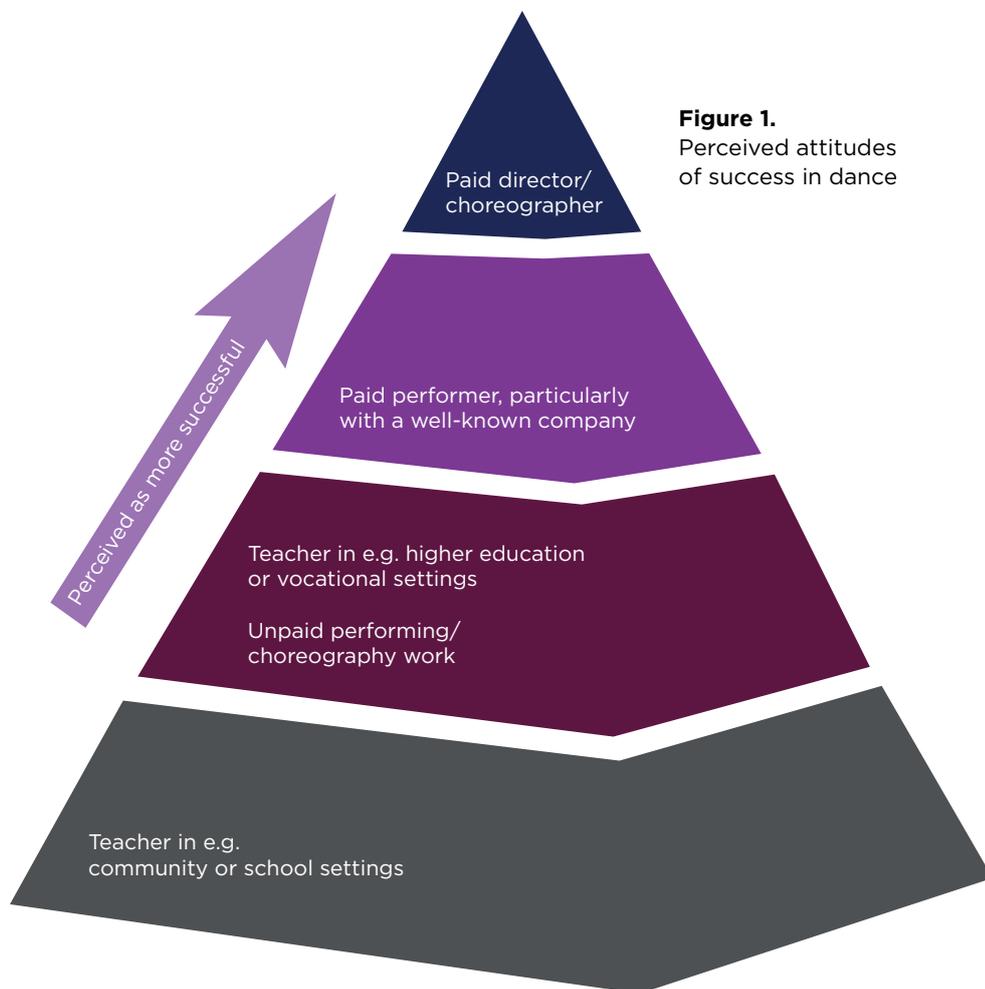


Figure 1.
Perceived attitudes of success in dance

a general consensus among the participants in our research that the dance world has particular attitudes and perceptions that informed how their work was valued. This was entrenched in basic aspects of dancers' careers such as where and how they trained, or where they lived. It was also

more explicitly recognised in terms of what work the participants were undertaking and who they worked for. Generally, being a choreographer or having one's own company was perceived as the most successful career path, followed by professional performance work, teaching in Higher >>

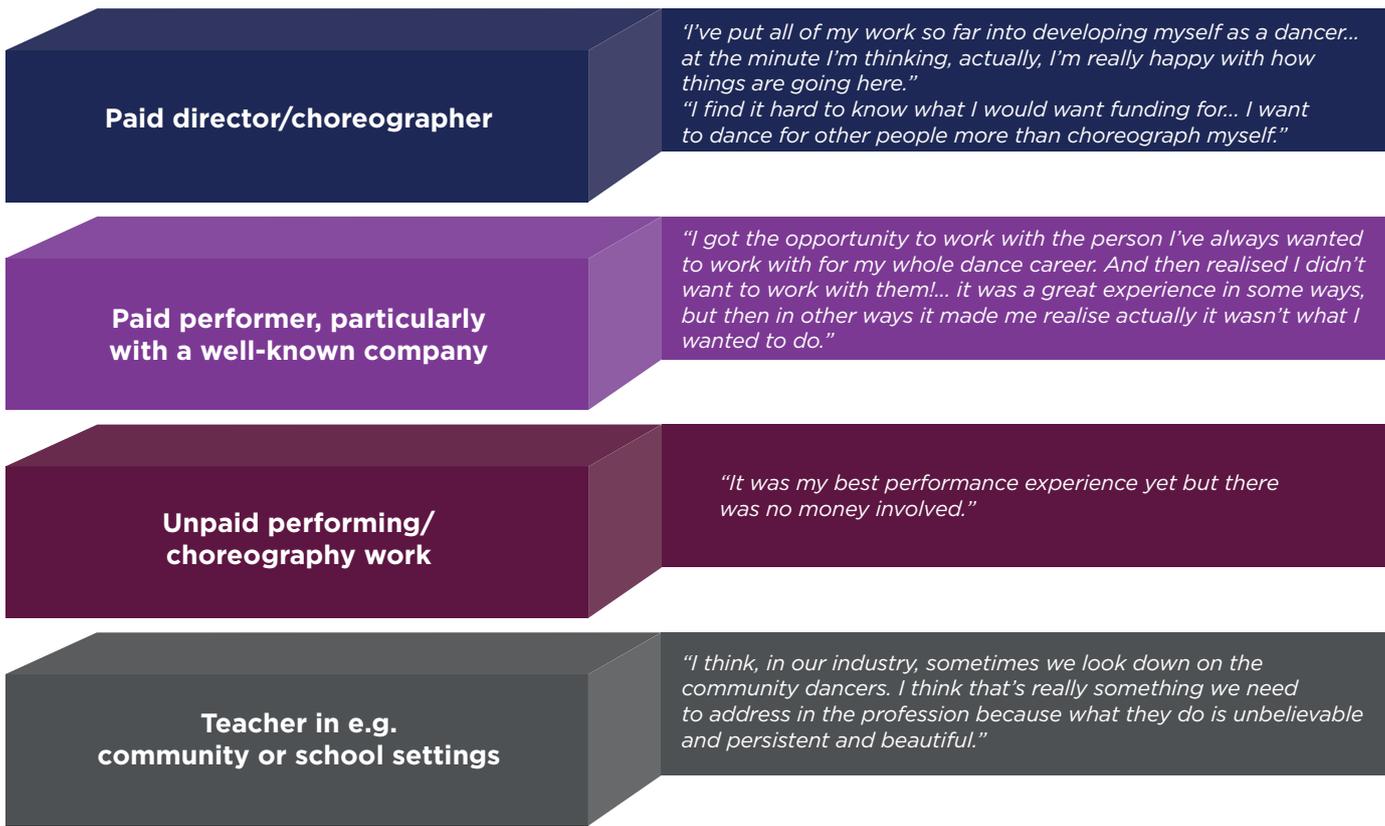


Figure 2. Comments from dance artists who challenged the perceived attitudes towards success

Education or vocational settings, and then community practice (see Figure 1). This hierarchy was evidenced when the participants were asked about their future ambitions, as many commented that they felt pressure to teach less and perform more. Those who already performed extensively felt the only way they could develop their careers in the eyes of others was to pursue choreographic or project leadership roles. Several participants specifically indicated a hierarchy in terms of how they believed community work and teaching was valued. They felt that although these were often seen as more stable roles, community work was sometimes looked down upon and not seen to be as successful as undertaking performing or choreographic roles.

This perception of industry values was challenged, however, by a number of participants who expressed concern over the pressure they experienced to follow particular career paths regardless of their own interests or aims (see Figure 2). In some instances dancers did not have any desire to manage their own creative projects or apply for their own funding to

make work, but felt that their career development was limited if they did not. Similarly, some participants described experiencing anxiety over not being able to progress within this supposed hierarchy for various reasons. For example, some had to give up their touring work and reduce their work travel time once they started a family; this limited what work they could accept. In the past Clarke and Gibson have called for funding structures to become more "flexible and responsive to the needs of applicants" to combat such issues and support independent dance artists in more varied roles.(2) However, the evidence gathered within this study demonstrates that dancers working in the sector still feel their careers are governed by fairly rigid expectations.

Pauline Tambling describes the industry as being split between "superstar artists" and "low paid practitioners", demonstrating that this hierarchy informs not only how independent artists are perceived by others, but also the financial remuneration that they receive.(3) In relation to community

dance, Tambling's description echoes the views of participants who discussed the way community 'practitioners' were valued within the industry. Many felt that choreographic roles within companies were considered to be more 'artistic' than community work, and therefore more elite and better paid. When discussing those who worked in participatory settings, however, the participants acknowledged what a demanding role this was, relying on a high level of skill, knowledge and artistry in order to undertake work effectively. As such, they challenged the perception that it should be perceived as a less successful, or lower paid, role.

A significant aspect of this study was examining the motivational factors of the participants involved. Interestingly, few of the dancers cited being driven by the hierarchy outlined above. When asked about what motivated them to work within the independent sector, factors such as their passion for dance as an artform, and the fulfilment and enjoyment they experienced from working within such a vibrant industry, appeared

to be most valued. Dancers also valued factors like flexibility, variety and the opportunity to work with different people. Although several of the participants acknowledged that regular employment and financial stability was important, they did not cite financial success as a motivating factor within their work, suggesting that independent dancers do not necessarily have ambitions to become 'superstar artists'.(3) Furthermore, those participants who described being motivated to work for particular companies in the past explained that upon reflection, those roles had often not lived up to their expectations. As the participants grew more experienced they became less concerned about how they were perceived by others. Instead the focus of their work was ensuring their experiences of working within the sector were positive, providing them opportunities to grow as artists and practitioners.

Similarly, when questioned about how they defined success, few of the participants spoke about specific roles or projects as being more successful than others. Instead they described more overarching experiences that governed their perception of work. Those in the early stages of their careers felt that success was simply about being able to sustain a career within the sector. Often these dancers said they did not care what kind of work they were doing, and that they were happy just to be a part of the dance community they loved. As independent dancers became more experienced, they began to value the autonomy that was inherent in their work. The participants appeared to really cherish and appreciate this as something unique to freelance work. Being able to make their own decisions about what they did, when they did it and how they went about it was seen as a huge success. Several of the participants spoke about the importance of their relationships with others and how having the opportunity to provide help and support meant that they were succeeding themselves. Several of the dancers spoke about getting together with other artists to share their skills and experiences, or, if they were in the position to, creating opportunities and jobs

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that would nurture emerging artists. Finally, many of the participants felt that with success came a responsibility to contribute to and enhance the dance world, for example through choreographic innovation or demonstrating the impact dance can have on different people's lives. When discussing their desire to make a valuable contribution, several participants referred to community arts practices, recognising the sustained and highly valued influence that participatory arts made on the world and the positive message this sent about the dance sector.

It is evident that the descriptions of success provided by the participants in this study respond to many of the values and beliefs shared within the community dance sector. Community dance provides flexible and creative roles that allow artists and practitioners, however they choose to define themselves, to work collaboratively with others and contribute to the wider dance sector. The independent dancers in this study clearly valued the autonomy that came with their roles, recognising the privileged positions they were in. As such they felt motivated to work in sharing, open and responsible ways, and were able to recognise success in multiple contexts. These findings are supported by mainstream psychology literature around wellbeing, which indicates that people are at their happiest, most

satisfied and most productive when they feel autonomous, competent, and related to others in various social environments.(5,6) Individuals excel when they are able to meet new challenges and grow accordingly, and when they feel that they have something to offer to society.(7) Importantly, each of these factors or needs can be satisfied through any of the work an independent dancer undertakes, be it community projects, choreographing new work or teaching the next generation of artists. As such, the findings from this study challenge some of the hierarchies present within the dance industry by demonstrating how work in community dance settings can provide happiness, fulfilment and 'success' for many independent dance artists.

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The full report, which examines various aspects of independent dance practice, is available online at:
www.beds.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/499682/Final-Report.pdf

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