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## Creativity and personality in professional dancers

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### ABSTRACT

In this study three different groups of professional dancers (ballet, modern/contemporary and jazz/musical), which considerably vary with respect to the creativity-related demands involved in the respective dancing style, are compared with respect to psychometrically determined creativity, general mental ability and different facets of personality. Results indicate that modern/contemporary dancers, who are often required to freely improvise on stage, exhibited relatively high levels of verbal and figural creativity (as it was measured by means of psychometric creativity tests), followed by jazz/musical and finally by ballet dancers. With respect to personality, modern/contemporary dancers can be characterized as being less conscientious, higher on psychoticism and more open to experiences than the remaining experimental groups. In line with relevant research in this field, this study reveals some central personality characteristics of highly creative individuals which may be considered as important ingredients in the acquisition or actualization of exceptional creative potential.

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### 1. Introduction

Dancing represents a fascinating and enjoyable creative expression, which has attracted attention in almost all annals of recorded history. Performing artists or dancers from different disciplines (such as ballet or modern dancers) are commonly considered as outstandingly creative individuals, but scientifically no conclusive characterization of this (rather heterogeneous) group of people has been achieved yet. In the course of history, different forms of dance have emerged. For instance, classical ballet has its roots in Europe and Russia of the 16th and 17th century. The technique, as we know it today, was written down in the Académie Royale de Danse in 1661, known today as Théâtre Nationale de Opéra (Au, 2002). The development of modern/contemporary dance, which involves a considerably higher level of creative expression than classical ballet, may be dated into the 19th century and was motivated by the willingness to attenuate the fixed and rigid structures inherent to classical ballet. Modern or contemporary dance is a more free style type of dance, allowing artists to freely improvise or to perform in a more “ad hoc manner”, while in other dancing disciplines such as jazz/musical or classical ballet, dancers are required to align themselves more strongly to predefined choreographies or scripts. Jazz and musical dance has its origin in the USA. This form of dancing emerged from the folk and society dances of the African slaves in America, and meanwhile this dance discipline comprises a broad repertoire of different steps and body

movements. It became very famous in the 20th century, at the time when the musical was born.

This study was designed to investigate personality characteristics of professional dancers of varying dance disciplines in order to learn more about the manifold facets of personality specifically involved in outstanding (or at least clearly above-average) creative individuals. In doing so, we aim at improving our understanding of creative personality characteristics in individuals in more “real-life” or creativity-related domains such as dance or performing arts, which may offer a valuable enrichment of research in samples of the normal population. Specifically, three different groups of dancers (ballet, modern/contemporary, jazz/musical), which may considerably vary in the creativity-related demands involved in the respective dance style, are compared with respect to psychometrically determined creativity, general mental ability and different facets of personality. Guided by the view that creativity is highly domain specific, this study aims at looking at “micro-domains” (such as ballet, modern/contemporary or jazz/musical) within the larger creativity domain of dance (cf. Baer, 2010).

Research on personality correlates of creativity has been carried out in many different domains. For instance, in one of the first studies in this field, MacKinnon (1965) focused on personality characteristics in architects of varying levels of creativity. MacKinnon’s work has stimulated much research in this area and in the meanwhile relevant studies in this field have provided evidence of a relatively stable set of core dimensions as being characteristic for creative individuals. Among the most important ones are “high valuation of esthetic qualities in experience, broad interests, attraction to complexity, high energy, independence of judgment, autonomy, intuition, self-confidence, ability to resolve antinomies

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or to accommodate apparently opposite or conflicting traits in one's self concept, and finally, a firm sense of self as "creative" (Barron & Harrington, 1981, p. 453).

Within the artistic creativity domain, highly creative individuals such as artists or dancers have been characterized among others as being more creative, introverted, comparatively high on emotionality or neuroticism, more open to experiences and strongly achievement- or performance-oriented (e.g. Alter, 1984; Bakker, 1991; Haller, 2010; Marchant-Haycox & Wilson, 1992; Rubinstein & Strul, 2006). Similarly, in Feist's (1998) comprehensive meta-analytic review of literature on personality in scientific and artistic creativity, creative people are "...regardless of which measure or taxonomy was used to assess personality and creativity... more autonomous, introverted, open to experiences, norm-doubting, self-confident, self-accepting, driven, ambitious, dominant, hostile, and impulsive" (p. 299). These traits are highly similar and in some cases even identical to the traits Eysenck (1995) used to identify psychoticism (e.g. aggressive, cold, egocentric, impulsive etc.). Eysenck's psychoticism dimension, which has been observed to be substantially associated with various creativity-related demands (e.g. Abraham, Windmann, Daum, & Güntürkün, 2005; see also Eysenck, 1995), is conceptualized as a continuum, ranging from lower (altruism, conformity) to higher manifestations (impulsivity, psychopathy, p. 235) and this personality trait is thought to underlie a variety of psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia or manic-depressive symptoms (as well as schizoid, psychopathic or borderline disorders). In fact, there are many illustrative examples of eminent creative people who suffer(ed) from mental or psychopathological disorders leading some authors to conclude that "...madness may be the price for possessing one of the most sublime human gifts" (Barrantes-Vidal, 2004, p. 59). Post (1994) for instance investigated the prevalence of various forms of psychopathologies in exceptionally creative people (such as writers and artists) and concluded that certain psychopathological personality characteristics may be linked to some facets of creativity. In a similar way, Kaufman (2005) studied a large sample of different types of writers (fiction writers, poets, playwrights, nonfiction writers) and concluded that poets are more likely to suffer from mental illness than other types of writers.

According to the findings briefly summarized above, the creative personality can be best characterized as being broadly interested, ambitious, norm-doubting and self-confident, prone to non-conformity, continuously striving to swim against the current and to experience something new. With respect to this study, this may particularly apply for modern/contemporary dancers, who are often required to freely improvise on stage, thereby experiencing more freedom in actualizing their creative potential. In contrast, ballet dancers (and to some minor extent also jazz/musical dancers) who are normally obliged to adhere to well-structured choreographies and scripts, are expected to tend to conformity or higher levels of conscientiousness. We may therefore hypothesize that the higher level of creative expression in modern/contemporary (as opposed to classical ballet) dancers is also reflected in psychometric tests of creative cognition. Specifically, modern/contemporary dancers should outperform ballet dancers and possibly also jazz/musical dancers in the employed psychometric creativity tests. With respect to personality, we may expect that modern/contemporary dancers score relatively high on Eysenck's psychoticism dimension (cf. Eysenck, 1995; see also Abraham et al., 2005) and on the Big Five dimension openness to experiences which is seen in close relation to creativity (see e.g. King, Walker, & Broyles, 1996). And finally, the three different groups of dancers should be also compared with respect to their motivation towards achievement and with respect to selected creativity-related variables from the (interpersonal or family) environment (such as

parental support), which have been shown to be associated with creativity as well (Simonton, 2000). Though motivational and environmental variables are known as important components of creativity (e.g. Hennessey & Amabile, 2010; Simonton, 2000) it may be difficult to derive specific hypotheses whether or to which extent modern/contemporary, jazz/musical and ballet dancers differ with respect to these variables (in light of sparse empirical evidence in this specific creativity domain). Thus, these latter research questions should be addressed in an exploratory manner.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Sixty professional dancers in the age range between 18 and 45 years (mean age: 26.7;  $SD = 5.6$ ) participated in this study, 43 were female and 17 male. The sample was composed of ballet dancers ( $n = 20$ ), modern/contemporary dancers ( $n = 20$ ) and jazz/musical dancers ( $n = 20$ ). All dancers had professional education or training in dance. In addition, they had perennial professional experience in dancing and were employed in various dance-related institutions or facilities (theater, festival theater, opera etc.). As a criterion for participating in this study, the dancers had made their living from dancing for at least 1 year. The three different groups of dancers differed significantly with respect to their age ( $F_{(2,57)} = 5.62$ ;  $p < .01$ ), with the group of ballet dancers being the youngest group ( $M = 23.5$ ), followed by jazz/musical ( $M = 27.9$ ) and modern/contemporary ( $M = 28.6$ ) dancers. Most of the participants were from Austria; six dancers hailing from non-German speaking countries (Czech Republic, Finland, Sweden, Slovenia, Russia, The Netherlands) were all well integrated in Austria and had no difficulties in understanding the instructions and items of the employed questionnaires and psychometric tests.

### 2.2. Psychometric tests and questionnaires

Relevant socio-demographic variables of the participants were assessed by means of a questionnaire requesting information about sex, age, profession, last employment, school and dance education, and the estimated duration of the professional career. In addition, participants were required to respond to some potentially relevant creativity-related environmental items (cf. Simonton, 2000) such as the number of brothers and sisters or the educational and professional level of their parents, along with some creativity-relevant variables from infancy (e.g. supportive parental environment, extent of practicing creative activities like drawing, painting etc. in childhood).

### 2.3. Creativity tasks

In order to obtain a comprehensive and reliable measure of participants' creativity level, we administered well-established psychometric tests for the assessment of verbal and figural creativity. Verbal creativity was measured by means of a well-known German-speaking creativity test ("Verbaler Kreativitätstest", VKT; Schoppe, 1975) and figural creativity by means of the widely used Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT; Torrance, 1966). Due to economical reasons only three subtests of the VKT and two subtests of the TTCT were administered. With respect to the VKT, participants worked on the following subtests: (a) *Similarities* (requiring participants to generate synonyms to a given adjective), (b) *Unusual Uses* (generate original/creative uses of conventional everyday objects) and (c) *Utopian Situations* (generate original/creative consequences to a given utopian situation). In each test, participants were prompted to generate as many and as creative/

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