

Ethics in dance: A debate yet to be held

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This paper is intended to raise awareness of the development of codes of ethics and practice in other professional groups and to underline the extent to which legislation and regulation is affecting interactions in all occupations and professions. It seeks to make the case for the development of ethical standards for dance teaching and the employment of dancers.

Professionalization

Although there have been professional dancers and the opportunity for dance training for hundreds of years it is only within the past fifty years that dance training and dance companies have become organised and developed to any significant extent within the western world. The heroic beginnings of the Royal Ballet, in England for example, involved a handful of people training and dancing in conditions that demanded the surrender of ordinary aspirations to regular income or consistent employment. Similarly the pioneer work of Martha Graham was carried out on a financial shoestring with only the commitment of the participants enabling it to continue.

By contrast at the beginning of the twenty-first century there are in the UK approximately twenty-five educational institutions training professional dancers, all of them subsidised in varying degrees by public money. All of them are subject to inspection, monitoring and some degree of control by government departments of education. Dance companies are also in receipt of public and charitable funds and have to meet the requirements of their funders. Companies are also required to operate within the constraints of employment legislation and in conformity with international directives, for example the European Code of Human Rights. Conditions in other western countries for both the training and employment of dancers are broadly similar.

Values

The fact is that once an activity develops from the private project of a few dedicated individuals to a large scale activity, recruiting members from a wide range of sources and in receipt of public funds, it inevitably becomes subject to regulatory authority. The main thrust of this regulation, whether it is in the health professions, education, employment or other areas of activity, is the protection of those involved in it from harm. Dance schools and companies within the developed world are now subject to large numbers of these constraints.

Underlying legislative and regulatory constraints are values which determine how power is to be limited and constrained. In some professions these values are expressed in ethical codes which try to articulate the principles which guide behaviour, especially behaviour between people of unequal power, and often refer to situations which are not covered by legislative codes. Ethical codes are particularly useful and likely to be developed in professions which deal with people in the role of patients, clients, students and children.

Power

No matter how much we might wish it to be different the fact is that those in positions of power very often do abuse that trust particularly where those they deal with have

little or no opportunity to protest. An investigative journalist called Joan Ryan published a book in 1995 called 'Little Girls in Pretty Boxes'. The content of the book can be identified from its subtitle 'The making and breaking of elite gymnasts and figure skaters'. A book edited by Helen Payne 'Ethical Practice and the Abuse of Power in Social Responsibility' concludes, 'abuse of power comes as no surprise'. A book entitled 'Ethics and Sport' deals among other things with violence and aggression, cheating and self-deception and the ethical problems of winning and losing. In the United States and increasingly in Europe, health professionals are being held to account for negligence or inappropriate behaviour towards patients and are increasingly required to allow greater patient autonomy.

It is impossible to believe that the dance profession is exempt from the possibility or indeed likelihood that some of its practitioners, especially those in positions of power, will abuse that trust. In the course of my research over the past fifteen years I have spoken to many dancers who have given me examples of what I would call unethical behaviour. I have heard many accounts of bullying by teachers in professional schools and by those in power in companies. Some investigators have started to explore these subjects. Anna Aalten is one, Clyde Smith is another. Sho Botham has begun to work on the ethics of dance teaching. There have been some changes although mainly in the area of improvement in the physical conditions for dancers. For example, the recent Healthier Dancer Survey of British dancers found that there were fewer complaints about environmental factors such as unsuitable floors and cold than had been reported in the first survey done in 1994 but more students recorded having eating problems.

Ethical issues

My view is that the dance profession is at a point in its history where its importance in our culture demands that it begins to develop an internally evolved code of ethics and practice to address all relevant issues within professional dance. There has been an attempt in the United Kingdom to develop such a code. It was initially devised by the late Peter Brinson, a dancer with the Royal Ballet, who became a notable supporter of the development of improved practice in the dance world. The 1990 Dance UK Healthier Dancer Conference owed much to him and was the first time that what I should call ethical issues within dance had been aired openly. I was a contributor to that conference myself and presented one of two papers on eating disorders. I remember very clearly the mixture of horror and satisfaction which greeted the very mention of this problem. The Dancers Charter was an attempt to codify some of the insights arising from that conference. However, it consists of a list of instructions of what members of the dance community 'should' do. For example: 'Choreographers should resist the pressure put on them to innovate and push back the limitations of physical achievement'.

Although Brinson's charter can still provide a useful beginning to thinking about the ethical issues that arise in dance, it needs to be preceded by a statement of the values and principles on which it is based otherwise it becomes yet another list of arbitrary instructions. It also needs to be embedded within the profession in such a way that there are sanctions for those who fail to abide by its requirements. Indeed the charter itself needs to be reviewed in the light of recent standards for the profession and increased knowledge of the requirements for physical and psychological health. For example, if I draw from my own area of expertise which is eating disorders, I am concerned to make it known that failure to menstruate regularly has an absolute relationship to the thinning of bone density. The demand that dancers maintain weight below which they menstruate is therefore, in my opinion, unethical.

Example

In attempting to begin to devise such a code the dance profession might benefit from the example of other professional groups. In my own profession of psychotherapy for example, a profession that in Britain is not regulated by law, ethical codes have been developed to guide practitioners in their dealings with clients. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) begins by articulating the values of the profession which include: ensuring the integrity of practitioner / client relationship, alleviating personal distress and suffering, and enhancing the quality of relationships between people.

It goes on to assert that values inform principles and to articulate the principles of counselling and psychotherapy which include: autonomy (respect for the clients right to be self-governing), beneficence (a commitment to promoting the clients well-being) and non-maleficence (a commitment to avoiding harm to the client). It continues by identifying the personal moral qualities of practitioners, which include: empathy, integrity, respect, competence. Only then does the code continue to give specific guidance in good practice in counselling and psychotherapy and to identify the detail of how therapists should conduct themselves.

These codes are maintained by a complaints system which enables clients to bring any dissatisfaction to the attention of an ethics committee which has the power to prohibit members from practising or to require additional training etc.

A celebration of life

It will be no easy task to devise a code appropriate to the dance profession. In fact I would like to propose that the development of such a code depends on our capacity to understand that the dancer needs to be at the centre of the dance. For all our techniques and traditions dance, as a thing in itself, does not exist. There is no such thing as 'dance', only people dancing. Our love affairs with technical excellence and choreographic innovation have allowed us to disregard the physical and emotional welfare of the dancer and the result is the continuing dismal toll of physical and psychological injury. Yet fundamentally dance is a celebration of life given embodiment by the dancer. We need a paradigm shift whereby the dancer will no longer be seen as an 'instrument' for the choreography or a success story for the teacher but rather as an equal collaborator in the creation of an art form. On that basis an ethical code might have power to transform and re-enliven our profession. Furthermore a code of ethics for dance needs to be evolved from within the profession and to involve the contribution of dancers and dance students. They are what are called within the health profession 'service users'. Their point of view is essential since they are the ones on the receiving end of training and employment and know best the realities of that situation. If individual organisations can begin formulating values, principles and codes for dance the debate, which needs to take place, can begin.

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