

The Belly Dancer Project: A Radical Inquiry into the Selves

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation research project (The Belly Dancer Project) is designed to examine some of the ways that belly dancers experience themselves in relation to the dance. This research project is also aimed at better understanding the methods employed in the study itself, and their aptitude in addressing questions about the selves¹. The researcher guides several 'featured dancer' participants through an exploration of their lived experiences of being a belly dancer via a multi-method approach in which the featured dancer is filmed in an interview and a belly dance performance. The filmed data generated from this collection are edited into a ten-minute video and uploaded to the project web site (www.thebellydancerproject.org), then expanded and amended in an open, online, discussion board forum. Other belly dancers and the general public are encouraged to visit the web site and contribute to discussions about the featured dancers. Belly dancers visiting the site are also asked to register on the site, complete a belly dance experience survey, post photos, blog, and in general use the site to meet and network with other belly dancers. All of these data remain available for later phenomenological description and hermeneutical interpretation.

¹ *Selves* is used as shorthand for the dynamic selves that continually intersect to be experienced by the individual.

OVERVIEW

The research questions for the dissertation project are as follows:

1. How do belly dancers understand themselves in relation to belly dance?
2. In what ways are the methods proposed in this study appropriate to describing and investigating the dancers' understanding of selves in relation to belly dance?

To address the research questions I have put forth, I have developed a phenomenological, ethnomethodological research approach. Ethnomethodology is the research methodology proposed by sociologist Harold Garfinkel in 1967 as (in part) a phenomenological critique of positivistic research traditions within the social sciences. It draws from the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz, which treats 'the world of daily life' as the 'paramount' reality, and places emphasis on the role of 'common sense understandings' (Sharrock 1989). The goal of fieldwork in ethnomethodology is close examination, rather than lengthy involvement in the field. More detail is gleaned from each encounter, and deeper hermeneutical analysis conducted for every piece of data than can be seen in ethnography or symbolic interaction.

This is not a study of belly dancers as a sub-culture, or community. It is instead a study of the individuals who have chosen to participate in a shared activity – belly dancing. This is also not a study seeking to obtain a representative cross-section of American belly dancers, in hopes of making generalizations about such a population. It is rather description and interpretation of the selves shared with me, the researcher, by belly dancers who have chosen to participate as featured dancers or registered members of The Belly Dancer Project web site.

This is also a project aimed at learning more about the methodologies employed in the study. Central to the numerous implications of the study is that this transparent approach to research yields a continually growing interactive on-line 'textbook' with a built-in research project case study, for conducting qualitative research from a methodologically holistic perspective.

VIDEO METHODOLOGIES

Ethnomethodology relies heavily on the interview to draw-out descriptions of the individual construction of a given social reality. The interview schedule for The Belly Dancer Project poses a wide range of topics, aimed at learning about how belly dance is experienced by the dancer (e.g. "How do you feel when you are dancing?"), and how she experiences her selves in relation to the dance and the rest of her life (e.g. "Do you think there's a big break between the 'belly dance world' and your 'everyday worlds'?" "Describe your spirituality."). One topic, "What is it like for you to be interviewed about these things?"

asked at the end of the interview, is included in an attempt to get at the participant's experience of the interview method.

Interviews with several (three-to-four initially) featured dancers are conducted in the participant's home, or in my home. Lights and a single camera are set-up beforehand, and the cameraman remains in the room for the duration. The interview takes between 45 and 75 minutes, as topics are expanded or contracted, based on the participant's responses. After the interview is completed, I review the raw footage several times for emergent themes in the data (e.g. a welcome sense of obligation to the belly dance community; family/children as central to one's sense of selves; or personal spirituality being tightly integrated with belly dance). I then 'pull' (or select) footage that best exemplifies the salient themes for each participant, and edit this footage into a video 'description,' of that dancer, which will be interwoven with the dancer's performance video (discussed below).

The featured dancers are then each video taped in a belly dance performance of two-to-three songs. The performance is group and/or solo, depending on the style of dance performed by the dancer (some styles of dance are by nature group dances, while some styles are individualistic), against a black background. This is done in order to highlight the dancers themselves, and the 'essence' of their dance form, without visual distractions to detract from the dance.

After the interview, performance, and any (optional) additional video are edited together, I return to the featured belly dancer. I show her the completed video, and discuss her reactions to it. There is no set interview schedule for this interview, as we will be covering themes specific to her video. It is not imperative that it be video taped, however, when possible it will be (otherwise, the interview will be audio recorded). This interview is then available for phenomenological description alongside all other project data.

INTERNET METHODOLOGIES

After the initial video data are collected, all additional data are collected on-line via dancers' surveys, picture galleries, blogs, and responses to the featured dancer videos in discussion board forums.

Surveys are administered as part of registration to The Belly Dancer Project site, and are employed in this project to collect data about a broader range of belly dancers than I can include as featured dancers. This survey follows the basic format of the video interview, but is in some places modified to be read silently rather than read aloud, and several additional questions (city and state of residence, age) have been added to track the demographic trends.

Web site guests and featured dancer participants are also encouraged to view and respond to the featured dancer videos. This is done through discussion boards dedicated to each of the featured dancers. With the featured dancers, as well as with the surveys, the data generated are mostly in textual form, and can likewise be described and investigated as such. Once registered on the site, users are encouraged to post their photos in a photo gallery, and blog about their belly dance experience. This data is also automatically captured by the web site, and can be described and analyzed alongside video and survey data.

DESCRIPTION

The above-described methods are intended to produce data about the participants' life worlds which can be further described in phenomenological fashion. Merleau-Ponty stated that what is most important is to describe what is given, as precisely and completely as is possible – explanation and analysis being far less important (1966). This pure description step is key to the phenomenological method, and makes possible a shift in the method from the description of separate phenomena, to searching for their common essence. This is done with the aid of hermeneutical inquiry of the descriptive data in order to approach essences of the selves vis-à-vis belly dance.

These methods are also intended to draw light to themselves and become phenomena under investigation in their own right. If we are to truly understand the insights generated by these data, it is necessary to also understand the repercussions of the methods that generated the data.

Data are gathered from all steps in the research process, and used to create descriptions of the dancers as individual experiencers of belly dance-birthed phenomena. The three-to-four dancers recruited for the project are temporally spaced out over the first six months of the study. During this time I also actively recruit members of the featured dancers' belly dance communities to visit the web site, submit a belly dance experience survey, and become part of the community. Over the second half of the project, recruitment to the site continues – on a broader scale. Also, descriptions begun earlier of the belly dancers are expanded, and phenomenological essences of the dancers' sense of selves are hermeneutically derived from the descriptions. Just as descriptions of the individual belly dancers evolve into essences of the belly dance phenomenon through phenomenological investigation, we are also able to see how described experiences of the methods employed evolve into essences of the research process itself.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice

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