

Learning From the Vulnerabilities of Professional Dancers: A Relational Study

Work-in-progress paper

EGOS 2022 - Sub-theme 66: Vulnerability and Embodied Experience in Organizations

Dr Suvi Satama, University of Turku, Finland

7–9 July 2022, Vienna, Austria

This is a work-in-progress, an early draft. If you have time, please read through it, especially the extracted empirical material that I have included in the section “Relational Aspects of Vulnerability in Professional Dancers’ Work”. I would like to hear your comments on what kinds of thoughts these quotes awaken in you. Also, the paper still lacks a clear theoretical framework and literature review, as there are so many possibilities for theoretical focus (e.g., identity work, embodied work, and meaningfulness at work), so if you have suggestions, I would be more than happy to hear them. Thank you!

Abstract

This paper aims to explore professional dancers’ vulnerabilities. Drawing on 26 interviews conducted with ballet dancers from the Finnish National Ballet in the spring of 2021, I aim to verbalize the complex notion of vulnerability and what it means to professional dancers. I approach vulnerability as a relational endeavour – an activity or a bodily state that always materializes and is felt in relation to others. The wider contribution of this paper lies in its potential to broaden our understanding of how work organizations can be seen in a more humane and empathetic light and, by doing so, increase our well-being and connection to the others.

Keywords: *relational vulnerability, embodiment, humane working life, professional dance*

Introduction

When you really jump into your work, you lose [your] sense of time. That creates a sense of meaningfulness, you know. If we just gave time to ourselves and to the others and were courageous enough to go deep and high... that would be meaningful for me and for my working group. But so often, we are just busy trying to get things done somehow, and not enabl[ing] our vulnerabilities to show and fly.

This study aims to develop the concept of relational vulnerability in the field of organization studies. Drawing on the empirical context of ballet dance, this paper provides a fine-grained understanding of working dancers' vulnerabilities. The topic of vulnerability is especially timely, as contemporary working life is characterised by haste, incompleteness, fragmentation, and uncertainty. In addition, remote and new digital forms of work have both benefited and challenged human well-being in complex ways. During this turbulent time in the (post-)COVID era, leading businesses and people have been calling for new ways of thinking and identity-crafting from employees and leaders. Genuinely caring encounters, shared humanity, trust, unhurriedness, and "learning to be comfortable with being uncomfortable" (Corlett and Mavin, 2021:1) are elements of the human work community, the distinguishing factors of future working life and management, and the sources of sustainable productivity in organizations. This is the guiding idea of this paper.

The research questions are as follows: *How are vulnerabilities defined, materialised, and expressed among professional dancers? What is the value of vulnerability for colleagues and managers in organisations with regard to connecting with others in a complex working life?* The suitability of ballet as empirical context of this study lies also in its fundamentally embodied nature (Biehl, 2017; 2019; Mandalaki, 2019), creating vulnerabilities. In this profession, the contrasts between passion and vulnerability, reaching for perfection and feeling oneself as losers, and the complicated audience-performer relationship are continuously present (Satama, 2016).

I understand vulnerability as co-practised between organisational agents and its contextual factors. It is relational in nature (Collinson, 2005; DeRue & Ashford, 2010) and affects how vulnerabilities are expressed and negotiated within organisations. In line with this view, Corlett et al. (2019, p. 557) theorise vulnerability as a relational activity comprising the "processes of recognising and claiming vulnerability, developing social support to share vulnerability with trusted others and recognising alternative ways of conceptualising and responding to vulnerability". This is the understanding of vulnerability that I attach to my study. This paper highlights how professional dancers experience moments of being deconstructed when they reflect on themselves and their relationships with their colleagues.

On Relational Vulnerability

The concept of vulnerability is widely used in the social sciences to refer to various groups or individuals; however, it has rarely been theoretically defined or analysed (Virokannas et al., 2018). Vulnerability is an aspect that structures our lives and belongs to everybody, and it is an

intercorporeal phenomenon (see Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2022). It is both a process and a product of societal and cultural acts. In organisation studies, vulnerability is commonly understood as entirely negative and related to weakness, dependency, and powerlessness, and in dominant constructions, leaders are expected to be in control and strong, not vulnerable (Corlett et al., 2019), as the opening quote of this section also renders visible. Conceptually, vulnerability attaches, for example, to notions of passion, entailing both joyful and wounding aspects (Satama, 2016), and to suffering as a shared experience (Stowell & Warren, 2018). However, the literature specifically relating vulnerability to identity work (one option of theoretical discussion to attach this paper to) is limited (for exceptions, see Corlett and Mavin, 2019; Hay, 2014; Sims, 2003; Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Warhurst, 2011).

In my approach to exploring vulnerability, I highlight the relationality of what connects us with others (Käll, 2016) and sensible knowing derived from our lived experiences (Strati, 2007). In other words, vulnerability is affected by both the agent's personal feelings, experiences, and senses and the actions of the surrounding world and its cultural background, so it is, therefore, always relational in nature. For example, Letiche (2012, p. 180) explains that the dancer “has to feel and relate to what an audience sees and feels”. Nevertheless, embodied agency does not always need physical interactions between people and things to be further developed. Mirchandani (2015) explores the idea of “reading” bodies without physical contact. Embodied agency, therefore, does not materialise only in physical contact with others but also through voice, which can be used to “emulate imagined ideal workers” (Mirchandani, 2015).

Moreover, from a relational standpoint, the concept of kinaesthesia, a source of sensations in which the subject is more or less aware, is crucial for vulnerability. Without kinaesthesia, the subject would not be able to distinguish her own body from other bodies, would have no capability for independent movement, and, therefore, would be incapable of adopting agency (see Noland, 2009). A closely related concept, kinaesthetic empathy (see Koivunen & Wennes, 2011), is also essential for communicating vulnerabilities by physical gestures and movements in a relational way. Neither constructivist nor affect-centred theories of agency have much to say about the kinaesthetic experience, the dynamic engagement of the body in a specific context that invites subjects to effect change (Noland, 2009, p. 4). In this study, I address these critical neglects and, by giving a voice to professional dancers, I analyse how vulnerability is shaped relationally between the professional dancers, their managers, and their audiences.

Methodology

This paper relies on critical sensory methodology, which aims to capture the sensory, embodied and emotional experiences of people (Pink, 2009; Thanem & Knights, 2019; see also Lovell & Banfield, 2022).

The context of this study is the Finnish National Ballet. The empirical material of this paper includes 26 semi-structured interviews conducted with ballet dancers from this company in 2021 via Zoom. I address dance as a theoretically valuable and empirically fascinating context in which to explore those “hidden” qualities that relate to the aesthetic view of organisations (Strati, 1999). For me, dance appears as a rich aperture for understanding people as fundamentally embodied and vulnerable beings, continuously shaped by our bodily experiences and the incredibly complex array of feelings, affections, attitudes, and beliefs that inevitably affect us during our daily lives (see also Biehl, 2017). It is a particularly fascinating context for highlighting different shades of vulnerability, both theoretically and in practice. The work of a ballet dancer is both physically and emotionally demanding. The ballet dancers must give their best and expose themselves to vulnerability, such as direct criticism and competition, during their everyday work.

The management of the Finnish National Ballet has lived through turbulent times in recent years. Danish national Kenneth Greve became the artistic director of the Finnish National Ballet in 2007, but he was stripped of his managerial role in 2018 due to claims of improper conduct (Yle, 2021). Madeleine Onne, a Swedish citizen, took over from Greve. However, in June 2021, the Finnish National Ballet was again seeking a new artistic director (Kansallisbaletti, 2021). Due to the turbulence of this management environment, this artistic context is especially interesting for researching professional dancers’ vulnerabilities and for linking it to broader discussions of aesthetics and embodiment and, more broadly, humanistic management and social responsibility of work organizations. I will discuss the analysis of the empirical material later...

Relational Aspects of Vulnerability in Professional Dancers’ Work

Note! I show you here only snapshots of my recently collected empirical material to give you an impression of what kind of things the professional dancers talked to me about – no empirical analysis has yet been made.

Balancing between being (overly) sensitive in relation to others and being strong in the sense by knowing “who I am”

Many of the interviewed dancers seemed to connect vulnerability with being sensitive in both a good and a bad sense:

I associate it [vulnerability] with sensitivity. When I was younger, I didn't understand and respect my own vulnerability. That's what [the artistic director] abused very ruthlessly. Now that I have learned who I am and that I am vulnerable ... so in my view, vulnerability is about giving everything and open[ing] up oneself to the others. But when you do so, others have a chance of hurting you. I trusted him [the artistic manager], and I was open to him, and told him everything about myself. But then, he attacked me and saw it [sensitivity] as a negative thing. In that moment, I felt ... very vulnerable. And I thought, wow ... vulnerability is not accepted here [the opera house].

Another dancer explained how sensitivity is a kind of body state, an ability that one cannot take away or learn to be without:

Sensitivity, it will always be in me and cannot be removed. But what should be taken away instead is ... malice and disgust. That's what disturbs my sensitivity. But on the other hand, I also experience all the wonderful things in my life very powerfully, thanks to my sensitivity.

One of my colleagues built her career in line with what our artistic director wanted ... [in] a certain direction. A career under [the artistic director's] direction. It has left her [feeling] a bit ... sorry for herself. She also said that the director “hit” [on] those ballet dancers who appeared to him as the most “editable” ones. So, they were editable and very vulnerable in this sense. I think his purpose was not to destroy those dancers. He just wanted them to be better and better. But it just didn't work like he had imagined.

The following two empirical extracts describe the complicated relationship between one of the ballet dancers and the artistic manager of the company:

I didn't look vulnerable ... therefore, he wasn't interested in me. He wasn't interested in starting to make any perfect makeover for me because I didn't appear to him like that would be possible. One of my colleagues said to me, ... you are very lucky, just continue your own thing!

Maybe a kind of blank paper, you know. Great artists have always been interested in such ... blank paper on which you can leave your own imprint. And you can write history. If you do that, you build up an awesome dancer. But it can turn out to work in a totally wrong way. The director [tells] the dancer to drop five pounds, so he will make the dancer a top one. But it can break the mind of the dancer if she or he wasn't ready for this.

I am terribly sensitive on the "benevolent-malicious-axis". It feels really hard, and I hate it. You know, there are those people who are pathologically negative. Those who pathologically generate problems and who think pathologically negatively about everybody and everything. So I cannot work with those kind[s] of people, I get paralysed. Even the presence of those kind[s] of people make[s] me stuck. I don't have [the] tools to be me, my normal self, with those kind of pathologically negative people.

Feeling oneself as "air" to the others, as invisible, was the main sensation of one of the ballet dancers, and it made her feel vulnerable:

At times, the days felt like I was wasting my life as a wallflower. Sometimes months passed by without anybody even remembering my presence. For example, when I was just ... a substitute in some other dancer's role. During those days, I just went to work and did the morning class, and [I] thought ... why the hell am I doing this. And I [stood] there in the corner of the rehearsal studio until five p.m., just learning somebody else's steps and pirouettes that I would never get a chance to perform. Sometimes, I might get to replace a sick dancer, feeling myself like a healing plaster. My life as a dancer has been filled with sadness and some kind of yearning.

I was often frustrated and anxious about feeling ... so invisible.

The following two empirical extracts illustrate the competitive atmosphere in the professional dancers' work. They continuously and inevitably need to compare themselves with the others, and this, in turn, creates the emergence of relational vulnerability.

I lived in England for a long time, and there [was] terrible competition between professional dancers. I was too weak, I guess. I felt good, but I was too sensitive to bear that competition. When I moved to Helsinki, I didn't dare ... do anything; I was so [weak] after the years in England. I [lacked a strong direction] in that phase of my career. So I ... distanced [myself] from that hustle and bustle, some years passed, and

then one day, I started to do my own thing. And when that dam opened, it would have been the same for me if someone had come to tell me [something]; I didn't care about [the] opinions of the others. That sensation was so strong and intense. So, all my vulnerability was gone.

I got the feeling that those dancers who are in that game here [at the opera] can succeed. But I don't regret that I haven't been involved in that game. For some dancers, it doesn't feel bad to play; it is natural to them. Maybe they show their vulnerability on stage. It might be that they are able to set limits for themselves better than I [can]. So it's not that simple that those who play are less touching on stage. Maybe they are just better [at] creating those limits of what to reveal about themselves and to whom. You're not there at work, we're not playing, they're worse on stage, less touching. It's not so straightforward, though. You don't know them, you don't know how to limit them, you don't reveal anything [of] yourself.

The older you get, the more you think that [you can] let it show [vulnerability]. It can be useful, too.

I don't want to [say that] I'm a ballet dancer because people always start asking things ... first, they ask how long I have danced. I answer, I get my salary from this, and I do this six days a week. This is not a hobby for me. Then, there is always [the] question of whether I need to be on [a] diet all the time, and can I eat a piece of that cake or not. That's another question I always need to pass in [one] way or another.

I went to the opera last autumn for the first time since starting my study leave. This time, I was on the other side of the stage, sitting in the audience. The experience was emotional and difficult. I sat in the audience and thought of everything I knew that was going on behind the scenes right now. It was exactly those kinds of moments that made my life like a party; for those moments only.

There is something so magical in the onstage performances. The last minutes before the start of the show are full of electricity behind the scenes. I sat in my velvet chair and thought about what I had given up. I could not help crying. At the start of the show, it felt like I was watching my soul on stage.

Moving Between the Feelings of Being a Star Individual and the Loser of the Group

In this second part of the analysis, I describe the thrilling tension between the “star individuals” and the “losers” identified in the dancers’ speeches. Here, I use the term star individuals to refer to dancers who are in close social collaboration with other dancers but who have a very special role, one way or another, in the joint performance of the group as a whole. Even if the star individuals seem to be very important and something all the dancers want to reach for in their own ways, it seems that these kinds of dancers do not dominate the relational power of the group. The movement between feeling of being a star or a loser create a space for another aspect of relational vulnerability to emerge. One of the dancers describes the relational, communicative basis of her work as follows:

As in all arts, it’s all about communication. When a dancer performs on stage, something needs to be moved inside the audience. Only then is the job done. Of course, you can appreciate the virtuosity and being talented, but as a star dancer, you need to be able to transmit that energy, emotion, and intensity so that it reaches the audience. Only then [are] you ... a star dancer.

In the quote above, relational vulnerability seems to be materialized during the onstage performance in the relationship between the dancers and the audience. On the other hand, another dancer describes the *individual* capabilities of a star dancer as follows:

Talent and charisma, that technical basis must be epic. And the presence and interpretation need to be powerful. There are those dancers who don’t transmit [that] kind of energy; they are not able to throw themselves emotionally as strongly ... and then it does not lead to being stars.

When I returned from my maternity leave, the assumption of the leader of the company was that I [had] to be in perfect shape right away. My working days were immediately full – I danced one role fully, and I worked in five other roles as a reserve.

Often ... curiosity [is] very strongly involved in the process of being top dancers. Those best dancers don’t work for some external reason or for getting honoured and money. There is a kind of childish enthusiasm and curiosity in this context. Curious people know more, dive deeper, and understand more. It’s the kind of gasoline that they get satisfaction from when they understand and learn or become more talented in their work. Then, [it’s] only as a side result, as a nice bonus, [that] the thing [will] proceed

nicely, and they will succeed, and there will be money in the kind of contexts [that] have money [laughing]. But that curiosity is a very essential feature of people on the top.

In this kind of working culture in which individual capabilities are raised above the collective capability, it is hard to stay strong.

It burned me out, though. But it was about my own inability to control myself. I can run projects perfectly, but I don't seem to be able to lead myself. As a person, I am intense and do what I do to the fullest. And the choreographic projects are so holistic. They're like all in my head all the time; it is so hard to shut them up for a while and rest. I couldn't do that. I got really tired. Now that six years have passed by, I have had a sensation of what normal life is like and what the balance between the different sectors of life means.

It felt that the more I got rid of that world [of ballet], the better I felt. The body centrality [is] so much entwined with this occupation.

It is interesting, however, how some of the dancers seemed to turn their burning passion and genuine vulnerability into a strength, while the dancers who were only looking for external success and pride can be viewed as “losers”.

Such people who go for money and reputation first and have [a] hunger for external factors, they drift into being losers. It's because they don't have the same passion for what they are doing. Instead, the top dancers have an organic interest in what they are doing. So it [is carried] much deeper and broader in life. They will go much deeper in that matter, and they also feel happier than those who do it [for] false motives. And maybe the losers acknowledge [that] they can't get there to the top level. But still, they are running after the money and reputation. That is about being a sad loser.

Finding and Losing Meaningfulness from Relational, yet Vulnerable, Moments of Embodied Work

This last section discusses the sense of meaningfulness that experiencing relational vulnerability can lead to. Of course, not all the rehearsals and moments offstage are always smooth and lead to something meaningful, as the following dancer describes:

In the process of creating choreographies, there are always small moments when you come across a wall that this path leads ... to; you have to pack and go around and make

different solutions. But it is such an integral part of the artistic process; I do not consider it a problem.

Working on my own choreographies is just awesome, especially when there is a good team. I always have a strong vision, and I am the one who says the last word, I'm happy with that. Still, we are doing things together. That's wonderful. When you have great professionals around, it is very rewarding to come up with ideas together. You throw [out] an idea, and the other one goes on with it, and it rises up to [an] entirely other level.

So it is awesome, but then, when it is so intense ... I was in an "adrenaline pipe" from 2007 to the end of 2014. So, it was lovely and rewarding, but you know, it took all of me. I didn't have the time or energy for friends; my husband felt that he was being sidelined. It was a pretty tough price I had to pay for my work. So you get so much from it, but then you lose a lot in another sector of [your] life.

[As] I have got[ten] older, [I have contradictory] ... feeling[s about] why people come to see the performances I am dancing in. I haven't experienced them as meaningful because I am constantly thinking [about] what people get when they see them. That has been painful for me. When I have gone to see a performance, it is so rarely that the performance really and genuinely touches me. The artistic side is left [at] the back [of] those I have seen.

I thought about the audience much less when I was younger. I enjoyed the physicality of this profession so much. I was more insecure about myself and didn't dare to throw myself, open up myself, and [I] think that some people could get something out of this. It was [easier] to do everything technically brilliantly. I got meaningfulness from that. Because even so, if I did some movements perfectly, the audience would be like "wow!"

All the injuries and my burnout experience have forced me to seek ... balance. The primary condition for success is balance. I think I would have done better [in] my work at a younger age if I had been better able to regulate the balance in my life. I just had [my] pedal to the metal, always. I remember when my dad told me when I went to the opera ballet school that I shouldn't burn the candle [at] both ends. There were those evenings when I came home from the ballet school, and I was crawling and vomiting because I was so exhausted. They have at least taught me that [you have to face your]

limitations, and [as such] you will not have any success if you do not feel balanced. And while there may ... [seemingly be] success, if you are not well, you cannot enjoy it, and it is then as if it were not.

Conclusion and Discussion

I will write this section later.

References

- Biehl, B. (2019) 'In the mix': Relational leadership explored through an analysis of techno DJs and dancers. *Culture & Organization* 15(3), 339–359.
- Biehl, B. (2017). *Dance and Organization. Integrating Dance Theory and Methods into the Study of Management*. Routledge.
- Corlett, S., Ruane, M., & Mavin, S. (2021). Learning (not) to be different: The value of vulnerability in trusted and safe identity work spaces. *Management Learning* (in press). DOI: 10.1177/1350507621995816
- Hay A (2014) 'I don't know what I am doing!': Surfacing struggles of managerial identity work. *Management Learning* 45(5): 509–524.
- Helin, J. (2020). Temporality lost: A feminist invitation to vertical writing that shakes the ground. *Organization*, in print. DOI: 10.1177/1350508420956322
- Helin, J. (2019). Dream writing: Writing through vulnerability. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25(2), 95–99.
- Kansallisbaletti. (2021). <<https://oopperabaletti.fi/en/about-us/news/finnish-national-ballet-seeks-artistic-director/>>, retrieved 9 September 2021.
- Koivunen, N. & Wennes, G. (2011) Show us the sound! Aesthetic leadership of symphony orchestra conductors. *Leadership*, 7(1), 51–71.
- Letiche, H. (2012) Research ethics: Dance, presence, performance and performativity. *Culture and Organization*, 18(3), 177–193.
- Lovell, H. and Banfield, J. (2022) 'Implicit influence on body image: methodological innovation for research into embodied experience', *Qualitative Research* 22(1), 40–55.
- Mandalaki, E. (2019) 'Dancers as inter-corporeality: breaking down the reluctant body', in M. Fotaki and A. Pullen (eds) *Diversity, Affect and Embodiment in Organizing*, pp. 139–161. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mandalaki, E. and Pérezts M (2022) It takes two to tango: theorizing inter-corporeality through nakedness and eros in researching and writing organizations. *Organization* 29(4), 596–618.

- McMurray, R. (2021). Immersion, drowning, dispersion and resurfacing: Coping with the emotions of ethnographic management learning. *Management Learning*. Published online ahead of print. DOI: 10.1177/13505076211020456.
- Mirchandani, K. (2015) Flesh in voice: The no-touch embodiment of transnational customer service workers. *Organization*, 22 (6), 909–923.
- Noland, C. (2009) *Agency and Embodiment. Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Pink, S. (2009) *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Satama, S. (2016) ‘Feathers on fire’: A study of the interplay between passion and vulnerability in dance. *Organizational Aesthetics* 5(1): 64–93.
- Stowell, A. F. and Warren, S. (2018) The Institutionalization of Suffering: Embodied inhabitation and the maintenance of health and safety in e-waste recycling. *Organization Studies* 39(5-6): 785–809.
- Strati, A. (1999). *Organization and aesthetics*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Thanem, T. and Knights, D. (2019) *Embodied Research Methods*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Wall, S. (2006). An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(2), 1–12.
- Yle. (2021). <https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/finnish_ballet_artistic_director_stripped_of_managerial_role_over_improper_conduct_claims/10133557>, retrieved 10 September 2021.