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**e-Research: A Journal of Undergraduate Work, Vol 3, No 2 (2012)**[HOME](#)   [ABOUT](#)   [LOG IN](#)   [REGISTER](#)   [SEARCH](#)   [CURRENT](#)   [ARCHIVES](#)[Home](#) > [Vol 3, No 2 \(2012\)](#) > [Sobash](#)**The Psychology of Competitive Dance: A Study of the Motivations for Adolescent Involvement**

Samantha Sobash

**ABSTRACT**

"Competition is a social process that is so pervasive in Western civilization that no one can escape it" (Robson 2004). Dance training for most people begins at an early age, and thus the art form akin to sports introduces youth to competition. The booming dance competition industry has only enhanced the competitive aspect of the art form. Currently there are upwards of 200 local, regional, and national competitions held annually with participants as young as four years old. Is competition innate or are we introducing it as part of youth development in the Western world? Youth are increasingly pushed by society towards activity specialization which only limits their ability to develop as well-rounded individuals. This study aims to evaluate the dominant motivations for youth to participate in dance competitions. Also encourage people: dance educators, dancers and dance parents to recognize how competition actively affects the psychological and social maturity of young dancers as people in positive and negative ways.

**Keywords:** competitive dance, child development, adolescent athletes, dance, competition, sport, gymnastics, specialization

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**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Research on youth in competition has been primarily a concern of sports psychologists. This research applies prevailing theories to youth in competitive dance to help analyze the effects of such activity on youth social and psychological maturation. Dance competitions have blossomed over the years with other two hundred competition companies currently in business at the local, regional, and national level. Each competition provides opportunities for performance with set rules and judging criteria. News and TV reality shows such as *Dance Moms* have shed some light on the general public as to the physical and psychological demands on children who compete. However, there has not been a lot spoken about the motivation for parents, educators, and students to participate in dance competitions.

Specialization at an early age has become widely promoted among sports and dance. Early childhood skill is said to be required for potential elite performance (Capranica and Millard-Stafford 2011). The advent of the Youth Olympic Games has increased emphasis on global youth competition. An intense focus on one specific activity stresses a certain mentality that can affect the child's mental health. There are long-term effects on children involved in rigorous training and competitive schedules. This all poses potential risks from early specialization in sport.

Many young dancers have limited time with schooling and other life events to hone their craft and therefore tend to forego cross training. Cross training will ultimately strengthen the body to sustain a high level of artistic, physical activity for a lifetime is so desired. Cross training prevents overuse injuries, uneven strength between sides, and psychological burnout (Capranica and Millar-Stafford 2011). The prevalence of dancers involved in dance competitions has only heightened the youth sport specialization dilemma. Competitions inevitably force young

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dancers to manipulate their body physically and mentally to excel in one area. It is incorrect to encourage such activity of youth.

Growing support within the sport sciences recommends early diversification over specialization to aid general locomotor and psychological skills (Capranica and Millard-Stafford 2011). Coaches and instructors continue to rely on sport specific dogma to influence programmatic development of the most vulnerable population (Capranica and Millard-Stafford 2011). Sport specialization according to researchers Capranica and Millard-Stafford refers to the "age or point in time in an athlete's development when sports training and competition is restricted and focusing upon a single sport in the pursuit of elite performance" (Capranica and Millard-Stafford 2011). Parents have the ability to steer their children towards an assortment of activity in their early years. The defining point at which a child is ready to prepare for a professional career is subjective at this point. Everyone has their own opinion on the matter of when the right time is. Today, children as young as four participate in dance competitions. This paper argues the pressure and demand of competition is unsuitable for youth of such an age.

In many sports, there exists an unofficial recommendation for youth to take off one month from training every six months. However, most sports today encroach on their historically designated seasons with pre-season and post-season tournaments. Dance has never been accustomed to seasons or periods of rest in training. The dancer trains year round believing the common misconception that taking time off will hinder their body from reaching and maintaining its highest level of performance. One theory developed by the use of Darwinian thought suggests genetically gifted athletes in their youth possess the inherent characteristics to positively adapt to the training loads during growth and maturation (Capranica and Millard-Stafford 2011). This 'survival of the fittest' modality exudes the competitive drive that motivates many students to excessively train in dance and sports today.

Logically, youth competitions should be based on meeting physiological and psychological characteristics of young athletes. In so doing, youth have the opportunity to develop the necessary technical skills to prevent injury during physical growth and biological maturation when athletic skills are not fully developed. Unfortunately to their detriment, youth competitions are organized according to gender and chronological age of the athlete. Training dose and proper progression promote adaptations of youth essential to specialization (Lewis 2011). If instructors and parents can build up resiliency factors, a young person can positively develop instead of abnormally in the face of stressors (Lewis 2011). Maladaptive behaviors are instilled when youth are unable to make adjustments to cope with their circumstances.

Upon studying different sports, researchers have found it impossible to apply a single model to training and competitions designed for children. There are unique demands of youth competition and training to adhere to the psychological and physiological capacity of child athletes. Innovative and multidisciplinary based models must be considered within each activity. There are also considerations to be made regarding social, political, economical, organizational, and economical variables (Capranica and Millard-Stafford 2011). These cross national studies are important to determining the needs for children as well.

Weiss and Hayashi studied the parent-child influences associated with those highly competitive in gymnastics. The research presents the theory of sport socialization. There are two distinguished socializations: "Socialization into sport" is concerned with the factors responsible for attracting children to sport or physical activity (Weiss and Hayashi 1995). "Socialization through sport" is concerned with the positive or negative outcomes that may occur as a direct result of participation (Weiss and Hayashi 1995). There are three determined significant attributes to child's socialization in the predominant learning theory: personal attributes, significant others, and socialization situations (Weiss and Hayashi 1995). The majority of the athletes surveyed by Weiss and Hayashi reported their parents strongly encouraged their participation in a given sport. Family, peers, and coaches represent influential socializing agents of both girls' and boys' activity involvement.

Parents make significant financial and time commitments to their child's participation in organized activity. Dance competitions require a lot of rehearsals, training, costumes, transportation, and time at the events. Parents are required to be present with children competing at such young ages. This study aims to reveal the motivating

factors for parents to invest so much time and effort into their children competing from early on in life and the expectations of such competitive training.

Research confirms parents directly and indirectly influence their child's perceptions of personal ability and motivation. But also it is the child's achievement behaviors which elicit certain attitudes and expectations in parents that reinforce children's current achievement goals. Youth still look to their parents as sources of information and are affected by their behavior (Weiss and Hayashi 1995). Of interest to the current study is what the children, parents, and teacher perceive as the purpose of youth participating in dance competitions.

Forneris, Camire, and Trudel researched the development of life skills and values in high school sport. Their study was designed to examine the influence sports should ideally be having on youth development compared to the reality of its impact on youth development (Forneris, Camire, & Trudel 2012). The study defines life skills as physical, behavioral, and cognitive abilities that enable youth to succeed in the different environments in which they live (Forneris, Camire & Trudel 2012). Values are defined as qualities that enable human beings to fulfill themselves and live cooperatively with others.

The athletes in general reported less expectations that sports will develop life skills than parents, coaches, and administrators (Forneris, Camire & Trudel 2012). Their expectations lie more in learning how to set and attain goals. The instructors are generally not trained to foster life skills through sports practice. The coaches are focused on the goals for the team or individual to reach a certain amount of success in their performances. Therefore athletes become more attuned to the process of setting and attaining goals. Depending on the dance instructor and goals of the class, instructors may have discussions of relative life skills and values in their students. When time and energy is devoted to competition, this aspect of honing pertinent life skills and values through dance is lost. The mission statement of any sport or activity provides the fundamental values that should guide the practice of the sport (Forneris, Camire & Trudel 2012). It is imperative to consider why youth practice certain activities and the purpose of competition in those activities, respectively.

Individuals shape their motivational responses with subjective perceptions of the motivational climate in specific contexts. Research suggests the perceived motivational climate has important psychological implications for pedagogical contexts (Carr and Wyon 2003). Depending on the perceived climate, students may feel concerned about making mistakes which impedes the learning process and development of skills. This encourages less attractive social behavior such as personal doubt and timidity.

Research presents two types of perceived climate orientations: mastery oriented and performance oriented. Mastery oriented climate is defined as "individuals perceive a situation focus on self-improvement, learning and task mastery through the emphasis of effort and personal progression by teachers and coaches" (Carr and Wyon 2003). There are many positive attitudes developed from this orientation. Students feel satisfaction in their competence and put forth effort knowing they will personally improve. Performance oriented climate is defined as the belief "the purpose of sport is to enhance social status, extrinsic motivation, and negative attitude" (Carr and Wyon 2003). There is a focus on "normative criteria, social comparison, competition, and the unacceptability of mistakes" (Carr and Wyon 2003). Participants of competitions are more likely to develop a tendency to define achievement in socially comparative terms. Depending on the young individual, being involved in dance competition may instill either of the above orientations. This current study aims to expand on the psychological implications of dance competitions as a motivational context for youth.

Quested and Duda completed a study which examined perceptions of social environment in vocational dance schools and fulfilling basic needs satisfaction for the wellbeing of dancers. Task-involving dance environments were positive to the well-being of its students (Quested and Duda 2010). While ego-involving dance environments negatively affected the dancers in regards to competence (Quested and Duda 2010). It is important to heed attention to the basic needs theory as it pertains to training youth. Youth have different experiences, and when collectively gathered in one social environment the climate is uniquely embraced. Each individual interprets the climate of the situation and reacts. Understanding basic needs satisfaction is imperative to working with youth in dance, as it ensures the well-being of the dancers through adolescent development.

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There is a "socio-cognitive conflict" when the social and cognitive are both effected in a learning atmosphere (Buchs et. al 2010). For example conflict regulation may focus on social comparison and demonstration of one's own competence (Buchs et. al 2010). This mindset deters cognitive learning. Positive interactions stems from learning in positive interdependence. It is best when youth work on complimentary projects, rather than the same ones in which competition become the main focus (Buchs et. al 2010). Youth will inevitably start comparing their work to others. If the students were focused on the quality of their own work, they would be able to produce their best work.

Robson explored orientation as well in the behavior of individuals. Ego orientation is when a person focuses on comparing themselves to others with a desire to be the best (Robson 2004). Mastery orientation focuses a person on the improvement of their own skills (Robson 2004). Competitiveness can inspire positive attributes leading youth to success and appropriate personal improvement. Youth will practice self-discipline and sacrifice which is preparation for adult life (Robson 2004). It can encourage youth to work towards high goals and strive for their personal best. People can work competitively without necessarily comparing self-ability to others. "Although competition is a social process, others need not be present" (Robson 2004). Appropriate guidance from mentors such as coaches and parents is needed for youth to advance in a healthy fashion.

In some cases youth are pressured to compete by their parents, coaches or peers. Youth become stressed by the pressure to perform well by others. This anxiety and stress may detract from one's quality of performance in competition (Robson 2004). The individual may rather quit practicing their sport or dance than be mentally frustrated and perform poorly. Researchers are concerned over how competition affects their self-esteem and self-confidence of the more competitive athlete (Robson 2004). High achieving athletes are likely to overt-train to the point of exhaustion, self-injury, and stress before the competition even begins (Robson 2004). So this research supports the notion that parents and instructors need to provide appropriate expectations to young athletes during training, so competition will not negatively affect their performance.

In a study of adolescent athletes on coping and coping effectiveness in relation to a competitive sport event, there were small but significant differences in how athletes of different pubertal status and chronological age coped (Nicholls et. al 2009). Results also suggested that coping differed between chronological age and pubertal status. "Coping includes the conscious attempts individuals make to manage situations and they perceive as stressful and endangering their well-being" (Nicholls et. al 2009). Adolescence is an important time to develop coping strategies. Coping is used to manage a lot of sports related stressors such as making errors, watching others perform well, receiving criticism from coaches as well as rapid physiological, social, emotional and cognitive changes associated with adolescence (Nicholls et. al 2009). Coping is constrained by the biological, cognitive, emotional and social maturation of a person.

Puberty is defined as "the activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal axis (HPGA) that culminates in gonadal maturation" (Nicholls et. al 2009). HPGA is one of the physiological factors associated to coping with stressors. As HPGA matures there are functional adaptations that enable individuals to meet external environmental demands more efficiently (Nicholls et. al 2009). Different athletic experiences instill different coping mechanisms. In this respect, dance as an experience enlists still different coping mechanisms. Theses coping mechanisms need to be considered in further research.

A study on fane as a transformative occupation found the most agreed upon reason people dance is that it has the power to transform lives and add meaning to life. Graham developed a teaching conditions theory which 'identifies and posits conditions that support the development of social, emotional, and intellectual meaning in dance learning contexts' (Graham 2002). These are all essential aspects of positive youth development. In asking the purpose of dance for each in their respective lives, the research dives into the meaning of activity beyond the fa çade of competition. In an application of sociologist Talcott Parsons' Functional Theory, Graham relates the reported five functions in relation to sport: socio-emotional, socialization, integration of disparate individuals into groups, political, and social mobility (Graham 2002). All of these are inherent in the practice of dance. No matter the initial motivation or purpose for dance in one's life, competing is a social act and involving youth in dance competition affects the inherent demeanor of youth in social interactions.

A stereotyped vision of the available occupations exists of the dance field. Performers are portrayed at the top of the field, and just underneath are those perhaps not good enough to perform who help others learn to dance (Graham 2002). There are few who actually perform at the highest level. We must consider again why people choose to put themselves or their children into dance class especially in a competitive atmosphere. Dance presents a plethora of life skills. Instead of representing the dance field in an unbalanced triangle, Graham imaginatively reverses the dance occupation to a fern. The fern proposes everyone involved in dance is united by the inherent nature of dance: "Movement by a human body in space and time" (Graham 2002). The branches of the fern represent the different reasons for participation. The branches are of interest to this current study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants.**

Participants consisted of 58 (47 Female; 6 Male; 5 Unspecified) undergraduate dance students recruited from Chapman University in Orange, CA. Students ranged in age from 18-29. The department trains students equally in the genres of Jazz, Ballet, and Modern from all across the United States and even abroad. A great number of the students at Chapman are familiar to dance competitions, but it was not necessary for participants to have been involved in dance competitions. There was no compensation for their voluntary participation in the study.

### **Procedure.**

A link to an online survey was distributed to all the dance majors via email. The study required participants to fill out a onetime survey with up to 64 questions. There were two versions of the survey. Version A was intended for dancers who had participated in a dance competition at some point in their life. Version B was intended for dancers who have never participated in a dance competition at any point in their life. Only 5 of the participants had never participated in a dance competition.

Both groups were asked questions pertaining to the age they started dancing, reason for starting to take dance classes, perceived purpose of dance for youth in general, motivation to continue dancing at an older age, attitudes towards competition, etc. All of the participants also replied to social statements on a 5 point Likert scale. Researchers were interested to what extent participants heed to external influences in their lives. Participants who had competed answered additional questions based on their personal experience as a youth involved in dance competition.

## **RESULTS**

This study received a strong response from female participants (88.7%), between the ages of 18-21 (66%), who had participated in at least one dance competition in their lifetime (90.6%). Over half (58.5%) of the participants began dancing at age 5 or younger. The younger the participants were when they began dancing, the less autonomous the decision or motivation was for beginning the activity. Most were placed in class by their parents or had been inspired by someone they knew to begin taking class. As the beginning age of dance training increased participants said their motivation was to be involved in an enjoyable form of physical activity or have a creative outlet.

Only 7.8% said their motivation from the start was to eventually pursue a dance profession. However, 65.4% replied dance is currently their chosen life profession. Only 21% said they continued to dance primarily for means of a creative outlet in their lives. When the participants considered the purpose of dance education for youth in general there was no real consensus, 39.6% felt it encouraged youth to develop important skills and social values; 28.3% agreed it provided youth with a creative outlet; 20.8% thought it gave youth an enjoyable form of physical activity. The dancers in the study were trained in very versatile atmospheres. 94.3% had trained in jazz and lyrical/contemporary; 98.1% had trained in ballet; 83% had trained in Tap; 90.6% had trained in modern; 69.8% in Hip Hop.

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Over half, 55.8% of the participants said the majority of their close friends are dancers and 28.8% remained neutral on the topic. When asked if the participants felt more comfortable in social interactions with other dancers as opposed to non-dancers, 45.3% posed "neutral" and 29.6% responded "yes". The participants were very indecisive when asked if they feel they had missed out on school related activities or other social activities due to an intense focus on dance. 45.3% responded "yes", expressing even though they missed out on social events such as school dances for competitions or weren't as actively involved at school, they don't regret their decision to be so involved in their dance training. The following four responses are representative of the group.

***It was always "I can't, I have dance/rehearsal/practice/performance."***

***Dance had consumed so much of my free time that I was constantly missing out on parties, family functions, and social gatherings. It was worth it though, because I don't know who I'd be without dancing.***

***I never really made school friends since I had no time to get to know anyone.***

***I had a whole spectrum of interests and dance took all of my time outside of the school day. I was unable to pursue other interests. I don't regret focusing on dance, but do wish I'd had the chance to develop other areas of my life.***

Although it was difficult for participants to become actively involved in school or social events, most of the participants said they were absent from school never, rarely or sometimes due to traveling for competitions.

Figure 1 in the appendix shows two columns representing the percentage of participants who agreed with the corresponding statement of competition in dance and social life. 58.5% of participants agreed dance is a competitive physical activity while 22.6% said it was not and 18.9% remained neutral. When asked is competition is an essential part of social life 40.4% of the participants responded "yes", 40.4% also responded "no" and 19.2% remained "neutral". Over 80% of the participants denied ever changing studios to become part of a higher ranked competition group or train in a less competitive atmosphere. 62.3% of the participants were also involved in competitive sports as adolescents.

The results were inconclusive on the primary objective of dance competitions. 35.53% said it gives dancers opportunities to receive feedback from experiences judges in the field; 27.5% said it gives dancers more opportunities to perform; 21.6% said it gives dancers opportunities to meet and see the work of dancers from different areas. The dancers (77.1%) enjoyed competing, but only 47.9% would encourage adolescents to participate in dance competitions. Out of the 5 participants who had never participated in a dance competition, 60% of them described their studio atmosphere as competitive.

Graph 1 in the appendix depicts 52.1% of participants began participating in dance competitions themselves in the 9-12 age range. The age range of 9-12 is thought by 52.8% of the participants to be an appropriate age for youth to begin competitive training in dance as depicted in Graph 2 in the appendix. The majority 85.4% continued competing until 15-18 years old. All of the listed competition divisions: solo, duet/trio, small or large group and production were competed in by the majority. 97.9% had competed in the small or large group category. The two main reasons the dancers said they were motivated to participate in dance competitions were to have more opportunities to perform (40%) and to have the opportunity to be part of a team and work for high achievements (37.8%). Most participants were encouraged by their parent (68.8%), peers (83%), and/or instructors (91.7%) to participate in competitions. Although 70% said they never felt pressured by their teacher or parent to continue competing had they wanted to stop.

Table 1 displays the social statements we asked participants to rank on a 5 point Likert scale which reached a definite consensus. These statements guided an analysis of social demeanor and psychological confidence among participants.

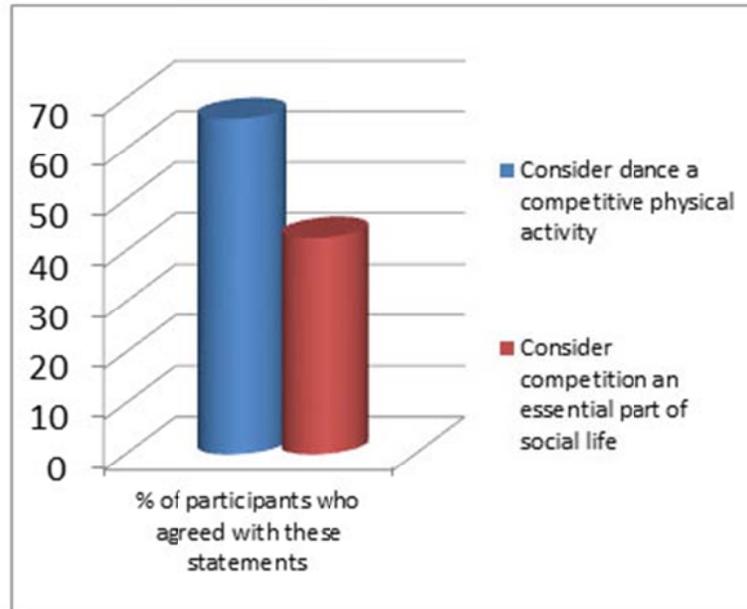


TABLE 1

## DISCUSSION

The results imply dancers with a competitive dance education have a neutral perception of competition being positive or negative during youth development. While most feel it is important to view dance competitively, there is still the hesitation to encourage adolescents to participate in youth dance competitions. Competitions take a major toll on a young individual's social life. Competition requires a lot of extra hours of rehearsals, training, and traveling to competitions. Dancers involved in competitions have little to no free time. There are no opportunities for youth in competitive dance to explore other interests.

As discussed in the review of literature, specialization at a young age inhibits the development of key locomotor and psychological skills of an individual. One of the major differences in time commitment of athletes to dancers in training is the rehearsal dancers engage in aside from regular training. Sports athletes have practices, but there is no need to additionally rehearse for a game. The practice takes care of game preparation. Dancers rehearse in addition to regular training and have definitive expectations of performance by their parents, peers, instructors, and ultimately of themselves.

Since over 62.3% of the individuals were also involved in competitive sports as adolescents, it would be interesting to further the research distinction of dance competition and sport competition for youth. The participants believe the group as well as the individual is given attention in dance competitions; most competed both as soloists and in a group. This work is similar to the sports mentality of team work. The social statements revealed the participants were somewhat wary of expectations from others and heed to external influences when making life choices. The statement most agreed with was "Current situations can change at any time". This implies the participants feel the need to constantly work to prove themselves to others and maintain their desired place in life. This is very reminiscent of a competitive atmosphere.

As previously discussed, the sports research has cautioned against one training model for various sports. Dance is an entirely different type of training which needs to also be considered for the training models created. Instructors cannot fall into the traditional dogma of an aesthetic. Youth are a vulnerable age to be working with and there are consequences when youth are in such motivational climates that may alter their perception of social behavior. Competition is a social process that shouldn't be evaded in training a dancer, but there is an appropriate time to begin this training. The participants felt 9-12 years old was a good time to start competitive training of youth, but the truth is up to 12 years is risky. Adolescents before puberty do not have the ability to effectively cope with

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stressors associated to competition and will rely on guidance from mentors such as parents and instructors. Competition is not a negative term, but when a young individual is not physically and psychologically mature enough to manage the situation it is detrimental to their social development.

While the results show a high consensus on the perception of dance as a competitive physical activity, participants were less committed to the idea of competition as an essential part of social life. Competitiveness must be considered an important social asset if we choose to encourage such behavior in maturing youth. This research shows that as a society we may not be methodically analyzing the very behaviors we are instilling in children through certain activities and climate orientations.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although the results are inconclusive as to how social behaviors of individuals who have competitively danced may differ from those who have not, this study developed an understanding of dancers' attitudes towards youth involved in competitive dance and competition as a social process. The rigorous training schedule of competitive dance overwhelms an adolescent's social life. The rigorous training schedule of competitive dance overwhelms an adolescents' social life. Several of the participants confirmed it was difficult if was difficult to make friends or be involved in other activities outside of dance. Youth in dance competitions specialize from an early age, which narrows their social development.

The research failingly did not inquire as to why the majority of participants perceived the 9-12 age range as most suitable for youth to begin competing. Further research should analyze the motivations of external influences such as parents and teachers to encourage youth participation in dance competitions. A future study should include more male participants to determine how gender shapes one's subjective attitudes and motivations for activity. We could also be more informed of dancers' personal experiences via in-depth interviews and gather more participants who have not participated in dance competitions to comparatively explore their attitude towards competition and youth in competitive dance.

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