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Social somatic theory: issues and applications in dance pedagogy¹

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ABSTRACT - Somatics is a large part of the lives of many dancers and teachers. Somatic practice is a useful tool, helping dancers move more effectively and efficiently. However, recently, there has been a growing interest in moving somatics into a socio-cultural realm. "Social somatic theory" is a somatic approach that acknowledges the social construction of dance bodies and the macro world where bodies live. This article describes and explains, "social somatic theory", addresses the need for such an approach, and explores applications and issues related to this approach.

Keywords - Critical Theory. Embodiment. Postmodernism. Social Somatic Theory. Student Bodies.

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Teoria social somática: questões e aplicações na pedagogia da dança

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RESUMO - A educação somática é parte significativa da vida de muitos dançarinos e professores. A prática somática é uma ferramenta útil, auxiliando dançarinos a moverem-se de maneira mais eficiente. Entretanto, recentemente, tem havido um crescente interesse em posicionar a educação somática dentro do domínio sociocultural. “Teoria social somática” é uma abordagem somática que reconhece a construção social do corpo que dança e o mundo macrocósmico onde ele vive. Esse artigo descreve e explica a “teoria social somática”, identifica a necessidade de tal abordagem, explorando aplicações e questões a ela relacionadas.

Palavras-chave - teoria crítica, corporificação, pós-modernismo, teoria social somática, corpos dos alunos

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In 1993, I coined the term “social somatic theory” (GREEN, 1993). Since that time, the need for viewing dance bodies through a socio-political lens has grown, particularly in current times of social upheaval and unrest. A number of scholars are now questioning the ideas and viewpoints inherent in a somatic approach that does not address a larger macro context.

In this article, I attempt to describe and explain social somatic theory, explore how dance bodies are socially constructed, investigate the research, pedagogical, and practical applications of the concept, and address issues and tensions associated with this approach and its relationship to other bodily approaches.

Social Somatic Theory

Some somatic theorists have begun to address socio-political issues related to the soma. Although somatic theory and practice tend to focus on inner experience, there are some somatic theorists and educators who move into a more macro socio-political sphere and address how our bodies and somatic experiences are inscribed by the cultures in which we live. I call this body of literature “social somatic theory” because it addresses socio-political issues related to somatic theory and practice. By no means, a monolith, these various discourses bump up against each other and may not be consistent with some components of somatic theory in general, particularly Thomas Hanna’s views of somatics (See GREEN, 1993, 1996a, 1996b). However, one commonality among the literatures of social somatic theory is a general shift that moves outward from micro to macro dimensions and from self to society.

Social somatic theory draws on the ideas of such writers as Don Johnson (1992) and Elizabeth Behnke (1990-91) who have addressed issues of bodily authority and have demonstrated how our bodies are shaped by the cultures in which we live. According to these theorists, Western culture creates the myth of a body/mind split. This split does not simply separate our minds from our bodies and favor mind over body. Rather, there is an active obsession with the body as an objective, mechanical entity. However, according to these theorists, this split removes us from the experiences of our bodies and often results in disconnecting us from our own inner proprioceptive signals and from our somas as living processes.

Furthermore, as Johnson suggests, dominant cultures often perpetuate this body/mind split in an effort to maintain somatic weakness and disconnection in order to preserve control. By disconnecting people from their sensory and sensual selves, through the imposition of external models of “ideal bodies” or standards of what the

body “should be” and how it should act, the dominant culture maintains control as people in oppressed groups distrust their own sensory impulses and give up their bodily authority. And, according to Johnson, it allows human exploitation and suffering to take place in the name of science. Resonating with some feminist thinkers, Johnson points out that early women health practitioners, for example, were ostracized and condemned as witches for providing alternative health practices that were basically somatic and worked with an authority of perception and inner awareness. He contends that,

The most disastrous result of splitting mind from body and intelligence from perception, and of giving value to the former over the latter, is the topsy-turvy system of social values found in the recent history of human slaughter, which has been carried out by...‘experts,’ justified by scientific rationalism, and supported by masses of citizens who have been trained to perceive only in the most truncated fashion. (JOHNSON, 1992, p. 112-113)

Additionally, much of social somatic theory also intersects with postmodern literatures of the body. Postmodernists such as Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida question assumptions of the modern age such as the belief that reason and scientific inquiry can provide an objective and universal foundation for knowledge. They argue, “hegemonic metanarratives [grand theory of modern times], rather than reflecting a universal reality, are embedded in the specific historical time and place in which they are created and are associated with certain political baggage” (PARPART, 1992, p. 1). They argue that there are privileged social discourses that silence other voices.

Much of Johnson’s work is grounded in the discourse of Michel Foucault, who looked at power and its relationship to knowledge (1979, 1980). Although Foucault was interested in studying power and extremes of standardizing bodily behavior that have characterized institutions in a historical context, and did not directly address the body as a source of pedagogy (and rejected power as repressive but rather explained it through discourse), his studies similarly approach the body as a site of social and political control and power.

I mention these bodily discourses, which are directly or indirectly related to social somatic theory, in an attempt to demonstrate the possibilities of somatics and expand the definition of somatic practice and theory. As Johnson points out, somatic practice alone, without a larger global context, may actually harm students rather than help them. He points out the dangers of a rigid scientific rationalism, but also cautions us against any fundamentalism, even regarding somatic practices, dance training and educational systems that become models of authority themselves and that impose external models of correctness without helping students experience their bodily and sensual authority (1992). Therefore, any educational system is suspect if it encourages

students not to listen to their inner voices and somas and forces them to apply external standards, forms and models. At the same it, this means that students may find ownership through a somatic approach, but an approach that does not embrace individualism and the universality of bodily experience.

Social Constructions of Dance Bodies vs. the Universality of Dance Bodies

Somatic knowledge in and of itself is not inherently good or bad. The mistake that can be made, however, is aiming for universality in the rules that govern somatic principles. Generally somatic theory delves into personal subjective ways of knowing the world without looking at inner bodily experiences as a sociocultural construction. Somaticists tend to look at somatic experience as real and universal (see HANNA 1996, 1998). However, “social somatic theory” re-envision the possibilities of somatics on diverse levels and dimensions. In earlier works, I question the focus on science alone, or an epistemology based in uncovering facts (GREEN, 2001, 2015). I point out that our bodies are influenced by our prior experience, histories, and culture. This does not mean that we throw away basic tenets of somatic thinking, but that we extend the ways we study bodies and recognize that somatic experience is not about truth and facts but about how we live in our bodies in society and culture.

For example, Johnson claims that our bodies and bodily experiences are shaped by history and culture. He sees the body as a viewpoint and claims, “My body – its sensibilities, movements styles, reaction patterns, and health – is not simply an individual reality governed by its own biophysical laws and idiosyncratic effects of my personal history. I am also a result of the ideologies within which I move” (JOHNSON, 1992).

In other words, bodily experience is not neutral or value free; it is shaped by our backgrounds, experiences, and sociocultural habits. We are not all given some generalized body and all bodies are not the same. Our bodies are constructed and develop in a particular place at a particular time and habituated by the culture in which we live. Therefore, it is helpful to study the sociocultural effects on the body as well as how our bodies work in practice. This means being aware that everyone’s bodily experience is different and that there is no universal construction of the body nor is there an ideal body type, alignment, or correct way to be in our bodies. We are taught how to live in our bodies; therefore our bodies are not the same. For example, as Johnson suggests, in some traditional Eastern cultures children sit on the floor while they eat while in Western societies children sit in chairs. As a result these children may develop different postural habits and it is the responsibility of educators to be aware

of these differences when applying somatic principles. The dancing bodies of different students, and students in different cultural settings, have different requirements and needs; they are diverse and grow to be different cultural bodies (see JOHNSON, 1992).

Examples in Dance Research and Pedagogy

A number of dance scholars have been attracted to this more macro approach and there are a number of ways “social somatic theory” is or can be the impetus of work in dance pedagogy and research. For example, my research with students about body image explored social bodily issues through somatic practice. As I say in the abstract of one of my articles,

This article explores body, power and pedagogical issues related to a study in dance education. The study investigated the body perceptions of participant student teachers in a somatics and creativity project within a university level instructional setting. During this project somatic (body–mind) practices were used to explore body perceptions and image. The students then created what they called an ‘interactive movement performance’, which explored the issues raised in class. It explored how these body perceptions are influenced by society and the dance world. During the project the participants were asked questions about previous experiences in dance education, and how they have learned to perceive their bodies in reference to a model weight and body ideal.

The initial qualitative/postpositivist analysis, from class discussion, interviews, observation and document analysis, indicated that the participants’ previous experiences in dance did reflect an emphasis on ‘ideal body’ myths in the dance world. Students also expressed the value of somatic practice as a tool for body awareness and consciousness of these socio-political issues in traditional dance education. The students tended to tie somatics to an inner authority that resists technologies of normalisation and dominant meaning systems in dance and society. Somatic practice facilitated a dialogue through which they realised and expressed the pressures to meet an imposed bodily standard. Further, it allowed them the space to explore a connection to their bodies rather than the disconnection that comes from attempting to meet standards of bodily ideals. This article focuses on the themes of pedagogy and power that emerged from the study. (GREEN, 2001)

In another project, I used somatic practice with women with breast cancer:

The purpose of this study was to explore ways that Kinetic Awareness®, a somatic body and dance practice, can help women with breast cancer deal with the symptoms of their treatments. The stories of the women are told through a multifaceted case study process, using postpositivist displays of data such as narrative and split page format. This strategy embodies an approach, which does not attempt to find generalized solutions, or prescriptions; portray the researcher as authority; or attempt to speak for the participants. Rather, it offers a multitude of voices, viewpoints and possibilities. Through this qualitative approach, the study focuses on finding agency within a medicalized system of care. (GREEN, 2015)

Thus, the socio-political issues I was exploring dealt with the medicalization of the health care system and how somatic practice may help these women find more agency and ownership of their bodies.

Other scholars working in this realm include Martha Eddy, Silvie Fortin; Leena Rouhiainen, Eeva Anttila, Teija Löytönen, Soili Hämäläinen, Jess Curtis, and Ojeya Cruz Banks. Martha Eddy (2002) addresses the issue of appropriation in somatic education, and suggests that what we now call somatics began in Asian Body practices. Silvie Fortin (2002) points to the use of somatics throughout the world and addresses a study using somatics with women with eating disorders (2011). Teija Loytonen (2004) “looks at how emotions are entwined together at a dance school. She addresses the power structures and normative beliefs and ideas about the best ways of teaching dance” (ROUHIAINEN; ANTTILA; HÄMÄLÄINEN; LÖYTÖNEN, 2004, p. 12). Soili Hämäläinen (2004) looks at social power structures regarding student bodies and how student bodies are shaped by cultural concerns. Eeva Anttila (2004) uses a Freiren framework to look at the meaning of freedom in dance, within a bodily perspective, using a critical theory lens. Jess Curtis (2015) explores somatics and contact improvisation as tools for social change. Natalie Garrett Brown (2011) argues for the political potentiality of embodied experience. Ojeya Cruz Banks (2009) examines dance pedagogy as a tool for the decolonization of dance bodies.

The ideas shared by these authors tend to focus on the use of somatics as a tool for political change or are a critique of how student dance bodies are constructed. They all move from an individual/self focus/ to embrace socio-political; or cultural aspect of dancing bodies.

Issues and Tensions

It may be valuable to recognize that some scholars have critiqued somatic practice in general. Isabelle Ginot deconstructs Shusterman’s theory of somaesthetics. Ginot suggests that Shusterman’s work is problematic because it has a limited focus that does not include major aspects of the work he cites. One way Shusterman’s work is limited is that it aligns Foucault’s thinking with his own idea of “somaesthetics” and contends that Foucault’s work represents a “body consciousness” and experiential level of embodiment (SHUSTERMAN, 2008). Further, Shusterman does not consider the differences between Foucauldian and somatic views of bodies. Foucault looked at power and its relationship to knowledge. His studies approach the body as a site of social and political control and power. Although there are connections between somatic theory and Foucauldian thought, a number of tensions exist between these ways of

thinking. For example, Foucault would not be fond of the idea of bodily experience and would be suspicious of the use of working pedagogically through the body. Although he viewed the body as a site of political manipulation and control and studied it as an effect of the culture in which we live, his writing suggests a suspicion of typical somatic conceptualizations such as bodily experience and practice (FOUCAULT, 1979, 1980). As Frank (1990, p. 132) points out, “What Foucault contributes to the study of the body — beyond his studies as a site of political violence — is an enhanced self-electiveness about the project of the body itself”.

In other words, Foucault does not claim that the body can provide us with a grounded truth or that education through the body can free people from oppressive social policies and authoritarian regimes. His writing offers an approach rooted in a critique of institutions through discourses created by a dominant culture. He would be cautious about somatic practices because of his claim that experience is based on how our perceptions have been socially constructed. He would be leery of any claims to “experiential” or “somatic” authority.

In addition, Don Johnson (1992) points to the danger of using somatic practice as a panacea to the world’s ills without framing the discourse in a larger social context. He suggests that by focusing solely on individualistic bodily experience, we may be hypnotizing ourselves to the outer world and the problems Foucault addresses through his historical analyses.

Nevertheless, it may be recognized that although Foucault rejected bodily practice and experience in his early career, towards the later part of his career he came to “refute the autonomy of discourse” (MCNAY 1993, p. 27) and to refer to the corporeal aspect of life. He acknowledged, “the discursive and material are linked together in a symbiotic relationship” (MCNAY 1993, p. 27). Thus, although he was more suspicious of experiential or corporeal notions of body in his early years, he grew to be more accepting of such aspects later in his life.

However, although Foucault did become more accepting of bodily conceptualizations later in his life, Shusterman sometimes misconstrues Foucault’s intent. Shusterman criticizes sexual aspects of Foucault’s work, but does not seem to be aware that the core of his work problematized a somaesthetics and found no solutions to the problem through somatic practice. Rather, he looked at the body through a historical lens and made his point through an analysis of language. I read Foucault’s idea of “care of the self” as a societal prescription emanating from organizations that attempt to control people through a focus on their own behavior, not as a prescription for health and embodiment.

Thus, Shusterman’s alignment with Foucault may be falsely prescriptive. Shusterman never address how the experience of the body is influenced by anything outside of an individualistic view.

This may be one example of how the differences in thinking are often ignored in body theory and somatics. Shusterman's ideas are more fully aligned with Merleau Ponty and phenomenology because they both see the body as experience. But his writing about Foucault does not address the tensions between postmodern thought and somatics.

So there are real differences and tensions between somatic theory in general and a more postmodern approach to the body. Although Ginot tends to define somatics as one way of thinking and practice with one epistemology, and does not recognize the growing literature on social somatic theory, she does point out that is problematic to view somatics as "an antidote to dominant dance practices" (GINOT, 2012, p. 12). She looks at how somatics has been addressed and finds, for example, its relationship to science problematic as well as its replacing a political and social conscience with a somatic conscience that views the subject.

Those who critique somatics in general, however, may not be aware of social somatic theory and the ways it rejects essentialism and universality, while still using embodiment as a source of bodily information. Social somatic theory may be one way of recognizing the importance of bodily experience, while addressing these concerns, moving thinking about somatics to a worldview that rejects individualism and essentialism without throwing the idea of embodiment out the window. While most somatic theory embraces scientific logical thinking and a positivist epistemology and ontology, social somatic theory sees the body through a more critical socially constructed view. It offers a "troubling" view of essentialist tenets of somatics without rejecting bodily knowledge as a tool for exploring difference and justice.

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