



# Career transition of dancers in Portugal: an exploratory study supporting the need for a program for development and career transition in dance

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## Abstract

**Background:** The subject of career transition for dancers continues to be a challenging issue to tackle. Consequently, dancers are mostly left alone to deal with this crucial transition, one that also determines the quality of their lives after dance.

**Goals:** Main finality of this research study was to understand and offer guidance in the career transition experiences of professional dancers in Portugal and to propose a development and career transition program in dance that allows effective intervention to help dancers in their transition process. Main goal was to characterize how dancers perceive their career transition processes.

**Methods:** The study follows a qualitative approach, with data collection through semi-structured individual interviews to professional dancers (from both genders) at different moments of career. Thematic analysis was conducted for the complete corpus, with codes emerging from the collected data (no a-priori coding system).

**Results:** Six key themes and a total of 34 sub-themes were identified. Dancers referred to feel unsupported and alone and, consequently, to experience significant psychological challenges when faced with a career transition. Most specifically, without adequate guidance, dancers reported to feel unprepared for their future. None of the interviewed dancers was aware of initiatives available to support dance career transition in Portugal. They were aware, however, of the existence of programs in other countries and expressed a need for such support in Portugal.

**Discussion:** It can be concluded from the above that this research validates the need for a development and career transition program in the Portuguese dance community, one that aims to soften and/or eradicate the challenges associated with a dancer's transition from active performer into a dance-related or other career. Collected data support the need for outlining a training and supportive program that provides dancers with tools to enable a healthier and harmonious experience of transitioning beyond performance.

**Keywords:** Retraining, Qualitative research, In-depth interviews, Intervention program

## Introduction

*“Dance is a career that entails an extraordinary high-level of passion, commitment, extensive periods of training, and a professional life that is relatively brief, since many dancers have to retire in their early thirties and some even earlier”* (Baumol, Jeffri & Throsby, 2004, p. 1). Although dancers' performative life is so intense, insecure, and short, the fact that such life comes to an end is rarely considered in advance and, even more rarely, planned for (Sidimus, 1987). Nevertheless, timely planning for life after the career has

proven to be an effective measure for enabling a smoother career transition and for helping dancers to cope with the transition to build a new life (Jodai & Nogawa, 2012). There is some resistance to offer support in this after dance career planning process because such type of educational programs is sometimes regarded as a threat to the necessary devotion for a vocational and professional career (Roncaglia, 2010).

Some of the main critical factors in the career transition of professional dancers are as follows:

- ◆ *Difficulty of extra-dance* preparation during the training period and career: In some forms of dance (e.g., classical ballet), the active career is so time-consuming that it becomes impracticable for dancers to prepare, at the same time, for an alternative, post-transition economic activity (Baumol et al., 2004; Parker, 2011; Simmons, 2008);
- ◆ *Intensity of commitment*: The intensity of the commitment required for professional dance is extraordinarily high, starting at an early age and extending through the dancer's career, thus making it often difficult for the dancer to be able to stop and reflect or prepare for the life after dance (Baumol et al., 2004; Parker, 2011; Pickman, 1987; FIA Project, 2016);
- ◆ *Restriction of experience*: Given the demand and intensity required of a vocational training, dancers commonly have specific and narrowed experience, and this *de facto* restricts their awareness of other career possibilities outside and beyond the professional dance activity (Buckroyd, 2000);
- ◆ *Perception of lack of commitment*: One of the principal fears in dancers is that their interest in deepening an area beyond dance, with a view to their career development after the transition, may be perceived by their employers and peers as a lack of commitment towards dance (Baumol et al., 2004). Moreover, many dancers appear to feel that dance needs so much focus and concentration that, as soon as they start thinking about their next career, they are in danger of dissipating their concentration about their current dance career, and not dancing as well as they could. It is as if admitting that there is something other or more in life would be sufficient in itself to weaken their present dancing qualities (Valerie Wilder, in Sidimus, 1987);
- ◆ *Age of the transition*: Usually, the transition of dancers occurs at an age that is considered too early for an individual to withdraw from active life, but which, in turn, is an age when it is not easy to begin a new career (Baumol et al., 2004). When retiring, dancers are faced with the prospect of a new career and with having to compete with “normal” people, who are usually in the middle of their careers or even reaping the benefits of an already established job (Roncaglia, 2006).

Other obstacles that dancers face when they retire from dance include (a) deciding what to do next (Parker, 2011), and (b) deciding whether to stay or leave the dance world (Baumol et al., 2004).

Considering these inherent (to professional dancer career) challenges, it is critical for dancers to understand and accept the fact that dance may be an important part of their life but that it is not life-in-itself (Taylor & Estanol, 2015). However, convincing a dancer that any other profession can be as creative or meaningful as dance seems futile (Horosko and Kupersmith, 2009). It has been advocated that is of utmost importance to help dancers to integrate their valuable experience of training and career in dance as a life experience and to help them realize and feel that there is life after dance, that the individual is more than a dancer, and that the world offers a wide range of enormous alternative possibilities (Buckroyd, 2000).

It is also essential to recognize the skills and qualities developed by dance training that can be transferred to other areas (Buckroyd, 2000). In fact, dancers are often not aware of their own qualities and skills and may lack self-confidence that ends up being detrimental to their transition process (Pickman, 1987; Bulkley, 2014).

The literature in the field of career transition of dancers (i.e., transition process to a life after dance) has been increasing in volume internationally. There are relevant resources to support the transition process of the dancers. Indeed, the challenge of career transition in dance has been receiving increasing attention, especially through the work of groups such as the International Organization for the Transition of Professional Dancers (hereinafter referred to as IOTPD), and already existing in some countries (e.g., United States, Canada, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom) specialized career transition centers that help dancers to prepare for their career transition process either psychologically, either professionally and financially. It should be noted that the programs of the first transition centers freed dancers from the pressure of looking for a new career mainly in an area related to dance and made it possible for dancers to find second rewarding careers in other professional arenas. Some

schools and dance companies have also implemented programs and services to support dancers in changing their careers (Baumol et al., 2004). These centers focus much of their work on raising dancers' awareness of transition issues during the various stages of their education and dance careers. Relevant to say that before the existence of these centers, discussion of transition in the dance community was considered taboo (Baumol et al., 2004).

The author has no knowledge of any study of career transition for dancers carried out in Portugal. There is indeed a knowledge gap in this area, for Portugal, and a need to delve deeper into the career transition of dancers at a national level, to better understand the details of their career transition processes and resources they may count on to help and support them at this moment of life. Only once this in-depth analysis of the different perspectives, perceptions, and experiences of interviewed professional dancers has been evaluated, would it be possible to outline and structure a program of intervention devised specifically to support the dancers in their transition to a career after professional dance. This was the purpose of this study: to deepen and analyze the career transition experiences of professional dancers in Portugal and to make some considerations about a development and career transition program in dance, aiming to provide dancers with a better experience of their transition process.

## Methods

### Design

An exploratory study, of qualitative nature, has been chosen for this project. Data were obtained through semi-structured individual interviews.

### Participants

Two female and one male dancer participated in this study. As in the study by Baumol et al. (2004), it was considered relevant to interview dancers about their real career transition experience as well as about their expected career transition experience (heterogeneous experience). Professional dancers were chosen

according to the following inclusion criteria: having experience as working professionally, full-time, at the same dance company for at least four years; those having completed their career transition process as professional dancers having done so at least three years earlier, similarly to the study of Willard and Lavallee (2016).

### Instrument

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted. An interview script was developed, consisting essentially of open questions to encourage participants to express themselves freely in respect of the issues addressed. For compiling the interview script, several studies about career transition of dancers were reviewed and analyzed, and different interview scripts were consulted (e.g., Simmons, 2008; Harper, 2012; Parker, 2011; Bulkley, 2014; Willard & Lavallee, 2016; Roncaglia, 2010; Baumol et al., 2004). The structure of the interview script was identical for all participants, except for the dancer in career transition. The interview followed a chronological structure and focused on the dancers' training path, their experiences as professional dancers and their perceptions and experiences of career transition and (if the case) of life after professional dance. Data were also collected on the dancers' views about: (1) advice to dancers in different situations, and (2) their awareness, suggestions, and thoughts about transition support initiatives.

### Procedure

Two interviews were conducted via face-to-face through Skype® by the author of this paper, and one was conducted by e-mail (written interview by one of the retired dancers). Both Skype® interviews lasted about 2 hours; one of these interviews took place in two different sessions, on two consecutive days. The interviews started with the same initial questions for both Skype® interviewees and, to ensure that the interviews took place in a fluid and natural way, the sequence of the remaining questions in the interview guide was made dependent on the content of the previous answers. In the case of the written interview, the interviewee received the same interview guide as the

other participants did and provided the answers in the form of a text.

### Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed by the author of this paper. The content analysis followed the following steps: (a) “Familiarization” with the complete content of the corpus (Willard & Lavallee, 2016, p. 270); (b) identification of the themes emerging from the collected data (open coding); (c) elaboration of the profile of each dancer, namely, a narrative profile and a grid profile; (d) integration of identified themes in more general themes, common to all dancers (axial coding); and (e) grouping of sub-themes (Parker, 2011) into key themes, characterized by a higher-level of abstraction.

### Ethical issues

To ensure the prior understanding of all participants of what it would mean to participate in the study, a letter of informed consent was prepared. All participants received the letter of informed consent and the interview guide before the interviews were carried out so that they could validate their intention to participate in the study and reflect, if they so wished, on the content to be covered during the interview in advance. After confirming their participation, interviews were scheduled at a convenient time for the interviewees. To guarantee the anonymity of the dancers participating in the study, codes B1 to B3 were assigned, with codes B1 and B2 corresponding to the dancers who have completed their career transition (37 and 39 years old, respectively) and code B3 corresponding to the dancer in the transition process (43 years old). Also, to maintain the anonymity of the company of dance (participants employer), it was coded as DC.

Before the beginning of the Skype® interviews, it was confirmed with interviewees if they had any questions regarding the informed consent letter, or about the study, that they wished to clarify, and if the recording of the interview could start. In the case of the e-mail

written interview, the consent letter was received by the researcher together with the written answers.

No ethical committee was consulted for the study.

## Results

Two professional dancers with their career transition process concluded and one professional dancer in transition were interviewed. The two who had concluded their career transition were: a 37-year-old dancer who made the transition three years ago and had a professional dance career of 14 years; and a 39-year-old dancer who made the transition four years ago and had a professional dance career of 17 years. The participant who was in the process of career transition at the moment of the interview was 43 years old (an age already considered advanced for professional dance), dancing professionally for 26 years at the time.

Six key themes and a total of 34 sub-themes were identified (see Table 1): (1) temporal milestones, (2) the dancer during training, (3) the dancer during their career, (4) the dancer during transition, (5) the dancer after the dancing, and (6) general considerations about the career transition process. The most relevant selection of themes and sub-themes will be discussed next.

### Theme 2: The dancer during training

*‘To speak the transition’ during the training*

All participants highlighted the importance of verbalizing (speaking openly about) the topic of transition still during the training of the dancers. They also reported that this topic is not really an issue that is normally addressed, a fact whose importance is also reinforced throughout the research in this area (e.g., Levine, 2004; Sidimus, 1987). One dancer mentioned: *“It is a pertinent theme and that is not yet spoken in the dance schools, it is a taboo subject and I do not understand why”* (B1).

### Theme 3: The dancer during their career

*‘To think the transition’ during the career*

It was noted that ‘to think the transition’, that is, thinking about the future beyond and after dance, is not a concern when one is a young dancer, something also reinforced in the revised literature (e.g., Roncaglia, 2006; Sidimus, 1987). Nevertheless, one of the interviewed dancers stated that this is an issue that is always present under the surface: *“That ‘ghost’ is always there because it is a very short career. But when we are 20 years old, or 18, we think that 20 years of career is a lot of time; it is something that until the age of 40 will not (...) will not hurt anything. I mean, it hurts many things obviously, but...”* (B2).

Two dancers referred to having had two moments of thinking about the transition, at different moments of their careers. One of the dancers (B2) had a first moment of (spontaneously) considering the career transition at around 29 years old, motivated by the desire to have other professional experiences and having

decided to do additional training. The second and final moment of reflection about the career transition for this participant was at age 35. Another dancer (B3) had a first moment of (non-spontaneously) thinking about the career transition at the age of 21, due to losing the job because of contractual issues; the second moment of thinking the transition for this participant was at 37 years old, being in the process of transition at the time of the study. So, it can be deduced that the two moments of thinking about the transition for these participants had different causes. For one of the dancers, the causes of reflection (about career transition) were of voluntary order and, for the other, they were involuntary. Nevertheless, both dancers reported that they, at the end of the day, managed to make something positive from their experience.

**Table 1.** Key themes and respective sub-themes (from content analysis)

Themes	Sub-themes
Temporal milestones	Age; Number of years in the dance world; Beginning of dance learning; Beginning of professional career; Length of professional career; Age of transition; Number of years post-transition
The dancer during training	Learning path; Motivation to start dance classes; Professional/artistic dreams; Decision to be a professional dancer; School training; Other interests during training; Social support; ‘To speak the transition’ during the training
The dancer during their career	Life of a professional dancer; Identity; Political aspects / internal issues; ‘To think the transition’ during the career
The dancer during transition	Motives for the career transition; Feelings during the transition; Complementary studies; Support during the period of transition
The dancer after the dancing	Feelings after the transition; Post-transition journey; Professional dancer career; What do they not miss from the life as a dancer; Perception on acquired skills
General considerations about the career transition process	Ideal period for career transition preparation; Advice to future dancers; Advice to dancers considering transition; Awareness about career transition programs; Relevance of creating a career transition program; Meaning of sharing experience

#### Theme 4: The dancer during transition

##### *Motives for the career transition*

For one dancer in this study (B1), the transition process was triggered by the termination of their contract, an involuntary cause for thinking about the career transition. For another participating dancer (B2), the reasons for the transition are related to the lack of fulfillment and being unhappy, suffering from pain, and internal politics. For the dancer who is in

transition (B3), the situation that led to think about the career transition was the occurrence of an injury.

The reasons behind career transition are complex and rarely one-dimensional. According to Roncaglia (2006), the reasons for retiring from a performing career can be classified as voluntary and involuntary, and these reasons are not mutually exclusive; it is the extent to which other factors interrelate that, ultimately, determine whether the retirement was freely chosen (voluntary) or forced (involuntary). Two

dancers participating in this study (B1 and B2) exercised their power of choice and ability to control their career transition processes, which are fundamental factors in determining whether the transition is perceived as voluntary or involuntary, independently of the initial triggers to think about the transition. The transition of these dancers was, therefore, planned and perceived as voluntary.

#### *Feelings during the transition*

All dancers expressed how complex and difficult the career transition process is. It was evident, in the interviews, that dancers experience difficulties, loneliness and psychological suffering when faced with a career transition. They described the career transition process as a complicated and very lonely process, accompanied by a feeling of emptiness, helplessness, and confusion. Participants used expressions, such as *“we are never prepared”* (B3) and *“it is not easy to accept that we are stopping dancing (...) and entering another phase of our life”* (B3).

These feelings are not exclusive of transitions imposed by involuntary reasons; they also happen when the decision of the transition is voluntary. When the initial motive that led to thinking about the transition was involuntary, participants found it difficult to deal with and to accept the unexpected moment of transition. By way of example: *“I was a little lost”* (B1) and *“I saw things so black, you know... so much that my life was over!”* (B3). On the other hand, in the presence of a combination of factors that culminates on a voluntary decision, the transition process was characterized by an increased diversity of feelings: namely, fear of wanting to dance after all, fear of feeling frustration due to lack of acceptance of their age and of natural path of life and body, uncertainty given to the complexity of the decision, all these negative feelings together, mixed, with certainty and enthusiasm. One of the most illustrative expressions of this code is the following: *“I was very afraid of feeling frustrated and feel ‘oh, after all I want to dance’ or...”* (B2). Also, by the same participant: *“And so this was a door I closed, period. And this decision is also complicated”* (B2), referring to the decision to retire from dancing,

professionally, and to the fear and uncertainty surrounding such a decision.

#### **Theme 5: The dancer after the dancing**

##### *Feelings after the transition*

The participating dancer going through the career transition said that *“it will always be a shock”* (B3) and a difficult period to overcome, but revealed confidence that would have the skills to deal with the situation, believing that it would be a *“harmonious and positive”* experience. This dancer considered that the most important thing would be to feel confident and to have positive feedback on the complementary activities to dance that the participant started to do in the transition period. The dancer considered that what can mainly hinder a transition process is the lack of acceptance of oneself.

The lack of acceptance was also mentioned by another dancer (B2). However, this participant said to feel very good after taking the decision to retire, and, after assuming the new role, to have the same feeling of enthusiasm as when starting to dance professionally. This interviewee felt no emptiness between stopping dancing and starting a new profession and, on the contrary, felt very enthusiastic. And this remained the case for the first two years after stopping dancing. Whenever going to a rehearsal or a show, the participant made an active effort to confirm the decision and was always pleasantly surprised. The participant also stressed that *“more than stopping dancing”* (B2), the most difficult part was realizing that, from the age of 30, the body *“is in charge”*. The interviewee also noted that life intensely focused on dance and on what a career as a professional dancer implied, was previously felt as the norm; only after transitioning the participant began to feel as *“a normal person”*, missing being a dancer.

The other dancer who had already completed the transition (B1) was also satisfied with the life after dance. This participant found that the transition became positive, allowing to discover a new passion.

It thus appears that planning the route after dance had a positive influence on the quality of the career transition of the interviewed dancers who had completed their transitions, something that is also affirmed in the literature on the subject (Baumol et al., 2004; Willard and Lavalley, 2016).

#### *Post-transition journey*

The dancer in transition said that, when completing the career transition, it would be fundamental to keep having some continuity, within the world of dance. This participant intended to make the transition when not being able to continue dancing.

Both participants who had completed their career transitions continued to carry out training to acquire new skills and value themselves in their new careers, and both had defined plans and objectives for the future, framed in their new life paths. Also, both stopped dancing, having nevertheless developed new connections to dance.

#### *Perception on acquired skills*

Participants listed a large and varied range of skills that they had acquired as dancers, valued as important for life after dance. Among these were: autonomy, discipline, responsibility, memorization, teamwork, creativity, observation skills, thinking skills, and physical and mental dexterity. Two participants also mentioned other skills as important in the work of a dancer, again echoing literature on the subject (Baumol et al., 2004; Levine, 2004); one reported to find it difficult to discern which of the skills developed from dance were transferable to life beyond dance: "I can't quite see particularly well what dance has given me in reality because I see it as my life" (B2). Some of the involved skills were time management, personal confidence, respect and body awareness, work capacity, focus on individual goals, commitment, perseverance, and motivation. Discipline was the most frequently reported skill, for every participant, when referring to transferable skills beyond dance, again ratified by existing literature on the subject (Levine, 2004). Other frequently mentioned skills were

creativity, responsibility, commitment, and self-confidence.

#### Integration of different sub-themes

All the dancers participating in the study emphasized the immense dedication and the focus that is required from a professional dancer and alluded to the lack of space left for social life, also mentioned in different studies (e.g., Jeffri and Throsby, 2006; Jeffri, 2005; Willard and Lavalley, 2016). All participants identified strongly with being a dancer, something that continued to manifest itself even after their career transitions and, as also reported in the study by Willard and Lavalley (2016), all showed a sense of pride in their careers as professional dancers. Participants reported that what is not at all missing (after completing the career transition) was: body aches (B3), diets (B1) and performing on stage (B2).

#### **Theme 6: General considerations about the career transition process**

##### *Ideal period for career transition preparation*

The dancers participating in this study who completed their career transitions both considered that the ideal period to consider the career transition is no later than 35 years old.

##### *Advice to future dancers*

Participants highlighted the importance of speaking and providing awareness of what it means to be a dancer, what a dancer's life consists of and realizing it as a short-term profession. It was expressed that this awareness must begin during the training, even before starting the professional career. The training should include the topic of career transition as well as of injuries; it was reinforced the relevance of supporting young dancers in their thinking about a future alongside dance, accompanying and guiding dance students during their training regarding the future, also making it clear that not all trained students will be able to work as professional dancers. It was mentioned, for example: "*We must show them clearly that it is a difficult life, that it is a life of constant compe-*

tion" (B3) and "the career of a dancer is a short career and if we start approaching that theme at the time of training, fewer people will be frustrated in the future" (B1).

#### *Advice to dancers considering transition*

Participants highlighted the importance of considering that the career transition should be made no later than 35 years old; advising young professionals to enlarge their professional horizons, planning on what they can do after retiring from their professional active dancing; thinking about the future; becoming aware of other skills they may have or may want to develop; reflecting about other areas of interest; trying to understand other possibilities within their reach; having an "open and available mind"; eventually, looking for psychological counselling. A very illuminating expression was "I have only realized this now, but stopping dancing is really something violent" (B2).

#### *Awareness about career transition programs*

None of the participants in the study was aware of initiatives of support in the matter of transition in Portugal. They were, however, aware of the existence of programs in other countries.

#### *Relevance of creating a career transition program*

The three participants valued the creation and existence of a specific program to help dancers deal with their career transition processes. They emphasized the importance of the support to dancers also within the dance companies themselves, aiming to help dealing with both the process of career transition and the process of career integration: "You are never prepared, but you can have a preparation. And what is essential, either in terms of professionalization either in terms of transition of profession, is that you have the minimum tools and self-knowledge so that you do not feel unprotected, even if afterwards your decision is 'ouch, I know all of that but I don't want to know, I will not make the transition' (...) But, at least, there is a follow-up and I think that follow-up is essential" (B2).

One of the participants (B3) expressed that the inexistence of programs designed to facilitate the career transition of dancers reveal that dancers are not valued enough, saying that there is 'little recognition of the so valuable work that we do' (B3), feelings also found in the literature (Willard and Lavallee, 2016).

## **Discussion**

A major limitation of this study lies in the reduced sample size. It is, after all, an exploratory study. Nevertheless, the in-depth semi-structured interviews allowed to uncover relevant transition experiences and provide an enriched reading of dancer job-related journeys.

All participating dancers had a minimum experience of four years as professional full-time dancers in the same dance company, and none had an experience exclusively as an independent dancer. It would be helpful if future research could contribute to deepen the reality of the career transition of independent dancers in Portugal, as well as with other different contractual scenarios.

It became evident from collected data that dancers experienced difficulties, loneliness, and psychological suffering when faced with a career transition. Participants described their career transition process as a complicated, very lonely process, accompanied by feelings of emptiness, helplessness, and confusion. These feelings were not exclusive of transitions imposed for involuntary reasons; they also happened when the cause of the transition was voluntary.

Accepting retirement from dance is referred to, in the literature, as the biggest challenge in the career transition of the dancers (Sidimus, 1987). This reality was also reinforced by participants, alongside being aware of the challenges that such a transition entails and being prepared to face it. As one of the participants said: "you are never prepared but you can have a preparation" (B2).

It came out from the data collected in this study that, similarly to other studies in the area (e.g., Baumol et al., 2004; Willard & Lavalley, 2016), the planning of the route for life after dance contributed positively to the quality of the career transition of dancers and to a greater satisfaction with their post-transition paths.

The career transition process in dance is universal to all dancers. But the way in which this process is lived and the way it is perceived by each dancer is flooded with variables that make the process unique, namely, their motivations, identities, resources, expectations, support, achievements, possibilities.

All participants felt a sense of pride in their careers as professional dancers. Similar to what different studies highlight (e.g., Jeffri and Throsby, 2006; Jeffri, 2005; Willard and Lavalley, 2016), the three dancers participating in this study emphasized the immense dedication and focus that is required from a professional dancer, and the lack of space left for social life. All participants identified strongly with being a dancer, something that they continue to feel even after their career transition.

Also, participants were unanimous in asserting the relevance, as well as the absence of *'speaking the transition'* during training, something that is also reaffirmed in the literature in this area of research (e.g., Levine, 2004; Sidimus, 1987). Regarding *'thinking the transition'* during the career, that is, to think about the future after dance, this is not a concern when being a young dancer, something reinforced in the revised literature (e.g., Roncaglia, 2006; Sidimus, 1987). Exceptional cases occur when faced with, for example, possible involuntary or forced transition. Nevertheless, a participant in this study warned that *"that 'ghost' is always there because it is a very short career"* (B2).

None of the participants in the study was aware of transition support initiatives in Portugal. They all were, however, aware of the existence of programs in other countries and all value the creation and existence of a specific program to help dancers to cope with their career transition processes. The non-existence of programs designed to facilitate the career

transition of dancers was perceived, by one of the participants, as a sign of lower value and recognition of dance as a profession. This perception is aligned with the study by Willard and Lavalley (2016), where the authors concluded that there was an overwhelming feeling among dancers of being disregarded and not valued when faced with the absence of direct social support from the company where they worked.

## Outlining a program for development and career transition in dance

Collected data support the need to create a program with the goal of preventing and mitigating the difficulties of career transition experienced by dancers, providing them with a healthier and harmonious experience of this inevitably job-related process.

Such program is composed of intervention actions and strategies considering the results of this exploratory study, as well as the evidence coming from good practices implemented in programs and centers of career transition that exist internationally.

As mentioned before, one of the dancers participating in the research study mentioned: *"you are never prepared but you can have a preparation"*. The main aim of such a program is then to help dancers to make successful, smooth transitions, a transition experienced with sense of control, support, and autonomy, embracing the full integration of dancers' career paths.

This implies that the career transition planning should start early and be integrated into every aspect of the life's journey of a dancer, as indicated by the revised literature (Levine, 2004) and supported by the perspectives from the dancers who participated in the study. Indeed, participants stressed the extreme importance of early awareness of the implications and demands of dancers' lives and the short duration of their performative careers, emphasizing not only the issue of career transition but also the occurrence of injuries.

It is extremely important that dance students are encouraged, from the beginning of their training, to accept and assume the idea that their dance training is part of a career that will only last part of their professional lives (Buckroyd, 2000) and that everyone has more potential than is generally assumed (Franklin, 1996). Dancers in this study emphasized the importance of having an *'open and available mind'* and of reflecting, from an early age, on other interests that they may have, alerting to the relevance of building a future, parallel to dance, since the start of their performative career (and not only in the transition phase itself). In this way, the identification of the transferable skills provided by the dance training will help the students to develop a sense of their ability to be successful in areas other than dance (Buckroyd, 2000). Psychological counselling is a big help throughout this entire process.

Transformation and change in attitudes and values is demanded, given that the career of a dancer is still commonly seen only as being constituted by the phases of preparation and performative career. Therefore, the already outlined program of career transition covers the three main stages of a dancer's life cycle, according to Levine (2004): (1) preparation/training, (2) performative career / professional development, and (3) beyond performative career / career transition. During each stage, the efforts to prepare the dancers for a career transition must focus on two main aspects: (1) changing values and attitudes (of dancers, dance community, and public in general) regarding the professional career of dance, and (2) delivering of a relevant set of training/supporting initiatives, services and resources, namely: individual and confidential counselling, regular group meetings, mentoring, shadowing, establishing partnerships and collaborations with different institutions, seminaries, workshops and conferences, and other relevant services and resources.

As noted in the revised literature (Levine, 2004), the challenges of the career transition focus on three main areas, referred to as the "triad of needs": psychological, educational, and financial. The program of development and career transition in dance aims to fulfill these different types of needs, along the three different journey stages (preparation, performative career, and beyond performative career).

## Conclusion

A main aim of this exploratory research was to build up evidence about a subject that is not yet properly acknowledged and approached. The collected data raise awareness and bring recognition that it is urgent to implement a program for development and career transition in dance.

Professional dancers give themselves entirely to their art form, find themselves almost exclusively in the world of dance, must retire from professional dance early in their lives, facing a reality they do not know and are not prepared for (due to the immersion in the world of dance for so many years), and must prepare and start second careers, often not knowing which or how. It is essential to create conditions to ensure young dancers that dance is a legitimate career to aspire to and that it is possible to pursue a career in dance at the highest level without irrevocably sacrificing their quality of life or a subsequent career (Levine, 2004). With a sense of full dedication, urgency, commitment, and resources facilitation, it is possible to build a better future for the dancers and the art of dance in Portugal. For this to happen, it is essential that, similarly to the countries where exist career transition centers in dance, the question of transition ceases to be a taboo also in Portugal and starts being recognized as a normal stage of the life of a dancer and, therefore, properly cared for, thought of, and supported.

It is crucial to recognize dancers for what they give of themselves as artists and for their potential to keep contributing as professionals beyond their art. This requires acknowledging and supporting their journey beyond dance.

## Acknowledgements

Cohn (cit by Pickman 1987) mentions, “*the dancer transports us from the real world into the fantasy world; our job is to find a way where we can aid the transition of the dancer from the fantasy world into the real world*”. I would also say, our job as psychologists working with dancers is to help the dancer to be able to be a dancer in the real world. The realization of this work was both a personal journey for the interviewed dancers and for me, while receiving their experiences, integrating them, and reading them from the inside. We believe that this work is a contribute for the implementation of programs and other initiatives supporting the career transition of dancers in Portugal. Hopefully, it has contributed to honor and live up to all the trust, sharing, and help these dancers have offered me. To them, I dedicate this work.

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