

Communication in close relationships of persons who dance Argentine tango

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Abstract

The aim of study was to evaluate communicative behaviors in close relationships of persons who dance Argentine tango and compare them with couples who do not undertake such activity. We also determined the types of psychological gender in our study groups and evaluated the differences between them.

The study involved 78 persons (who dance Argentine tango and the control group). The set of administered tools included: Communication in Marriage and Partner Relationship Questionnaire, Psychological Gender Inventory and a self-designed demographic survey.

Our data indicated that dancing tango was related to the overall quality of partner communication. Tangueros exhibited significantly better communicative behaviours and assessed their partners' communicative behaviours better as well. We did not observe any differences in the distribution of psychological gender in the two groups.

Our analyses show that the hypotheses concerning the relationship of practising tango and the quality of communication in a close relationship are predominantly accurate. The dancers evaluate their partner's contribution to communication significantly better – especially their support and commitment, and consider them less prone to diminish their worth. Argentine tango practitioners' overall assessment of the quality of communication is also significantly higher – both when it comes to their own behavior, and the behavior of their partners.

Dancing tango helps to improve communication and can be an effective form of assistance for persons with difficulties in communication in partner relationships.

communication; close relationships; psychological gender; Argentine tango

INTRODUCTION

Of all relationships a person builds in their life cycle, a close partnership, and marriage in particular, is the most durable and profound bond with another person. It exceeds all oth-

ers in terms of duration and degree of intimacy, while at the same time being the most challenging interpersonal relationship. Of particular importance for the quality of an intimate relationship is the ability to properly communicate: ie. in a clear and empathic way. Proper communication is a means to achieve sexual compatibility, fulfil family responsibilities and manage conflict resolution. The quality of communication between partners in a close relationship is determined by many different factors. Harwas-Napierała [1] divides them into

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two basic groups: individual and external ones. Among external conditions, the key role is attributed to social and family factors, especially one's parents, as they constitute their initial source of interpersonal experience. Individual conditions of communication in close relationships include the level of one's individual development (intellectual, emotional and social – moral), which in adults is reflected in the achieved level of personal maturity. A special role among this group of factors is attributed to one's self-image (including their self-esteem), which is associated both with their communication style and the way they resolve conflicts when those occur. Self-esteem underlies all human relationships and is one of the fundamental conditions that ensure proper communication [2]. Other authors [3] highlight the importance of self-awareness, intimacy, empathy and the ability to discover oneself as factors influencing how one forms verbal messages. Intimacy involves a certain degree of self disclosure, trust and discretion. Increasing knowledge about the partner's attitudes, values and needs implies growing intimacy [4]. Other individual factors that affect communication are the level of satisfaction of one's needs, their mood and well-being. While analyzing conversational styles in terms of individual differences, it is impossible to overlook gender [5]. The multiplicity of factors determining quality of communication, and thus, affecting the quality of intimate relationships and the complexity of the tasks faced by partners means that not all couples are able to constructively solve problems in their relationships.

Given that the quality of married life can be a source of great satisfaction in life or lead to many crises which cause negative psychological consequences, it is extremely important to seek various forms of assistance in developing communication skills. One promising area that can facilitate working on a relationship turns out to be Argentine tango. Few publications and research on the psychological significance of the dance show that its practice can, among others, have a positive impact on one's self-esteem and self-worth, their level of openness, ability to recognize and express emotions or set boundaries [6]. Dancing makes the contact with the other person acquire a multidimensional character. The nonverbal channel allows transmission of

information in a symbolic dimension and thus expression of a wide range of emotions and experiences, and requires great attention to the partner, which may create a sense of unity, togetherness. It enables experiencing oneself and the other person in a new and more profound way, initially during the dance, and later by applying the acquired and developed skills in everyday life. Of particular importance for this paper is the assumption that as a dance reflecting a relationship, Argentine tango can be a tool for learning and understanding how a person relates to others. The emphasis is not on mastering the steps, but rather on creating bonds and expressing emotions. Thus even more important than the very dance technique is the connection and mutual understanding between partners [7]. Physical closeness between the two partners translates into intimate contact in non-verbal communication. The proximity of the upper parts of the body causes a sense of unity, where both partners' breathing becomes synchronised, heartbeat of the other person perceptible. The embrace can be delicate, possessive and protective at the same time. It offers strong social support, brings back memories of childhood, can satisfy emotional desires. A meeting of this kind often offers information which would not be obtainable in any other social situation [6].

In many communities, dance, in its broad sense, is an act of founding social order, defining the roles of women and men in particular [8]. In its very principle, Argentine tango is a meeting of femininity with masculinity. The foundations of this style, as well as cultural stereotypes, clearly separate the roles of the dancers. The man is the one who leads, the woman the one who follows. Argentine tango is, however, not a fight, but rather complementing each other. The male partner does not manifest his strength, but focuses on reading his partner's needs, and being understood by her [9]. It may, therefore, be a way of overcoming certain limitations within one's own gender, and a search for experience one yearns for, which is missing from everyday life [10]. A variable inseparably linked to the cultural stereotype of masculinity and femininity, functioning in a given society is the concept of psychological gender [11]. A look at Argentine tango in terms of this no-

tion can further expand psychological research on the phenomenon of this dance.

In view of the referenced data, the aim of this study was to evaluate communicative behaviors in close relationships of persons who dance Argentine tango and compare them with communicative behaviors in close relationships of persons undertaking no such dance activity. In this study we also formulated specific objectives to assess inter-group differences in their level of support, engagement in communication, the tendency to devalue oneself and the partner, as well as to determine our subjects' psychological gender and evaluate the differences between the two groups in that respect.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study sample

The sample consisted of 78 persons, currently in a formal (n=57) or informal (n=21) relationship – 41 women and 37 men. Their mean age was 44.19 years, its range varied from 21 to 66 years. The mean length of the relationship was 14.41 years, ranging from 1 year to 39 years.

The subjects were divided into two groups, the characteristics of which are described below.

The investigated group consisted of 39 persons who practised Argentine tango and remained in a close relationship – either a formal (26 persons) or informal one (13 persons). In this group there were 21 women and 18 men. Their mean age was 43.18 years, and the age ranged from 21 to 64 years. The mean length of the relationship was 12.25 years and ranged from 1 year to 39 years. 33 persons had higher education, and 6 secondary education.

The control group consisted of 39 persons in a formal (n=31) or informal relationship (n=8), who did not have the experience of dancing Argentine tango. The group included 20 women and 19 men. Their mean age was 45.20 years, ranging from 26 to 66 years. The mean length of the relationship was 16.56 years and it ranged from 3 to 37 years. 27 people had higher education, and 12 secondary education.

MATERIALS

To achieve our research aims we used the following research tools: Communication in Marriage and Partner Relationship Questionnaire [3], Psychological Gender Inventory [11], and a self-designed demographic survey to collect basic sociometric data and information on the subjects' dancing activity.

The procedure

The study was conducted in the provinces of West Pomerania, Lesser Poland and Greater Poland. The volunteers were selected randomly, during the Sixth International Festival of Argentine Tango „Tiempo Para Tango” and accompanying milongas, as well as through teachers conducting classes and workshops in tango dance schools and other persons associated with the tango environment.

In order to create the control group, we sought couples who did not have the experience of dancing tango. Their selection proceeded at random, at different workplaces.

All respondents were assured of anonymity and strictly scientific nature of the research and informed consent was obtained. The subjects did not receive any remuneration for their participation in the study.

All data collected during the study were analyzed with the use of SPSS v.20.0 statistical package. In order to assess the differences in communicative behaviors between the groups we used the method of comparing two independent groups. Both groups consisted of an equal number of persons, and their result distributions were similar to normal, hence we applied the parametric Student t test. To assess the difference in the occurrence of different types of psychological gender, we used the chi-square method.

RESULTS

Data analyses on the overall quality of communication in close relationships show that in both comparisons (assessment of one's own vs partner's behavior) there were significant inter-group differences (Table 1). Own communication skills were better assessed by the subjects

who dance Argentine tango ($p = 0.042$; $p < 0.05$). They scored a mean of 121 raw points in the measurement of the overall quality of communication, while in the control group the mean score was 6 points lower. Differences in assessment of partner's communicative behaviors were some-

what greater ($p = 0.001$; $p < 0.01$). The dancers scored an average of 119 raw points, while the controls scored 13 points less. Also, the analysis of minimum and maximum scores in both groups indicates higher scores among persons who dance Argentine tango.

Table 1. General quality of communication in close relationships in the study groups

	Tango	N	Mean score	SD	Min score	Max score	p value
Self-evaluation	YES	39	121.3590	11.58603	101.00	143.00	0.042
	NO	39	115.4615	13.48458	84.00	137.00	
Evaluation of partner's behaviour	YES	39	119.4359	16.27202	75.00	146.00	0.001
	NO	39	106.3333	17.29821	67.00	134.00	

Source: own research

We observed significant differences in how our subjects assessed their partners' support ($p = 0.036$; $p < 0.05$). The dancers assessed its level at an average of 41 raw points, while the controls – at an average of 3 points less. As regards the assessment of own support towards the partner, the observed difference was at

a statistical tendency level ($p = 0.098$; $p < 0.1$). The dancers were slightly more willing to provide support: they achieved an average of 2 points more than the controls. In addition, their minimum score was 9 points higher than in the control group. All differences are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Level of support in a close relationship in the study groups

	Tango	N	Mean score	SD	Min score	Max score	p value
Self-evaluation	YES	39	42.8205	4.50071	31.00	50.00	0.098
	NO	39	40.7436	6.30254	22.00	49.00	
Evaluation of partner's behaviour	YES	39	41.1026	6.52443	27.00	50.00	0.036
	NO	39	37.8974	6.69955	21.00	50.00	

Source: own research

Significant differences ($p = 0.007$; $p < 0.01$) occurred with respect to assessment of partner's engagement in communication. The dancers' mean score was 32 points, and the controls scored 4 points less, with the highest score being 7 points higher in the dancing group. Differences at the level of statistical tendency ($p = 0.066$; $p < 0.01$)

were observed in the evaluation of own engagement in communication. The controls achieved an average of 2 points less than the dancers, and their lowest score was as many as 6 points lower than the minimum score in the group of persons dancing Argentine tango. A detailed score distribution is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Level of engagement in communication in the study groups

	Tango	N	Mean score	SD	Min score	Max score	p value
Self-evaluation	YES	39	33.9231	4.98622	26.00	45.00	0.066
	NO	39	31.6923	5.55430	20.00	43.00	
Evaluation of partner's behaviour	YES	39	32.0256	6.66684	15.00	43.00	0.007
	NO	39	28.2308	5.40692	16.00	36.00	

Source: own research

In the case of the tendency to diminish partner's worth, significant differences were observed with respect to one measure. Compared to the control group, the dancers clearly assessed their partners as less prone to depreciate them.

They reached an average score of 20 points, while the controls scored 6 points higher. Also, the disparity in maximum scores indicates a greater tendency to diminish partner's worth among respondents in the control group (Table 4).

Table 4. Depreciation tendency in the study groups

	Tango	N	Mean score	SD	Min score	Max score	p value
Self-evaluation	YES	39	21.3846	5.66901	13.00	33.00	0.222
	NO	39	22.9744	5.74221	13.00	39.00	
Evaluation of partner's behaviour	YES	39	19.6154	5.77023	11.00	33.00	0.000
	NO	39	25.7949	8.27545	13.00	43.00	

Source: own research

Data presented in Table 5 show that there were no significant differences in the occurrence of different types of psychological gender between the two groups ($p = 0.635$; $p > 0.05$). Among the dancers, androgynous type of psychological gender (36%) was slightly more frequent than sex-typed variant (33%), the third largest group (18%) were

undifferentiated subjects, and the remaining 13% had cross-sex-typed psychological gender. The control group was dominated by sex-typed persons (41%), second largest group consisted of androgynous subjects (36%), 16% of controls had undifferentiated psychological gender and 5% cross-sex-typed psychological gender.

Table 5. Types of psychological gender in the study groups

		Type of psychological gender				p value
		Sex-typed persons	Androgynous persons	Undifferentiated persons	Cross-sex-typed persons	
TANGO	YES	13	14	7	5	0.635
	NO	16	15	6	2	
N		29	29	13	7	

Source: own research

DISCUSSION

Our analyses show that the hypotheses concerning the relationship of practising tango and the quality of communication in a close relationship are predominantly accurate. The dancers evaluate their partner's contribution to communication significantly better – especially their support and commitment, and consider them less prone to diminish their worth. Argentine tango practitioners' overall assessment of the quality of communication is also significantly higher – both when it comes to their own behavior, and the behavior of their partners.

To interpret these results, it is necessary to consider them on several levels. Starting from the most superficial one, the quality of communication depends on common interests, passions, spending time on a shared activity. Most of our subjects indeed declare that they dance Argentine tango with their life partners. Ryś [2] sees common interests as a chance to overcome difficulties in the development of love. According to the author, they help avoid selfishness and lead to rekindling the relationship, thus becoming a source of energy. If partners make conscious effort to transform and enrich their relationship, work on accepting their partner, if

they learn to empathize and assume different points of view looking at emerging problems, then it is possible to talk about the development of mature love – based on mature communication. A good field to strengthen the relationship turns out to be Argentine tango. It broadens the scope of the planes on which partners contact each other in conversation and action, it can become a stepping stone from the usual everyday work and family life, as well as bring partners closer to each other through participation in the same tasks. Creative cooperation, experiencing joy and satisfaction from working together builds bonds stronger than satisfying one's individual needs or cultivating individual values [12]. As the findings of the demographic survey suggest, a large number of respondents practise at least once a week, up to even several times a week. It involves frequently going out to either dance lessons or milongas, and consequently, caring for physical appearance, which constitutes a part of tango etiquette. It can be assumed that this positively affects the perceived mutual physical attraction, which has a significant impact on the quality of the relationship [12]. Argentine tango, apart from being mainly a pastime, also allows many people to achieve intimacy with another person, and thus constitutes the answer to their reported needs. Breaking the routine of everyday life and creating an atmosphere of shared closeness are among the most important components of commitment to communication in a close relationship [3].

Effective communication with one's partner requires an adequate level of intellectual, personality, emotional, psychosexual, and also social development. Social maturity manifests itself in the shape of inner openness to the needs of other people. Such ability is essential for the proper functioning of communication in an intimate relationship. Being concentrated majorly on themselves, socially immature persons are primarily focused on taking. They treat others as tools they use to meet their own needs [2]. Argentine tango, apart from providing an opportunity to focus on the relationship, encourages its practitioners to participate in the life of a wider community, in which they can experience a sense of camaraderie, deeper friendship, the joy of being together and sharing a common passion with other people. It also forces them to

abide by certain rules and principles. Milonga participants have the opportunity to move together – sharing the same time and space, which contributes to their identification with a social group. The ability to move with other people is a social skill necessary to communicate with them. Developing this skill increases self-expression, strengthens contact with others and promotes group cohesion [13], which translates into communication quality in a close partner relationship. Frequent meetings with other people during tango lessons, workshops or milongas can also protect a close relationship against formation of too rigid boundaries. Partners in an intimate relationship should be guarded from interference by outside influences, and the boundary should be clear, but also flexible at the same time. A situation where partners are limited to each other's company only may be detrimental for the relationship and communication [14].

A more profound analysis allows to perceive Argentine tango in terms of a relationship building tool, a language partners use to express themselves with, or a way of introducing changes to their relationship. Dance and movement create a language that allows the manifestation of a wide range of emotions and experiences. Through movement, tangueros build their own lexicon, which enables a less inhibited emotional and symbolic expression. The channel that is activated between dance partners is non-verbal and thus contact with the other person becomes multidimensional. Creative space formed between a man and a woman dancing tango can be a rich source of communication. Messages that appear in this particular relationship must be received, reflected, maintained and reciprocated in an appropriate way. Dance creates a sense of community, togetherness, the partners are more attentive to each other. By sharing emotions through movement, they have a chance to feel that they are not isolated in their experience [13]. Such empathy involving mainly emotional sphere, is a fundamental plane of personal contact in an intimate relationship [2]. These experiences can later translate into everyday life, in which the partners continue to see their loved one as a source of support with whom they can share their feelings and emotions, both positive and negative. Support is also understood as showing respect to one's partner, appreciating

their efforts, or expressing interest in their needs [3]. Through co-creating movement and dancing, partners can feel that their contribution is important and appreciated, that it is worthwhile to rely on the other person's support, and sometimes it is pleasant to take the initiative. It can be assumed that Argentine tango provides space for partners to try out new roles and behaviors in order to then be able to use them in everyday life. In addition, thanks to a range of new experiences, it promotes personal growth.

Moving on to the deepest level of analysis, we could try to explain our results with reference to mirror neurons, a theory coined at the turn of the 21st century. According to the theory, it is enough to look at actions, movement or attitude of a person to experience a large part of feelings and emotions that we could experience while performing the same actions. Research suggests that the same neurons that are active in the author of a movement are activated in its witness. This helps to better understand the phenomenon of empathy and its kinesthetic dimension. It can therefore be assumed that by synchronizing movement with a partner a person can have a much greater access to their both conscious and subconscious psychophysical processes [15]. In the typical Argentine tango embrace, the proximity of the upper parts of the body causes a sense of physical unity, where both partners' breathing becomes synchronised, heartbeat of the other person perceptible. For example, if while dancing one person gradually but noticeably slows down their breathing or relaxes their muscle tension, the other person may react in the same way. According to [15], such tuning in within muscle tension strengthens the sense of being understood. Sharing these experiences can help establish deep emotional bonds between partners, it requires the development of certain skills, such as perception, sensitivity, benevolent interest in the other person, which subsequently find its reflection in communication in a close relationship. It must be remembered that human being is not able to really get to know the other person without interest in their world, their perception of reality, without the knowledge of their experiences and feelings, and for any emotions to be expressed there is a need for an authentic relationship with another person [16].

Our results also show that persons dancing Argentine tango are significantly more lenient in their assessment of their partner's behaviour than the control group. This tendency is particularly evident on the dimension of depreciation. According to Rys [2], a more understanding attitude toward one's spouse than towards oneself promotes the formation of bonds in an intimate relationship and may be associated with the ability to empathize with the partner's various mental states, especially when they experience trouble, difficulties or problems. This can therefore confirm the aforementioned importance of Argentine tango in shaping and developing empathetic attitude towards a loved one.

Among both Argentine tango dancers and non-dancers, psychological gender distribution is comparable and demonstrates that the majority are of sex-typed and androgynous psychological gender, with the rarest occurrence of cross-sex-typed psychological gender. This suggests that despite the clearly outlined roles in Argentine tango, it is not popular only among men and women who exhibit mental characteristics corresponding to their biological sex. In the study group there are many persons whose gender scheme does not determine their concept of the self (androgynous and undifferentiated). Argentine tango thus creates space for full gender identification, but also enables freedom from its confines or simultaneous identification with the opposite gender. In the group of tango dancers there are slightly more cross-sex-typed persons (masculine women, feminine men) than in the control group. This may suggest that they feel a certain form of constraint within their own sex and through dancing they are looking for something they do not experience in everyday life. Women who are professionally fulfilled, strong, full of energy, can sometimes long for weakness, submission, lack of responsibility. Men, on the other hand, can develop determination, confidence, decisiveness. Argentine tango seems to allow safe conditions for fulfilment of such needs.

Our results seem to be of importance for persons already dancing Argentine tango, who may look at their partner relationship from a different, wider perspective, and analyze thus awakened feelings and emotions in a more reflective way. However, our findings may also be of in-

terest for professionals in their therapeutic practice with couples, both those who make use of elements of dance/movement therapy, as well as those not working in this area. Argentine tango lessons, recommended at a proper point of psychotherapy can prove effective homework for couples who struggle with communication problems and a method for breaking routine in their relationship. Therapist's knowledge of the nature of Argentine tango and theoretical assumptions regarding its psychological use can make them help their clients better understand the source of any feelings or sensations emerging during the dance. The results also indicate the legitimacy of continued, careful research on psychological aspects of Argentine tango and its positive impact on human functioning in various aspects of life.

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