

The Psychotherapeutic Potential of Tango Dancing. A Person-Centered Perspective

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This paper provides an autoethnographic exploration of the psychotherapeutic potential of Argentine tango dancing through a person-centered perspective. It delves into how tango facilitates personal growth, emotional awareness, and resilience by acting as a dynamic form of emotional and physical expression. The research examines the intricate communication dynamics inherent in the dance, highlighting tango's unique ability to transcend verbal exchanges and create profound emotional connections. Tango demands mutual empathy, attunement, and responsiveness between dance partners, fostering therapeutic experiences akin to deep, trusting friendships. Additionally, it is argued that tango requires a level of emotional dedication comparable to spiritual practices, which makes it a powerful medium for continual personal and relational development. The findings suggest that the psychotherapeutic benefits of tango stem not only from its relational aspects but also from the individual's willingness to engage deeply with the emotions it elicits. The research concludes that tango can be a profound conduit for personal transformation, provided that the dancer is open to its emotional and interpersonal challenges.

Keywords: Argentine tango; autoethnography; person-centered therapy; therapeutic dance;

Introduction

Argentine tango is a couple's dance known for its intimate posture and complex footwork. Partners fluidly alternate their movements in response to the music and each other's cues. This dance requires clear roles of leading and following, traditionally assigned to males and females respectively. However, tango originally involved men dancing with other men, and more recently, the emergence of queer tango has further evolved the dance. In queer tango, traditional gender roles are not prescribed, allowing dancers to freely switch between leading and following regardless of their gender. At tango socials, or 'milongas,' dancers partake in an afternoon or an

evening of dance. Here, ‘tandas’—sets of three to four songs of similar rhythm and style—are played, between which dancers typically change partners.

When I started this research project I had been learning and dancing tango regularly for 5 years. From the first days of my tango journey, I would have intense emotional experiences. These included painful feelings such as frustration, fear of rejection, envy, jealousy, self-consciousness, guilt, shame, and anger, as well as pleasurable ones such as playfulness, joy, creativity, confidence, eroticism, and profound connection with self and others.

For most of my adult life I have been committed to ongoing personal development—in part as an attempt to heal from the psychological difficulties related to childhood adversity, in part to develop and maintain my competence as a psychotherapist, in part because I value the benefits of the reflective way of being. I have been in individual psychotherapy continuously for more than 20 years. I have been in long-term couples therapy and group therapy. I got professional qualifications in psychology, clinical psychology, psychotherapy, group facilitation, clinical supervision, and couples therapy, all with a strong emphasis on personal development through intensive psychological work. I have been attending personal development workshops, groups and retreats that utilise the practice of inquiry and reflexivity. I often use free writing as personal reflective practice. Yet tango seems to be continuously offering me opportunities for what I consider to be profound healing and development, both personally and relationally. Tango brings up material that would otherwise stay out of or on the edge of my awareness. This made me want to assess in a rigorous way the psychotherapeutic potential of tango dancing, to give it the acknowledgment it deserves and to explore potential applications. The following questions fuelled my inquiry:

- Does tango dancing have psychotherapeutic potential? If so, is tango dancing psychotherapeutic in itself, or only as an adjunct to psychotherapy?
- What is it about tango dancing that makes it psychotherapeutic?
- What conditions hinder or facilitate the psychotherapeutic potential of tango dancing?

Literature Review

In this section I present my assumptions and theoretical hypotheses about tango's psychotherapeutic potential. My objective is to acknowledge how my frame of reference as a tango dancer who is also a person-centered psychotherapist might influence my perception and interpretation of the data.

Personal Assumptions and Theoretical Orientation

Upon starting this inquiry, I was already hypothesizing about the psychotherapeutic potential of tango dancing. One assumption is that tango can offer a possibility for creative expression, which can be therapeutic. According to Carl Rogers's daughter, Natalie, who developed Person-Centered Expressive Arts Therapy (Rogers et al, 2012, p. 43), 'The expressive arts are profound in helping people become aware of all their feelings and particularly help them accept their dark or shadow side.' Rogers himself (1961, p. 293) defines the creative process as 'the emergence in action of a novel relational product, growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, people, or circumstances of his life on the other'.

He also identifies external and inner conditions that foster creative expression. The external conditions for creativity (Rogers, 1961, pp. 299-301) are:

- psychological safety (established by accepting the individual as of unconditional worth, by providing a climate in which external evaluation is absent, and by understanding empathically)
- psychological freedom and permissiveness of symbolic expression
- offering stimulating and challenging experiences (added by Natalie Rogers)

The inner conditions for creativity (Rogers, 1961, pp. 296-297) are:

- openness to experience (being aware of this existential moment as it is)
- an internal locus of evaluation (the value of their product is, for the creative person, established not by the praise or criticism of others, but by themselves)
- an ability to toy or play with elements and concepts

In tango the inner conditions depend on the dancer. The external conditions depend on the venue (room size, dancefloor condition, music, temperature, sound quality, decor), the dance partner and any other dancing or observing people present in the event. Perhaps the main way of creating a psychologically safe environment in milongas is the cabeceo, a traditional invitation method for asking someone to dance, emphasizing subtlety and respect. Dancers make eye contact to invite a partner to dance; a nod or gesture from the leader to the follower signals the invitation. If the follower accepts with a nod or smile, they meet on the dance floor; otherwise, they can politely decline by avoiding eye contact or subtly shaking their head. This non-verbal communication respects personal choice, minimizes public rejection, and maintains the social atmosphere of the milonga, highlighting mutual consent.

Another assumption is that tango offers dancers the possibility of co-creating a relational climate like that of an effective psychotherapeutic relationship. Sometimes, when I dance, my experience resonates with Rogers' (1959) six conditions of the therapeutic relationship:

- I connect with my immediate experience and allow it to be expressed through my dancing (congruence), which includes the vulnerability (incongruence) that arises when intimately connecting (contact) with another.
- I stay open to receiving and understanding what my partner communicates through her dancing (empathy).
- I try not to judge my partner's skill level, choices, or suggestions. Instead, I receive them in an accepting, caring way (unconditional positive regard).
- My partner receives these qualities from me (perception) and I from her.

This is in line with Kimmel (2009), who suggests that

the tango dancer's knowledge includes 'intersubjectivity skills for receptivity, partner sensing, and maintaining contact, which subsumes skills for modulating somatic moods to make oneself open to one's partner' (p. 80) and that 'tango interaction is fully co-regulative, embodied coupling, requiring an unbroken loop of information exchange and genuinely reciprocal causation.' (p. 115)

Given that Rogers' conditions are formulated with reference to the 'client' and 'therapist' positions, the question arises on how these positions play out in tango. Are the roles switched continuously during a dance, for example, or do both dancers adopt the 'therapist' position in relation to their partner? (C. Willig, personal communication, February 2, 2024). Murphy, Cramer & Joseph (2012) suggest that the therapeutic conditions of empathy, unconditional

positive regard, and congruence are mutually created and experienced within the therapeutic relationship by both therapist and client. Similarly, the bidirectional nature of the tango conversation has been emphasised by Brandt (2015) who points out that, like a verbal dialogue, it demands that each dancer listens and responds to the other's movements, creating a fluid and continuous negotiation that integrates physicality and emotions, thereby mirroring the complexities of interpersonal communication and interaction.

Kimmel (2009) points out that

A continuous, reflexive awareness is required from both roles [...] Good leaders sense whether their partner is sufficiently aware of their lead so that they can, if needed, make it clearer, or re-establish communication in cases of temporary breakdown. Good followers sense whether their partner receives enough feedback and whether their own actions correspond to the invitations they receive. (p. 83)

Literature Supporting the Therapeutic Potential of Tango

Several psychiatrists, psychologists and psychotherapists have proposed theoretical connections between tango dancing and various psychotherapeutic approaches, such as art therapy (D' Errico et al, 2014), psychoanalysis (Farber, 2021; Sowchek, 2002) and gestalt therapy (Zabuta & Kologrivova, 2021), and have explored how tango can be integrated into psychotherapy.

Zabuta & Kologrivova (2021) offer an analogy that likens the roles of tango dancers to that of a psychotherapist, illuminating the shifting therapeutic focus where the therapist, like a tango dancer, remains attuned and responsive to the client's needs, balancing the roles of support and

leadership based on the client's energy and consent, thereby fostering a therapeutic environment of safety, grace, and effective communication.

D' Errico et al (2014) claim that

tango brings out the true essence of the individuals, it removes every mask and stops the lies you tell yourself, forcing the contact with yourself [...] tango-therapy aims at offering a space of expression, knowledge and development of The Self, and this is possible because through the movement, the body speaks and tells about its fears, anger, sadness, ambition, dreams (p. 71).

Tateo (2014) found that by reflecting on their experiences, tango dancers integrate the cultural and community aspects of the dance into their self-concept. He claims that tango allows for the exploration of different facets of one's identity, fostering a reflective process that involves both adhering to and personally interpreting cultural norms. Hess (1997) expresses his conviction that couple dancing can contribute to personality development.

Psychological Healing Outside Psychotherapy

The idea that people can heal and grow outside of a psychotherapeutic relationship is not new and Rogers (1957) himself had acknowledged this:

It is not stated that psychotherapy is a special kind of relationship, different in kind from all others which occur in everyday life. It will be evident instead that for brief moments, at least, many good friendships fulfil the six conditions. Usually this is only momentarily, however, and then empathy falters, the positive regard becomes conditional, or the

congruence of the “therapist” friend becomes overlaid by some degree of facade or defensiveness. Thus, the therapeutic relationship is seen as a heightening of the constructive qualities which often exist in part in other relationships, and an extension through time of qualities which in other relationships tend at best to be momentary. (p. 100)

Farber’s (2021) suggestion that tango originated in Argentina as a therapeutic response to conditions of grief, making it a crucial therapy for a population that had been displaced, marginalized, and exploited, is aligned with Rogers’s view of healing outside of a traditionally defined psychotherapeutic relationship. Tudor and Worrall (2006) take this one step further by arguing that although many people experience moments of change within the immediacy of a relationship, there seems no reason why those moments should necessarily occur only in relationship and they point to a chapter published after Rogers’ death, in which Rogers and Sanford (1984) give an example of therapeutic growth precipitated in a man as he is reading, in a prison cell, on his own.

Methodology

At the first stage of the research, I decided to conduct an autoethnography to use my own experience as a dedicated tango dancer to explore the questions identified at the end of the introduction to this paper. Tango is not just a dance but a culture, and therefore, it requires a unique approach to understand its therapeutic potential fully. Autoethnography allows for a deep understanding of personal experiences and cultural analysis. It provides insider access to contexts which cultural outsiders and other research methods could never provide (Adams et al, 2021). I collected data through self-observation of and reflection on personal experiences that

felt relevant to the questions. As a person-centered psychotherapist, I decided to assess the psychotherapeutic impact of tango dancing on myself through a person-centered perspective. I believe person-centered therapy and autoethnography combine particularly well, as they are not only clinical and research methods respectively, but also ways of being in the world that are rooted in the practice of reflexivity (Rogers, 1980; Adams et al, 2021). They are also epistemologically aligned, especially regarding valuing subjective experience as a source of knowing.

An iterative process of reflexive inquiry has been central in this study. Following the guidelines suggested by Poulos (2021), the process commenced with engaging participant observation, where I immersed myself fully in the practice and culture of tango dancing. I actively participated while observing my reactions, interactions, and the social dynamics within the tango community. Attending to sense data and emotions allowed me to capture and document the raw, unfiltered emotional and sensory experiences encountered during private tango lessons, workshops, and social dances. I would write in my research journal straight after the experience, but also at times as part of my journaling practice whenever I felt the need to get clarity about a feeling.

The formulation of research questions arose organically from this immersive engagement, guided by the poignant moments of emotional and interpersonal resonance experienced on the dance floor-and beyond. Conducting exploratory research entailed a dive into existing literature and theoretical frameworks related to tango, psychotherapy, and autoethnography, which provided a scholarly context for my personal experiences. Searching for stories, conversations, and artifacts

involved collecting and reflecting upon the narratives shared within the tango community, alongside personal diary entries and reflective notes that captured significant moments of learning, conflict, and insight.

Mining memories was an essential step that involved revisiting past experiences, both within and outside of tango, to understand their impact on my current engagement with the dance. This introspective journey was not linear but rather a recursive process of reflecting, writing, editing, and rewriting. Writing itself became a method of inquiry, serving as a reflective prism through which my experiences, thoughts, and emotions were examined, deconstructed, and reassembled. This approach aligns with established practices in autoethnographic research, as detailed by Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), who describe writing as a method of inquiry that facilitates deep reflection and insight. This iterative process of writing and reflection enabled me to identify emergent themes that captured the essence of tango's psychotherapeutic potential, such as emotional awareness, interpersonal connection, and the transformative power of embodied expression. Through engaging in systematic reflexive introspection, I continually interrogated my assumptions and preconceptions, allowing for a nuanced and critically informed analysis of the data.

I chose to incorporate diary entries into the paper, including a response from my girlfriend who is also my regular dance partner, as a means of grounding the study's insights in experiences not solely my own. The decision to utilize these diary entries, particularly the feedback and reflections from a dance partner, is fundamentally about capturing the intersubjective nature of tango dancing—its capacity to engender mutual empathy, communication, and emotional

connection. I believe that such entries provide a vivid illustration of the relational dynamics at play, enriching the study with a level of interpersonal depth by highlighting how tango acts as a conduit for relational and emotional development. I hope that this inclusion not only substantiates the personal narratives through corroborative perspectives but also ensures that the findings presented are rooted in a more rounded and contextually rich understanding of the dance's impact on individuals and their relationships.

To address ethical issues related to the potential identifiability of my girlfriend and dance partner, I obtained written consent from her for including her diary entry in the research project and any publications. Her participation has also been approved by my university's ethics committee.

From a person-centered perspective, psychotherapeutic outcomes mean constructive personality change (Rogers, 1957). According to Tudor & Worrall (2006, p. 219) therapy outcomes are process outcomes, meaning that effective therapy is 'in itself, one of the outcomes of an experience of effective therapy.' Rogers and Sanford (1984) describe this as

the client's reciprocation of the therapist's attitudes. As he (sic) finds someone listening to him with consistent acceptance while he expresses his thoughts and feelings, the client, little by little, becomes increasingly able to listen to communications within himself... Finally, as the client is able to listen to more of himself, he moves toward greater congruence, toward expressing more of himself more openly. He is, at last, free to change and grow in the directions that are natural to the maturing human organism.(p. 1381)

Rogers (1959, pp. 218-219) lists fifteen different aspects of the outcome of a successful therapeutic experience and describes the process of therapeutic change as

moving away from fixity, remoteness from feelings and experience, rigidity of self-concept, remoteness from people, impersonality of functioning (unwillingness to communicate self, feelings and personal meanings not recognized nor owned, close and communicative relationships are construed as dangerous, problems are not recognized or perceived, no desire to change) and toward fluidity, changingness, immediacy of feelings and experience, acceptance of feelings and experience, tentativeness of constructs, discovery of a changing self in one's changing experience, realness and closeness of relationships, a unity and integration of functioning (1961, p. 64).

He defines fluidity as 'new experiencing with immediacy' in which the person 'has changed, but what seems most significant, he has become an integrated process of changingness' (Rogers, 1961, p. 141). Tudor & Worrall (2006) suggest that the experience of creativity and the experience of personal power (which they equate with the notion of autonomy, and with a client's development or reclaiming of an internal locus of evaluation) are also both process characteristics as well as outcomes of successful person-centered therapy (ie therapy is both a creative process and develops creativity, it requires that the therapist does not take the client's power away and this leads to an increased experience of personal power). I used the above qualities to formulate questions that I could use to assess whether tango dancing has generated a psychotherapeutic process in me:

- Does tango dancing help me move away from fixity, remoteness from feelings and experience, rigidity of self-concept, remoteness from people, impersonality of

functioning and toward fluidity, changingness, immediacy of feelings and experience, acceptance of feelings and experience, tentativeness of constructs, discovery of a changing self in my changing experience, realness and closeness of relationships, a unity and integration of functioning?

- Does tango dancing contribute to my experience of creativity?
- Does tango dancing contribute to my experience of personal power?

The iterative reflexivity that characterized this autoethnographic inquiry allowed for a fluid exploration beyond the initial guiding questions. I used open-ended inquiry and integrated both theoretical frameworks and diverse personal experiences, which enabled the examination of unexpected themes and insights. I believe that this approach ensured that the research remained responsive to emerging data, capturing a comprehensive view of tango's psychotherapeutic effects.

Findings

My upbringing in a dysfunctional environment marked by abuse, taught me to view my needs as secondary, or even dangerous. As a result, I learned to suppress these needs, cultivating a deep-seated sense of unworthiness and chronic shame. Persistent criticism and belittlement led me to view myself as fundamentally flawed and inferior. I absorbed these negative perceptions from my abusers, resulting in a self-concept of worthlessness, incompetence, undesirability, and unlovability. At the same time I was expected to excel and 'be the best'. Consequently, I adopted achievement-oriented behaviours, driven by a need to validate my worth through accomplishments, to counteract feelings of inadequacy and a fear of failure. In my tango experience, this fear of being seen as incompetent prevented me from attending a milonga until I had over a year of dance practice. Even then and for a long period of time I would only dance

with people I knew and had danced with before during group classes. I saw the milonga as an environment ripe for triggering my fears of rejection, competition, and skill assessment.

Recognizing these patterns has been pivotal in confronting and overcoming the legacy of my upbringing, allowing me to embrace more my desires and potential. The following entry in my research diary shows that, despite having made significant progress in recognizing and managing these issues, tango continues to expose any enduring patterns in my personality. These moments help me assess my current phase in the healing journey, pinpointing unresolved issues, and identifying new paths for personal development.

Diary entry 1

The tanda ends and as I am walking off the dancefloor, I am approached by a female follower who, disregarding the code of cabeceo, stands in front of me, blocking my way to my seat. She looks me straight in the eye and says, 'you haven't danced with me for some time, shall we dance the next tanda?'. I knew I had promised myself to never dance with her again because of my negative past experiences dancing with her. I was quiet for a few moments trying to find a way to say no, but I was stunned by her catching me in the middle of the dance floor, so I said 'ok, let's do it'. I regretted it instantly, but it was too late. During the four songs we danced together, she would not follow most of what I was leading. She was unable to listen to and interpret my leads, doing her own thing, taking steps, and moving constantly, even during pauses. Again and again, I had to stay still for her to calm down and then attempt to reconnect. She threw all her weight on me which caused my whole body to ache afterwards. Also, she kept talking throughout the

dance. Not just any kind of talking (which is still bad etiquette) but judging my dancing. I was left feeling frustrated, angry, and disappointed in myself for allowing this.

This experience offered me a significant insight into my current level of ability to assert boundaries and prioritize my needs. Previously, I might not have been as in tune with my feelings as I was in this situation. I recognized my reluctance to dance with her and was conscious of the frustration, anger, and disappointment I felt during and after the dance. Despite this awareness, my initial hesitation to accept the dance was the only moment I honoured my preference to avoid dancing with her. I struggled to firmly say no or to use the polite, traditional method of ending a tanda early by thanking her after the first song. Instead, I completed the entire tanda, tolerating a dissatisfying experience, physical discomfort, and unwelcome criticism.

Tango repeatedly exposes my fears of rejection, of not being good enough, and of incompetence. It reveals my habit of exerting undue pressure on myself and my dance partner, stemming from my tendency to prioritize achievement and performance over connection and communication. An entry from my research journal describes an incident that exemplifies these insights:

Diary entry 2

During the last tanda of the evening I had felt my girlfriend Maya (pseudonym) being somehow heavy and resistant to my leads so when the music stopped, I asked her if she was feeling tired. She replied, 'not tired, injured'. This felt like a punch in the stomach. I didn't say anything until we left the venue. As we were walking towards the underground station, I asked her if there was

something I was doing during the dance that made her feel uncomfortable. She said that in the last two tandas I was over-leading, meaning pushing and pulling her into moves instead of gently indicating and inviting her to what I intended to do. She said this frustrated her particularly because she knew I could dance with much more sensitivity. I said this made sense as it had been a very long day for me. It was Monday and I had been to the gym and then worked until we met for dinner, before heading to the milonga. On Saturday night I had gone to a concert which evolved into a long night out with friends. This meant that Sunday I was recovering from the previous night's hangover and little sleep. To make it worse I had more drinks at the milonga. The combination of tiredness and alcohol had made me more impulsive and insensitive than usual. Upon hearing Maya's feedback, I set a reminder on my calendar to work on over-leading with our teacher in our next private lesson. On the journey home Maya told me she sensed I was not feeling well and asked if I would like to talk about it when we get home. I agreed to do this and tried to silently reflect on what was going on for me. I realised I had drunk more than I should have and felt regret and shame about that. I also felt hurt and upset.

I told Maya that I felt hurt by her comment and that I was angry because I felt she had used a single word to describe her experience of dancing with me as one of injury and pain instead of giving me feedback I could use to improve. I told her I also felt hurt because she is especially gentle and caring with everyone around her and I was sure she has never said such a hurtful thing to anyone else she has ever danced with. And no-one had ever said anything like that to me before either. I said I felt like not wanting to dance with her again because I don't want to injure people. Maya was apologetic and reassured me that she enjoyed dancing with me and that even in that tanda, where I was over-leading, she also had fun and got a lot of pleasure out of it. She

said she had always found it difficult to communicate her frustrations out of fear of conflict. Her fear is that if there is conflict, there is the risk of escalation where people attack and hurt each other. I asked her if I had ever attacked or hurt her after her expressing a frustration and she said no.

When Maya's discomfort necessitated a shift from tango's non-verbal connection to verbal communication, it pushed us into a realm of vulnerability, encouraging open and honest dialogue. This experience underscores tango's ability to enhance communication and deepen connection through vulnerability. The dance's physical closeness mirrored my internal state, reflecting how external stressors like tiredness, alcohol, and personal pressures were affecting my dancing. This immediate feedback prompted a deeper self-awareness. Recognizing the role of these external stressors in shaping my responsiveness on the dance floor illuminated the link between my personal well-being and our interpersonal dynamics.

Maya's reluctance to express her frustrations, fearing potential conflict, brought a common relational issue to light. Tango acted as a catalyst, drawing these dynamics into sharp relief, and providing us with a practical setting to tackle conflict avoidance. This encouraged us to adopt a more exploratory approach to handling disagreements. Our decision to work on the issue of over-leading in subsequent lessons highlighted tango's role in facilitating structured, constructive feedback and learning. This commitment reflects tango's capacity to foster a culture of continuous self-improvement and relationship strengthening.

Past abuse has impeded my ability to develop trust, complicating my efforts to establish secure attachments in relationships. I tend to view others as potential threats and myself as undeserving of relationship, which undermines my capacity to forge and sustain intimate connections, leading to a heavy reliance on self-sufficiency. Historically, this has led to behaviours like avoiding relationships, undermining them, or ending them too soon. Tango is therapeutic for me for the very reason that it can be painful. It forces me to confront my current emotional state, whether I'm dealing with fear, insecurity, or the defences I've erected to shield myself from these feelings. In the dance, the emotions, and protective barriers I've built up can come to the forefront (which can also manifest in my dancing posture being too upright and rigid), necessitating direct engagement and processing. The following example from my diary demonstrates some of these:

Diary entry 3

Maya and I started dancing our first tanda during the second song, so we danced less than two and a half songs, not a full tanda. Normally if you dance less than a tanda then at the end of it you may ask the other person if they would like to dance the next one. Especially if they are your regular dance partner, with whom you dance and practice. Especially if they have told you how painful this can be for them because of their wounding. Especially because due to a back injury, I hadn't danced for some time, and I hadn't had any lessons, so I was feeling quite rusty and self-conscious about my dancing. This happened before and I explained to her how it made me feel, the underlying trauma, and what I needed from her. Despite all that, at the end of the tanda Maya quickly walked back to her seat. And then she danced with someone else. I felt awful the whole evening and after the milonga she asked me to tell her what was wrong as she could see I was upset. I was feeling very hurt and told her that I was upset but I didn't want to talk about it

because there was no point as I had told her about this before, but it didn't seem to register with her. Eventually I told her that she did the same thing again that triggered my insecurities. I told her how I felt rejected and unwanted, thinking that she didn't want to dance with me because I was not dancing well. She said she got it, apologised, and promised to change.

The following day, after having read my diary entry above, Maya sent me an entry from her own diary:

Diary entry 4 (Maya's response)

On Sunday evening, Stathi and I attended a milonga we frequently visit, though we hadn't been in a few weeks due to his back injury. Earlier that day, I had visited a friend's flat for food and dancing, which left me somewhat tired.

Upon arriving at the milonga, Stathi and I danced the first tanda together. Afterwards, we danced with other partners. I noticed Stathi sitting alone, frowning and looking distressed, which distracted me. During the break between tandas, I sat beside him and invited him to dance again. Though the dance was enjoyable, his expression grew increasingly pained, and he soon wanted to leave.

On the way home, Stathi was visibly upset. He avoided contact, spoke sarcastically, and seemed resentful. I sensed it was something I had done, recalling our past conflicts at milongas. Eventually, he pointed out that our first dance that evening was cut short—something that had caused issues before.

Months earlier, a similar misunderstanding had occurred when we arrived at a milonga during the last song of a tanda. I had returned to my seat quickly, leaving Stathi feeling rejected. Although I explained it was standard practice to return to one's seat after a tanda, it didn't align with his expectations, adding tension to our budding relationship.

Back to the present, I realized I had repeated the same mistake without recognizing it. That evening, the brief first dance felt complete and satisfying to me, so I had automatically returned to our seats, unaware of Stathi's feelings of rejection and insecurity, especially since he hadn't danced in weeks.

Reflecting on my actions, I recognized a deeper pattern. From childhood, I had learned to limit my pleasures, a concept encapsulated by the Chinese term 'She bu de'—the reluctance to indulge fully in enjoyable experiences for fear they might not come again. This mindset, reinforced by cultural maxims like 'le ji sheng bei' (extreme happiness leads to tragedy), had permeated my approach to relationships and life, manifesting as a subconscious restraint on my happiness.

At the milonga, this manifested in how I interacted with Stathi. Each milonga became a reflection of my broader struggles with intimacy and enjoyment. Despite the connection we shared, I unwittingly guarded myself against the full emotional depth of our relationship.

Confronted with the realization of my behavior's impact on Stathi, I resolved to address these ingrained habits. By acknowledging and challenging my reluctance to embrace joy fully, I hoped

to foster a more open and responsive relationship with him, beginning with an honest dialogue about our feelings.

This experience brought to light the lack of effective communication in our relationship and the misunderstanding that stems from it. I felt neglected and unvalued when Maya returned to her seat without suggesting we continue dancing, which contradicts her actual feelings of enjoyment and satisfaction from our dancing. This discrepancy highlighted the importance of explicit communication in our relationship, especially regarding needs and expectations.

My reactions revealed my sensitivity to rejection, rooted in the wounding I experienced by my parents' neglect and abuse. My response to Maya's behaviour reflects my relationship-related anxiety, where actions perceived as rejection trigger deep-seated insecurities.

Reflecting on this experience helped Maya recognise how cultural narratives and personal upbringing influence her behaviour in the relationship, particularly around her reluctance to seek more pleasure from dancing and by extension, from the relationship. Understanding these influences led to more mindful decision-making that supports the relationship's health.

Tango has played a crucial role in enhancing congruence by providing a means for both recognizing and effectively expressing emotions. For Maya, this involved a deeper understanding of how her actions affected others, while for me, it facilitated clearer articulation of my needs and insecurities. This mutual development fostered greater empathy and strengthened our emotional bond.

The dance acts as a microcosm of our relationship, reflecting and intensifying the underlying dynamics. It offers unique opportunities to cultivate intimacy, enhance communication, and address both personal and relational challenges. Through dancing, we engage in a form of non-verbal communication that requires a heightened sensitivity to each other's movements and emotional states. Transferring these skills into our verbal interactions has enabled us to resolve misunderstandings and express our needs more directly, thereby minimizing feelings of hurt and resentment.

It is important to distinguish between the potential therapeutic benefits of tango and the tangible outcomes achieved (C. Willig, personal communication, February 2, 2024). In my experience tango facilitates healing and self-discovery, but reaching a level of mastery that unlocks these benefits extends beyond casual participation. Engaging with tango as a communicative system capable of offering therapeutic experiences demands a commitment to continuous self-improvement and reflection, a process I would compare to the rigor of spiritual disciplines. The challenge of tango lies not only in the physical domain but also in the psychological resilience it necessitates—a factor leading many to discontinue their practice. The journey to mastery in tango requires significant time, effort, and financial resources, making it a path less trodden. In my personal journey, surviving an abusive environment fostered resilience and adaptability, traits that formed a foundation of perseverance and the ability to overcome adversity. Tango, similarly, requires resilience, not merely as a prerequisite but as a quality that is honed and deepened through the practice. Tango offers me a unique arena for growth through adversity, embodying the transformative power of facing and surmounting challenges. However, in my

experience there is a difference between spiritual practices such as certain types of yoga, which I have practiced for more than two decades, and tango. Both require resilience and the commitment to tolerate discomfort in order to access the benefits, but only tango involves interpersonal challenges and adversity that need to be overcome in order to grow from the practice. This dynamic interplay between the demands of tango and the development of resilience highlights a dual pathway: as I invest in mastering tango, I simultaneously cultivate resilience and adaptability, essential qualities for navigating the complexities of both the dance and life itself. Tango thus serves as both a mirror and a catalyst for my personal growth, emphasizing that mastery is not solely about the physicality of dance but encompasses a profound journey of emotional and psychological development.

Discussion

The findings suggest that tango dancing indeed has psychotherapeutic potential. Tango facilitates emotional expression, introspection, and interpersonal connection, which are core aspects of psychotherapeutic processes. The non-verbal communication inherent in tango dancing creates a unique space for participants to explore and express their emotional states. For instance, my experiences detailed in Diary Entry 2 illustrate how tango can surface deep-seated emotions and foster constructive personality change. Therefore, tango dancing can be psychotherapeutic in itself, though its effects can be enhanced when used as an adjunct to traditional psychotherapy, providing a holistic approach to emotional and relational development.

Tango dancing is psychotherapeutic due to its embodied nature, which demands presence, attunement, and responsiveness. The dance involves close physical proximity and coordinated

movements, requiring partners to be acutely aware of each other's cues and emotions. This can foster empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard, akin to the conditions of a therapeutic relationship as defined by Rogers. For example, in Diary Entry 2, when Maya expressed feeling injured due to my over-leading, it highlighted the importance of empathy and congruence. My acceptance of her discomfort, my empathy towards her feelings, and my reflection on my actions, combined with Maya's receptiveness, led to a deeper understanding and resolution. Additionally, Diary Entry 3 showcases the importance of unconditional positive regard, as Maya's later reflection showed her effort to understand and accept my feelings despite the initial conflict. These elements of tango facilitate a deeper connection with oneself and others, promoting emotional and psychological growth. The iterative process of leading and following in tango mirrors the dynamics of therapeutic relationships, making it a powerful medium for exploring and enhancing relational and emotional competencies.

The conditions that facilitate the psychotherapeutic potential of tango dancing include psychological safety, openness to experience, and the ability to engage in reflective practice. For example, the tradition of cabeceo in milongas helps create a respectful and consensual environment, enhancing psychological safety. However, tango also presents significant challenges, particularly for those who are less self-aware or less able to process and express their experiences. My own experiences highlight the importance of self-awareness in navigating the emotional landscape of tango. Situations where psychological safety was compromised, such as in Diary Entry 1, underscore the challenges faced by dancers who may struggle with assertiveness or boundary-setting. For less self-aware dancers, these situations might lead to frustration or blame towards their partners, rather than self-reflection and growth. Additionally,

dancing with a partner who is not my life partner, as shown in Diary Entry 1, emphasizes the role of individual sensitivity and understanding in deriving psychotherapeutic benefits from tango. The dance acts as a catalyst for personal insights, but the therapeutic potential is significantly influenced by the dancer's ability to engage reflectively with the experiences it elicits.

My experience of learning tango has been profoundly influenced by my choice of a tango teacher who emphasizes the psychological dimensions of the dance. During our ongoing private lessons, my teacher consistently draws parallels between tango and personal experience, much like a therapist would. He frequently brings my attention back to the importance of psychological presence during both dancing and learning. This emphasis on being present and recognizing how my personality patterns arise during dancing is very analogous to the therapeutic relationship, where constant awareness and reflection on one's immediate experience are key.

In this paper, the exploration of the psychotherapeutic aspects of tango is specifically concentrated on the themes of personal power and relational growth.¹ Regarding personal power, engaging in tango has empowered me to confront and navigate my vulnerabilities. This process has taught me to articulate my boundaries better, express my needs and desires more clearly, and navigate my emotional landscape with enhanced skill. Regarding relational growth, tango acts as a microcosm of life itself, a space where personal and relational dynamics and

¹ This focus is due to the constraints of space in this format, which necessitates a selective examination of these pivotal areas. While these themes are essential for understanding the transformative potential of tango, they represent only a subset of the broader psychotherapeutic benefits that this dance form can offer. The comprehensive spectrum of tango's psychotherapeutic dimensions, supported by extensive evidence, will be thoroughly addressed in the PhD thesis from which this paper is derived. This forthcoming thesis will elaborate on the preliminary findings presented here, offering a deeper and more detailed investigation into how tango can facilitate psychological healing and growth.

interpersonal complexities unfold. It demands relational vulnerability but rewards with connection and growth, deepening realness and closeness in relationships, and fostering development in relational functioning that extends beyond the dance floor.

One notable characteristic of this study is its reliance on subjective experiences, which is a fundamental aspect of autoethnographic research. This approach allows for a rich exploration of personal realities and subjective meanings, which are central to understanding the therapeutic dimensions of tango. While this study is rooted in my personal experiences, this subjective stance is not a limitation but a deliberate methodological choice that enhances the depth of the analysis. By embracing subjectivity, this research illuminates how personal narratives and individual experiences contribute to broader understandings of psychotherapeutic processes within tango dancing.

The experiential nature of the research highlights the difficulty of extending these findings universally, as the conclusions drawn are deeply enmeshed in my unique emotional, cultural, and relational experiences. This specificity potentially narrows the resonance of the study's outcomes with the wider tango and psychotherapeutic communities. To establish a wider dialogue into the psychotherapeutic potential of tango dancing, I plan to extend the scope of inquiry beyond this initial project. The insights garnered from this autoethnographic exploration will serve as a springboard for developing nuanced research questions aimed at conducting interviews with other tango practitioners. These subsequent interviews will be analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of the psychotherapeutic benefits of tango from a variety of perspectives. This planned follow-up

research endeavours to mitigate the limitations of subjectivity and generalisability by incorporating a broader array of experiential narratives, thereby enriching the understanding of tango's psychotherapeutic potential across diverse contexts.

Conclusion

I believe that tango, while distinct from psychotherapy, offers significant and multifaceted psychotherapeutic benefits. Through its ability to create a space for expression, connection, and transformation, it presents moments for personal growth, paralleling the way strong friendships can facilitate self-reflection and development. However, to fully harness these opportunities, tango requires a blend of motivation, self-awareness, and resilience. These qualities enable me to engage deeply with the experiences and emotions that tango elicits, mirroring the prerequisites for successful psychotherapy. Essentially, the effectiveness of tango in serving as a catalyst for personal development hinges on my readiness to explore and process the emotional insights it provides as well as on the presence of a regular dance partner who is willing and able to discuss, process and work through interpersonal tensions arising from the tango experience. Leveraging tango's full therapeutic potential while mitigating the risks of psychological wounding requires a conscious, reflective, and empathetic approach to the dance, both individually and collectively within the tango community.

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