

An Embodied Practice of Becoming: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the psychotherapeutic potential of Argentine Tango from a Person-Centred Perspective

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Abstract

This study explores the psychotherapeutic potential of Argentine tango through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of in-depth interviews with seven tango dancers, situating their accounts within a person-centred theoretical framework. While tango has been associated with wellbeing and therapeutic benefit, little research has examined how such experiences are subjectively lived and meaningfully understood by participants, particularly in dialogue with person-centred conceptions of growth as an organismic, relational, and embodied process. The analysis identified five interrelated Group Experiential Themes: *Finding Renewal*; *Developing Intimacy*; *Finding Solidarity and Community*; *Reclaiming Expression and Expanding the Self*; and *Asserting Boundaries and Navigating Ethics*. Together, these themes illuminate tango as an embodied, relational practice through which participants negotiated vitality, connection, creativity, and ethical relating, often in the aftermath of adversity. Renewal was experienced as a gradual re-opening to lived experience consistent with organismic valuing; intimacy and community emerged as mutually constituted and ethically contingent, resonating with person-centred theorising on mutuality; creative expression enabled the reclamation of disowned aspects of self under conditions of psychological safety; and participants emphasised the centrality of consent and boundary-setting, highlighting ethics as a condition of possibility for growth. The findings suggest that tango may function as a context in which organismic processes of growth and integration are reanimated beyond the consulting room. The study contributes to person-centred psychotherapy literature by extending its theoretical reach into explicitly embodied and communal domains and by illustrating how core processes of psychological change may be lived through a non-clinical relational practice.

Introduction

Argentine tango has increasingly been associated with psychological and social benefit across a range of contexts. Empirical studies have reported improvements in mood, wellbeing, and quality of life among tango participants, including in non-clinical populations and among groups experiencing adversity such as depression, neurological illness, or social isolation

(Hackney & Earhart, 2010; McKee & Hackney, 2013; Quiroga Murcia et al., 2010). Alongside this outcomes-focused literature, theoretical and practitioner-based writing has articulated tango's therapeutic resonance through several conceptual lenses. Psychoanalytic accounts have emphasised tango's capacity to hold and elaborate experiences of grief, displacement, and longing, locating these capacities in the dance's historical roots in migration and loss (Farber, 2021). Gestalt-informed writing has framed tango as a structured encounter in which awareness, contact, and embodied presence are continually rebalanced between partners (Zabuta & Kologrivova, 2021). Dialogical accounts have positioned tango as a site where identity, recognition, and self-other positioning are negotiated through embodied improvisation (Tateo, 2014), while art-therapy perspectives have foregrounded its capacity to externalise affect and expand the range of what is felt and expressed (D'Errico et al., 2014). Across these traditions, tango is described as therapeutic less because it produces particular outcomes than because it enables forms of engagement (embodied, relational, improvisational) that are difficult to access through verbal modalities alone. However, there remains relatively little qualitative research examining how these meanings are subjectively lived, negotiated, and sustained by dancers themselves over time. Building on person-centred theorising developed in an earlier autoethnographic inquiry (Anthopoulos, 2025), the present study extends this exploration idiographically across multiple dancers' accounts.

From a person-centred perspective, psychological growth is understood not as an effect to be produced, but as an experiential process emerging through lived contact with self, others, and the world (Rogers, 1957, 1959; Tudor & Worrall, 2006). If tango is experienced as psychologically meaningful, the key question becomes not whether it "works," but *how* it is lived as growth-enhancing or otherwise by those who participate in it. Addressing this question calls for a qualitative approach capable of engaging with embodied, relational, and emotionally complex experience without reducing it to predefined explanatory frameworks.

The study is grounded primarily in Person-Centred theory, particularly its organismic foundations (Tudor & Worrall, 2006). From this perspective, human beings are understood as oriented toward growth, differentiation, and integration, even in the aftermath of adversity. Psychological change is conceptualised as an expansion of openness to experience and an increased capacity to live congruently in relation to self and others. Although these processes are most often examined within the therapeutic relationship, person-centred theorists have long argued that growth is not confined to the consulting room (Rogers, 1957; Rogers & Sanford, 1984).

Embodied and creative practices offer a particularly fertile context for examining such processes. Movement, music, and non-verbal interaction can provide access to forms of knowing and expression that precede or exceed language, allowing individuals to remain in contact with experience when verbal reflection alone feels insufficient. Tango, with its emphasis on bodily attunement, improvisation, and close interpersonal contact, provides a compelling site for exploring how organismic processes of growth may be lived and negotiated outside formal psychotherapy (Anthopoulos, 2025).

Although the person-centred tradition is often characterised as primarily verbal, its organismic foundations have always implied an embodied conception of psychological

experience. Rogers (1961, p. 103) described therapy as “a process whereby man becomes his organism — without self-deception, without distortion ... [a] getting back to basic sensory and visceral experience.” This implicit embodiment has been variously developed: through person-centred expressive arts therapy, which extends the conditions for organismic experiencing into creative modalities (Rogers et al., 2012); through Fernald’s (2000) argument that organismic experiencing is the fundamental construct of person-centred practice and that Rogers’s primary intention as a counsellor was to facilitate contact with the body; and through theorising on mutuality, in which empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard are understood as co-constituted within the relational field rather than delivered unilaterally (Murphy et al., 2012; Tudor & Worrall, 2006). Tudor and Worrall (2006) further locate person-centred theorising within a wider organism-environment relationship, drawing on Barrett-Lennard’s (2005) notion of community as a zone of activity and shared meaning lying between the family and larger social systems. Yet sustained empirical examination of how organismic processes are lived in non-clinical embodied and communal practices remains limited. The present study contributes to this thread by examining tango as one such practice.

At the same time, tango is not an unambiguously benign practice. Dancers can experience vulnerability, misattunement, competition, exclusion, and ethical tension. Intimacy in tango is embodied and immediate, and community norms may both support and constrain individual expression. Any exploration of tango’s psychotherapeutic significance therefore requires attention to ambivalence, boundary-setting, and the ethical conditions under which experiences are lived as supportive or harmful. A phenomenological approach is particularly well placed to attend to these complexities without idealising or pathologizing the practice.

The present study addresses these issues by exploring how tango dancers make sense of their engagement with Argentine tango as a practice with psychotherapeutic significance. Specifically, it asks: *How do tango dancers experience and make sense of Argentine tango as psychologically meaningful in their lives?* Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study offers a nuanced, idiographic account sensitive to both convergence and divergence across participants, situating these experiential meanings within a person-centred theoretical framework. In doing so, it extends person-centred psychotherapy literature into explicitly embodied and communal domains. Rather than positioning tango as therapy, the study examines tango as a meaningful human activity through which psychological growth may be lived, negotiated, and ethically contained beyond the consulting room.

Method

Researcher positioning

I came to this study as a person-centred psychotherapist with over twenty years of clinical experience, an experienced Argentine tango dancer with a regular dance partner, and a PhD candidate whose first study was an autoethnography of tango’s psychotherapeutic potential

(Anthopoulos, 2025). Each of these positions shaped my engagement with the present study, and I describe their methodological implications in the Reflexivity section below.

Design

This study adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design to explore how dancers made sense of their experiences of Argentine tango as having psychotherapeutic significance. IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of lived experience and the meanings individuals attribute to it, while acknowledging the researcher's interpretative role in the analytic process. IPA was well suited to the study's aims for several interrelated reasons. First, its phenomenological orientation prioritises detailed examination of how participants make sense of significant experiences in their own terms, which fits the study's concern with the lived, idiographic texture of tango engagement rather than its measurable outcomes. Second, IPA's hermeneutic stance acknowledges meaning as co-constructed between participant and researcher, which is consistent with the relational, embodied nature of the phenomenon under investigation. Third, IPA's flexibility regarding theoretical framing permits explicit dialogue with person-centred theory at the interpretative stage without imposing it on participants' accounts. Together, these features made IPA appropriate for examining tango as an embodied, relational, and emotionally nuanced practice.

IPA's idiographic commitment shaped both sampling and analysis. In sampling, this meant recruiting a small, relatively homogeneous group rather than seeking representativeness, with the aim of developing a rich account of how tango was experienced by participants who shared a meaningful relationship with the practice. In analysis, it meant completing a full case-by-case examination of each participant's account before any cross-case comparison, so that Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) were grounded in the particularity of each individual's experiential world before Group Experiential Themes (GETs) were developed across cases. This sequencing preserves individual texture rather than dissolving it into early thematic abstraction.

Participants

Recruitment proceeded through purposive and snowball sampling within the Argentine tango community. A study advertisement, flyer, and personalised email invitation were circulated through the researcher's professional and tango networks, including London-based milongas, tango schools, and online tango groups. Interested individuals contacted the researcher directly, and all those who met the inclusion criteria were offered a place in the study. Seven participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults aged 18 years or over, to have a minimum of one year's experience in Argentine tango, and to perceive tango as having personally meaningful or therapeutic significance beyond a purely recreational activity. All participants were English-speaking and willing to reflect on and share their experiences in depth. The sample included variation in gender, relational background, and life circumstances. Pseudonyms were used throughout to protect participants' anonymity. The sample size accords with IPA methodological guidance, which

prioritises idiographic depth over representational breadth, enabling detailed, case-by-case analysis prior to cross-case interpretation.

Table 1. Overview of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Bereavement / loss context before tango	Verbal psychotherapy history (as reported)
Evina	Female	Bereaved (son)	Not reported
Damian	Male	Marital crisis	Long-term individual and couples therapy following tango engagement
Laura	Female	Relational losses	Counsellor herself; in own psychotherapy
Joyce	Female	Bereaved (son)	Not reported
Elena	Female	Recent break-up	Not reported
Clara	Female	Bereaved (both parents)	Some prior therapy
Leonie	Female	Mother's death during early tango years	Approximately 20 years of psychotherapy

Note. All participants were adults aged 18 or over. Years of tango experience varied across participants and is not reported uniformly here. The verbal psychotherapy column reflects what participants disclosed in their interviews; absence of a record does not necessarily indicate absence of therapy history.

Data Collection

Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Interviews focused on participants' lived experiences of tango, particularly moments they experienced as emotionally significant, challenging, supportive, or transformative. Questions were open-ended and exploratory, inviting participants to describe concrete experiences and reflect on their meaning, rather than to evaluate tango in abstract or theoretical terms.

Interviews were conducted individually, either in person or via video conferencing depending on participant preference, and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim by the researcher with the assistance of automated transcription software, with all transcripts checked manually against the audio for accuracy. The interview schedule served as a flexible guide rather than a fixed structure, allowing participants to shape the direction and emphasis of the conversation. The full interview topic guide is provided in Appendix A. Follow-up prompts were used to encourage elaboration, clarification, and reflection on dimensions of their experience.

Analytic Procedure

Analysis followed the stages of IPA as outlined in the second edition of Smith and colleagues (2021), incorporating their terminological refinements: what was previously described as emergent themes is now framed as experiential statements, and what were once clustered as superordinate themes are now developed into Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) at the case level and Group Experiential Themes (GETs) at the cross-case level. Each transcript was analysed individually before any cross-case comparison took place.

The analytic process began with repeated reading and re-reading of each transcript to develop familiarity with the participant's narrative and experiential world. Exploratory noting was then undertaken, attending to descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual aspects of the text. These notes formed the basis for the development of experiential statements, which captured psychologically salient moments of lived meaning while remaining grounded in participants' own words.

Experiential statements were then clustered into Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) within each case. Attention was paid to both resonance and tension within each participant's account. Once individual case analyses were completed, patterns of convergence and divergence across cases were examined, leading to the development of Group Experiential Themes (GETs).

Throughout this process, analysis moved iteratively between parts and whole, engaging the hermeneutic circle. The final thematic structure was refined through repeated checking against the data to ensure that interpretations were supported by participants' accounts and that alternative readings had been considered.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity was integral to the research process and was understood as an ongoing methodological and ethical stance rather than a discrete procedural step. My dual position as a person-centred psychotherapist and an experienced tango dancer afforded experiential sensitivity to the embodied, relational, and affective dimensions of participants' accounts, while simultaneously requiring sustained attention to the risks of bias, over-identification, and projection. I treated this insider position as both a resource and a responsibility within the interpretative process.

I conducted interviews in a manner informed by person-centred values, with particular attention to psychological safety, autonomy, and non-directivity. Participants were encouraged to determine the pace, focus, and depth of their accounts. While this stance supported trust and containment, it also raised methodological questions about the balance between therapeutic sensitivity and phenomenological inquiry. Practices that support safety in psychotherapy do not always facilitate analytic depth in research, and I came to recognise that my person-centred reflexes, particularly the impulse to maintain psychological safety, could foreclose the very moments of discomfort or uncertainty in which less articulated

experiential material might surface. Holding open the possibility of mild dysregulation, rather than smoothing it over, became part of what I had to learn.

This tension was especially salient in one interview, where I felt heightened anxiety because the participant's professional and personal background resembled my own. To maintain relational flow, I made several self-disclosures during the interview. In retrospect, I recognise that these disclosures shifted the interaction toward a more peer-based dynamic and may have inadvertently reinforced rehearsed narratives, limiting access to less articulated experiential material. This realisation sharpened my awareness of how the impulse to maintain psychological safety, while clinically appropriate, can constrain phenomenological openness in research.

My psychotherapeutic training continued to shape analytic attention, particularly sensitivity to vulnerability, relational risk, and emotional softening. To mitigate the risk of privileging therapeutically familiar meanings, I grounded experiential statements closely in participants' language and returned repeatedly to the original transcripts. I maintained a reflexive research diary throughout data collection and analysis, in which I documented emotional responses, interpretative decisions, and shifts in understanding. Regular PhD supervision provided a further reflective and dialogical space in which I could examine, question, and refine emerging interpretations. These conversations supported critical distance, helped me identify areas of over-identification or premature closure, and encouraged me to interrogate how my prior experience of tango and psychotherapy might be shaping the analytic process.

My earlier autoethnographic engagement with tango (Anthopoulos, 2025) informed analytic sensitivity while heightening the need for vigilance, particularly in bracketing confirmatory interpretations during cross-case analysis. Across the IPA process, I came to understand interviewing and analysis as ethically and relationally charged practices. Reflexivity therefore functioned as an ongoing stance of responsibility toward participants' accounts, the analytic process, and the knowledge being produced (Smith et al., 2021). Rather than attempting to eliminate the tension between my therapeutic and research identities, I held it consciously, allowing it to inform an interpretative position that balances attentiveness to safety, agency, and relational ethics with a commitment to phenomenological depth, nuance, and complexity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the City St George's, University of London Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection (REC reference ETH2324-2473). All participants received written information about the study and provided informed consent before taking part. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study without providing a reason and without any adverse consequences, and were notified that they could withdraw their data up until the time of transcription, after which anonymisation rendered withdrawal of individual data impractical.

Given the potentially emotionally sensitive nature of participants' accounts, interviews were conducted with careful attention to psychological safety. Participants were free to pause the

interview, decline to answer particular questions, or redirect the conversation at any point. All identifying information was removed from transcripts, pseudonyms were used throughout, and data were stored securely in accordance with institutional data protection and confidentiality guidelines.

Findings and Interpretative Discussion

Across accounts, Argentine tango was experienced as responding to fundamental human concerns including renewal following adversity, the negotiation of intimacy, the search for belonging, the reclamation of expression, and the ethical management of closeness. Participants described tango as a meaningful, embodied, and relational practice through which vulnerability, creativity, connection, and agency were lived and negotiated over time.

The analysis attends closely to participants' lived experience while engaging interpretatively with person-centred theory. Rather than positioning tango as therapy, the findings are understood as illuminating processes central to person-centred conceptions of psychological growth as they unfold beyond the consulting room, through movement, music, and embodied encounter.

Five interrelated Group Experiential Themes (GETs) are presented below. While distinguished for analytic clarity, these themes are conceptually interwoven. Processes such as embodiment, attunement, authenticity, vulnerability, and ethical discernment recur across accounts, forming a network of overlapping meanings rather than discrete categories. This permeability reflects the lived complexity of tango itself, where movement, emotion, relationship, and ethics are experienced as inseparable.

Table 2. Overview of Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and Subthemes

Group Experiential Theme (GET)	Subthemes
GET1. Finding Renewal	• Softening Grief • Crossing Existential Thresholds • Healing through Embodied Expression • Reconnecting with Life and Others
GET2. Developing Intimacy	• Repairing Connection • Growing through Relational Vulnerability • Co-Creating Safety • Reframing Intimacy as Mutual Attunement
GET3. Finding Solidarity and Community	• Shared Humanity • Vision of Inclusivity • Ambivalence and the Double Edge of Belonging

GET4. Reclaiming Expression and Expanding the Self

- Creativity as Authentic Connection
- Transforming Challenge into Growth
- Reclaiming Lost Identity and Suppressed Callings
- Encountering the Self through Music and Embodiment

GET5. Asserting Boundaries and Navigating Ethics

- Recognising the Risks of Misattunement
- Setting Limits as Acts of Self-Respect
- Creating Safety through Attunement

GET1. Finding Renewal: Reanimation in the Aftermath of Adversity

Participants experienced tango as a practice of renewal following grief, trauma, or emotional depletion. Renewal was not described as recovery or symptom reduction, but as a gradual re-opening to lived experience: a movement from paralysis toward vitality, from isolation toward connection, and from silence toward expression.

For three participants (Evina, Joyce, and Clara), tango met them in the aftermath of bereavement. Evina described how anniversaries of her son's death had previously left her "paralysed and frozen," withdrawing from social life. Yet in the year she began dancing, something shifted:

"For the six, eight weeks before the anniversary of his death, I'm not in a good place... quite paralysed and frozen during that time normally. But this year... it has got better. And the one thing that's different is... Argentine tango... This year I don't avoid people. I'm in the middle of a milonga with hundreds of people."

Here, renewal is embodied and relational. On my reading, tango did not remove grief, but altered Evina's capacity to live with it. The contrast between immobility and immersion is both literal and symbolic: the frozen, solitary body gives way to one in motion among others. From a person-centred perspective, this resonates with organismic valuing, where growth involves renewed openness to experience rather than the elimination of pain (Rogers, 1959). Tango appears to support such openness through movement, music, and shared presence, enabling grief to be held without becoming immobilising. This suggests that tango affords a form of embodied presence through which grief can be carried and expressed when verbal articulation feels insufficient, echoing phenomenological accounts of the body as a primary site of meaning-making (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Joyce articulated a similar paradox, resisting the language of escapism:

"You kind of lose yourself in the dance... even although you're probably holding a lot of grief in your body... and you can find joy and peace... you're in that precious present."

Her emphasis on the "precious present" captures renewal as temporal re-anchoring. Tango offered a way of being with grief while re-entering life, aligning with person-centred

accounts of post-traumatic growth as reorganisation in the presence of adversity rather than transcendence of it (Joseph, 2013). Such accounts also resonate with psychoanalytic reflections on tango as a cultural practice shaped by histories of loss and displacement (Farber, 2021).

For others, renewal involved a more confrontational existential threshold. Damian described tango as a decisive encounter with life itself:

“This door opens... you’re either going to go through the door... or you’re saying, I’m dying.”

Here, renewal emerges as an embodied decision to live. Dance, music, and emotion converge into a moment of existential commitment, echoing Rogers’ view that growth involves choosing openness over constriction when confronted with threat or despair.

Across accounts, tango functioned as a medium of reanimation: restoring aliveness without bypassing pain. Divergence lay in tone and tempo; for some, renewal arrived gently, for others, as a transformative surge. Phenomenologically, tango appears as an embodied philosophy of survival, enabling grief and vitality to coexist in lived immediacy.

GET2. Developing Intimacy: Mutuality, Vulnerability, and Relational Risk

Renewal was carried into relational life through experiences of intimacy. Participants described tango as a relational crucible in which closeness was continually negotiated through embodied encounter.

Evina spoke of tango as repairing intimacy with her husband following prolonged grief:

“All the activities I did before were solitary... tango was something we did together... I’m just glad to see him happy and much more relaxed in himself.”

Witnessing her husband’s pleasure relieved her guilt about the emotional weight of her grief, allowing intimacy to re-emerge as shared vitality. Here, connection is re-established through mutual enjoyment and embodied presence.

For others, intimacy was experienced as precarious and demanding courage. Damian described tango as “a vulnerable place... horrible or wonderful,” where growth emerged through staying with emotional exposure rather than avoiding it. This aligns with person-centred understandings of growth as involving risk and differentiation rather than comfort alone.

Participants consistently reframed intimacy as mutual attunement rather than one-sided provision. Joyce described connection as “a two-way process,” while Clara and Leonie challenged passive understandings of following (in traditional tango, the leader’s role has historically been gendered male and the follower’s female, although queer tango and contemporary practice often suspend this convention), describing it as an active, discerning relational role:

“It’s not like you’re just following... it requires that you hold yourself, connect... it’s an active process.”

Participants’ emphasis on continuous sensing, feedback, and reciprocity aligns with analyses of Argentine tango as an intersubjective, co-regulative coupling rather than a unilateral transmission of control, requiring ongoing partner sensing and adjustment (Kimmel, 2009). Such accounts resonate with person-centred arguments that empathy, congruence, and acceptance are mutually constituted within the relational field rather than delivered unilaterally (Murphy et al., 2012). Intimacy was growth-enhancing only when safety was actively co-created. Where attunement failed, closeness could become intrusive or destabilising. Tudor and Worrall (2006) argue that while psychological contact functions as a binary precondition for any relationship, the qualities that distinguish growth-enhancing from harmful encounters (responsiveness, mutuality, and respect for the other’s subjectivity) are carried by the conditions of empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard. Participants’ accounts suggested that it was this fuller relational quality, rather than mere co-presence, that distinguished growth-enhancing tango from misattuned encounters.

GET3. Finding Solidarity and Community: Belonging and Its Ambivalence

Participants situated tango within a wider social ecology, describing experiences of belonging grounded less in ideology than in tacit recognition and shared embodied presence. Solidarity was often felt rather than articulated, emerging through rhythm, proximity, and shared vulnerability.

Evina described recognising another bereaved mother through subtle cues:

“It’s a particular thing you see... the frozenness in the eyes.”

Joyce similarly emphasised collective relief:

“Everyone’s got their own stuff they bring... it’s a shared experience.”

Such moments illustrate how empathy can arise without explicit disclosure, aligning with person-centred notions of contact as experiential rather than purely verbal.

At the same time, community was experienced as ambivalent. Elena described tango as initially healing but later “toxic” and “institutionalising,” prompting her to reclaim a wider life beyond the dance. In Laura’s account, her sense of belonging fluctuated, shaped by what she described as “gender roles” she “didn’t want to play,” the early difficulty of finding practice partners and feeling welcomed as a new dancer, and the differing climates of each milonga she entered. These divergent experiences highlight that belonging is ethically complex and contingent on relational climate. This ambivalence is consistent with dialogical accounts of tango as a social field in which identity, recognition, and belonging are negotiated through embodied positioning within specific cultural and relational norms (Tateo, 2014). From a person-centred standpoint, this underscores the organism–environment relationship (Tudor & Worrall, 2006). Growth was shaped not only by individual openness, but by the cultural and relational climates participants inhabited. Tango communities functioned as microcosms of social life, offering both nourishment and constraint.

GET4. Reclaiming Expression and Expanding the Self

Reclaiming expression emerged as the conceptual core of the findings. Participants described tango as a medium through which previously muted or disowned aspects of self were rediscovered and embodied. Expression was experienced not as performance, but as organismic truthfulness enacted through movement, music, and relationship.

Creativity was consistently described as relational rather than individual. Evina's tailoring for tango evolved from "window dressing" into ritual, generosity, and contribution:

"I get so much more out of watching somebody else's pleasure."

Her creativity became a way of re-entering communal life, transforming self-expression into relational offering. This aligns closely with person-centred understandings of creativity as emerging under conditions of psychological safety and internal evaluation (Rogers, 1961; Rogers et al., 2012). This relational understanding of creativity is also reflected in micro-analytic accounts of tango improvisation, where meaning emerges moment by moment through embodied imagery, mutual responsiveness, and shared intentionality (Kimmel, 2009).

Participants also described transforming challenge into growth. Laura reframed painful critique into embodied learning, while Elena learned to differentiate empathy from over-identification, discovering the need for emotional boundaries. These accounts echo Rogers' notion of growth as the loosening of conditions of worth, allowing disowned experiences to be reintegrated (Rogers, 1959).

Music and embodiment played a central role. Leonie described tango as accessing truths beyond language:

"The body speaks and tells you about yourself."

Participants' sense that tango enabled forms of knowing unavailable through words echoes applied and clinical claims that movement-based practices can externalise affect and make implicit aspects of self-experience available for recognition and integration (D'Errico et al., 2014). For participants with long histories of verbal psychotherapy, tango offered a complementary mode of knowing, extending growth into explicitly embodied domains.

GET5. Asserting Boundaries and Navigating Ethics

As engagement deepened, participants became increasingly aware of the ethical complexities inherent in embodied closeness. Boundaries were not abstract rules but lived negotiations enacted through physical choices, refusals, and moments of attunement or withdrawal.

Evina described a class where abrupt disengagement left her destabilised, prompting protective withdrawal by her husband. Leonie spoke of physical symptoms when she "wasn't able to protect myself," highlighting how misattunement can turn intimacy into harm.

Boundary-setting emerged as an act of self-respect. Elena described removing her shoes to refuse dances; Clara described developing the capacity to walk away despite gendered expectations of compliance. These embodied refusals reframed ethics as organismic rather

than prescriptive, aligning with Tudor and Worrall's (2006) emphasis on differentiation as integral to growth.

Participants also highlighted environments where safety was actively co-created through attuned teaching. Here, permission replaced performance, illustrating that tango's growth-enhancing potential depends on ethical responsiveness within its social and pedagogical contexts. Therapist-practitioner writing on tango similarly frames safety as something co-created through responsiveness, consent, and the ethical calibration of closeness, rather than as a fixed rule or externally imposed boundary (Zabuta & Kologrivova, 2021).

Integrative Synthesis: Tango as an Embodied Practice of Becoming

Taken together, the findings suggest that tango functioned for participants as an embodied, relational practice of becoming. Renewal, intimacy, community, expression, and boundary-setting were not discrete outcomes but interdependent processes, each conditioning the others. Growth was experienced as widening the range of what could be felt, expressed, and negotiated, rather than resolving difficulty or eliminating vulnerability.

In this sense, the findings extend person-centred psychotherapy literature by illustrating how organismic processes of growth may unfold beyond the consulting room, through movement, music, and embodied encounter. Read alongside person-centred autoethnographic work (Anthopoulos, 2025), these findings strengthen the case that tango can operate as an extra-therapeutic site for organismic growth when relational, embodied, and ethical conditions are sufficiently supportive. Echoing Rogers and Sanford's (1984) suggestion that change may be precipitated through moments of deep contact with experience itself, tango is not positioned as therapy but as a meaningful human practice through which psychological growth becomes lived, negotiated, and ethically contained.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the sample was small, self-selecting, and composed of dancers who already experienced tango as psychologically meaningful. While this is consistent with IPA's idiographic commitment, it necessarily limits the transferability of the findings to tango dancers who experience the practice as neutral, negative, or purely recreational. Second, all participants were interviewed in English and were embedded within particular cultural and social tango contexts, which may have shaped both the forms of meaning articulated and the ethical dynamics described. Third, the researcher's dual positioning as a person-centred psychotherapist and tango dancer, while reflexively addressed, inevitably influenced the relational field of the interviews and the interpretative lens brought to the analysis. Although steps were taken to ground interpretations closely in participants' accounts and to interrogate assumptions through supervision and reflexive practice, alternative readings remain possible. Finally, as a retrospective interview study, the findings rely on participants' narrative reconstructions of experience rather than on observation of tango practices as they unfold. Future research might usefully complement IPA with longitudinal, ethnographic, or

participatory approaches to further explore how meanings of tango are sustained, transformed, or relinquished over time.

Conclusion

This study offered an idiographic account of how tango dancers experience Argentine tango as psychologically meaningful. Across participants, tango was lived as an embodied relational practice in which renewal, intimacy, belonging, expression, personal development and ethical discernment were continually negotiated rather than achieved as stable outcomes. In this sense, tango emerged less as a substitute for psychotherapy than as a human activity through which participants encountered themselves and others in ways that felt consequential, often in the aftermath of adversity.

Read through a person-centred lens, the findings suggest that tango may provide conditions in which organismic processes of differentiation and integration can be reanimated beyond the consulting room. Participants' accounts point to growth as a widening of experiential range and relational capacity: greater ability to stay in contact with grief without freezing, to engage intimacy as mutuality rather than compliance, to reclaim expression as authenticity rather than performance, and to assert boundaries as a condition of safe connection. At the same time, the same settings that enabled connection could also reproduce competition, misattunement, or exclusion, highlighting the ethical contingency of growth-enhancing experience.

These findings are not advanced as generalisable claims about tango, but as a nuanced contribution to person-centred psychotherapy literature, extending organismic theory into explicitly embodied and communal domains. They also invite clinicians and researchers to attend more closely to clients' lived, extra-therapeutic practices as potential sites of change, while remaining alert to the relational climates and ethical conditions under which such practices become supportive, constraining, or both. In this sense, tango may be understood less as an intervention than as a cultivated relational way of being (Rogers, 1980), one that at times approximates the attitudes and conditions associated with psychological growth.

Use of Generative AI Tools

In accordance with the Taylor & Francis AI Policy, the author declares that generative AI tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, **ChatGPT (OpenAI; GPT-5.2)** was used as a writing and editorial support tool to assist with language refinement, structural clarity, and stylistic consistency during drafting and revision. The tool was not used to generate original empirical data, conduct analysis, interpret findings, or make theoretical claims. All analytic decisions, interpretations, and conclusions are the author's own.

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Appendix A. Interview Topic Guide

The interview schedule served as a flexible guide rather than a fixed structure. Participants were invited to elaborate on whichever areas felt most meaningful to them, and follow-up prompts were used to encourage clarification, reflection, and the exploration of concrete experiences. The opening and closing procedures (welcome, consent confirmation, debriefing) are summarised below; the main questions that shaped the conversations are listed in full.

Opening

Welcome and introduction; restatement of the purpose of the study; confirmation that the participant has read and signed the informed consent form; reminder of confidentiality and the right to withdraw; explanation of the interview structure and approximate duration (60–90 minutes); invitation to share experiences openly.

Background and experience with tango

Can you tell me about how you first became interested in tango dancing? How long have you been dancing tango, and what has kept you engaged in it?

Tango as a therapeutic experience

Can you describe any experiences where you felt tango had a therapeutic impact on you? How does tango dancing contribute to your emotional well-being or personal growth?

Emotional and relational aspects

How do you feel when you dance tango? Can you describe the emotions you experience? In what ways has tango influenced your relationships with others, both on and off the dance floor?

Psychological presence and self-awareness

Can you share an experience where you felt particularly present or self-aware during a tango session? How does dancing tango affect your awareness of your emotions and thoughts?

Challenges and hindrances

Have you encountered any challenges or obstacles while experiencing tango as therapeutic? Are there aspects of tango dancing that you find less therapeutic or even challenging?

Parallels with therapy

Do you see any parallels between tango dancing and traditional psychotherapy? How do you feel your experience in tango has influenced your understanding or approach to therapy?

Personal insights and reflections

Looking back, how do you feel tango has changed you or your perspective on life? What insights have you gained from your tango experience that you might not have realised otherwise?

Closing

Is there anything else you would like to share about your tango experience that we have not covered? Do you have any questions about the study or the interview process? Thanks, debrief, and explanation of next steps.