A Gentle Dance Force: Contemporary Dancers' Embodied Experiences of Gentleness Through Improvised Dance

by

Mariel Day

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Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation
University of Alberta

Abstract

This study sought to map contemporary dancers' embodied experiences of gentleness through an improvisational dance process. Scholars highlight the continued harshness of the dance training and performing environment (e.g., Aalten, 2007; Barr & Oliver, 2016; Markula, 2015; McEwen & Young, 2011; O'Flynn, Pryor, & Gray, 2013; Thomas & Tarr, 2009). Yet, the word, *gentleness*, is rarely seen in the dance literature, apart from research on warming up (e.g., Malina, 2012) and somatic techniques (e.g., Ahsan, 2010; Diaz, Chatfield, & Cox, 2008; Eddy, 2009; Fortin, Long, & Lord, 2002; Williamson, 2009; Wozny, 2012). I situated my research within a humanist, interpretive approach and the concept of embodiment, employing an arts-based methodology to explore my research questions: 1) How do contemporary dancers make sense of gentleness for themselves?; 2) What are contemporary dancers' embodied experiences of gentleness, as explored through dance improvisation?; 3) How does gentleness manifest through the body in a dance improvisation process?

I anchored the design and findings of my study within the literature on embodiment, particularly in dance (e.g., Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; Barbour, 2011, 2016; Batson, Quin, & Wilson, 2011; de Lima, 2013; Fraleigh, 2015; Tsouvala & Magos, 2016; Warburton, 2011), as well as literature on dance improvisation (e.g., Crickmay, 2008; Harrop, 2014; Sheets-Johnstone, 2017). I designed, facilitated, and participated in a five-day dance improvisation workshop, collecting data through group discussion, field notes, and one-on-one semi-structured interviews following the workshop. I worked with three dancers – two women and one man, with ages spanning 23 to 56.

Dancers defined gentleness in familiar terms, but also through new understandings. The data revealed a dichotomy of gentleness and harshness, with gentleness seen as difficult to

maintain or establish within the harshness of dance culture. Dancers accessed greater body awareness and sensorial perception in the workshop. They understood gentleness differently according to their background, age, dance training experience, and preconceived notions of gentleness. In this way, the perceived limitations of one's body also affected how a dancer accessed gentleness. Through the improvisation process, I relied on my own body's sensations and intuition to guide the flow of the workshop. The gentle workshop structure facilitated openness and vulnerability amongst all participants, and I remained self-reflexive in my simultaneous roles of researcher, facilitator, and participant. Continuing in the tradition of researching somatic processes of the dancing body, this study proposes the concept of gentleness as a framework to explore possibilities for dancer well-being.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Mariel Day. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name: “A Gentle Dance Force,” ID: Pro00081498, June 1, 2018.

For my wonderful family,

the greatest gentle force

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Introduction

"Your gentleness shall force
More than your force move us to gentleness."
(William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*)

Dancers are anything but fragile. They are brilliant forces, powerhouses of energy, muscularity, dexterity, and artistic expression. Yet, with an accumulation of strength in dance often comes an accumulation of strain, hardship, and physical and emotional pain. Though the dance world may seem an ideal place to study the beauty of human nature, it can often be unduly harsh and demanding. Many authors in dance studies note the harshness of the dance environment, which often involves competition for roles, body image issues, and perpetuated cultures of pain (e.g., Aalten, 2007; Barr & Oliver, 2016; McEwen & Young, 2011; O'Flynn, Pryor, & Gray, 2013). While many of these severe aspects of dance are often part of the ballet context, they can also pertain to contemporary dance (e.g., Markula, 2015; Thomas & Tarr, 2009). As a contemporary dancer, I have experienced some of this harshness in dance, even while training in welcoming dance environments.

My impetus for this research was deeply personal. A dancer since age three, I long ago realized my love of dance. Though trained in dance for over two decades, I have not followed the typical competitive or studio stream of training. My path in dance began first with creative dance and then in modern and ballet with a small studio. This studio was dedicated to artistic expression through healthy and efficient training for the body. Instead of dance competitions, we performed end-of-year shows for family and friends. In my late teens, I discovered a semi-

professional modern and jazz dance group at the University of Alberta, an organization with which I still train and perform. This group exposed me to teachers of an extremely high calibre with excellence in technique and choreography. Throughout my contemporary dance training, I have taken numerous workshops in contemporary technique styles and somatic processes, both locally and abroad. My studies with Holly Johnston (Responsive Body) and Kathy Ochoa (Release Work) have been particularly influential. Most of my upbringing with dance has been positive and joyful. Though I have quit dance on several occasions, the movement has always drawn me back to embrace dance again.

After years of training in a recreational space, my passion as a dance artist led me to pursue dance full-time at the post-secondary level. Excited to probe deeper into the embodied art form of dance, I moved to a new city and began a university dance program with anticipation. Unfortunately, my experiences while training did not sustain my excitement for learning and growing through dance. In my dance program, there was little to no feedback about my dancing skills, either positive or constructive, from my teachers and classmates. Without external guidance or encouragement, self-doubt set in. I did not fit in this kind of environment, where my teachers did not nurture my expectations for learning deeply through dance. After a year of training, I left this program feeling absolutely broken. Looking back now, I realize I was an advanced dancer, able to train in an intense program. Indeed, my technical skills grew significantly during this intense period of training. Yet at the time, I did not celebrate my embodied knowledge as a dancer. Doubt made me question and criticize my dance technique. This embodied harshness stifled my creative instinct and love for dance. Leaving this training program left me both liberated and completely lost as a person. Saying ‘no’ to a structure of dance training that did not support me broke open the boundaries of my relationship with dance.

Who would I be if I could not dance? And if dance were still a part of my life, how would it operate outside of the dance school structure?

In the year between leaving my dance program and starting graduate studies in dance, I took no dance classes and did not dance in public. Instead, I danced by myself, in my bedroom, for only a few minutes at a time. Dancing in such an intimate way allowed me to tap into how dance felt in my body in a specific moment. Yet, I would often feel foolish for dancing for fun, wondering if I were accessing my contemporary dance technique. In this case, *technique* meant the traditional movement I had trained in for years through contemporary dance and ballet, such as using turn-out and high leg extensions. Despite my misgivings, by the end of the year, my voice as a dancer came back. I had worked on the technique of deep listening, finding the natural flow of movement in my body and following the joy of discovering movement from one moment to the next. Though my first public dance class after that year was initially nerve-wracking, I returned with greater maturity, confidence, and power in my dancing. In fact, after my first performance in over a year, I received very positive feedback from mentors in my community about the change in my presence and ability on stage. This feedback left me humbled and loved, but also wondering from where this change came. Of course, I had seen an improvement in my contemporary dance technique from my training program, but my confidence had not come from that program. It had come from spending many hours intimately dancing with myself, retraining my body to love itself and to love dance.

With a desire to probe further into dance through graduate studies came the new challenges of actually living a graduate student life while continuing my dance training. While walking home from the university on one particularly busy day, a tiny thought popped into my head: *Be gentle*. These words came out of nowhere, but felt as if someone had placed a drop of

gentleness into me that spread throughout my entire body. I completely relaxed. From this experience, I wondered how using the word, *gentleness*, as a starting point – however abstract it might seem – could actually change a person's physical body and state of mind. Building on the rich history from somatics of using gentle approaches, I was specifically intrigued by how the concept of gentleness could frame research into the dancing body. I imagined gentleness less as a quality of movement and more as a state of being: a place of infinite possibilities from where we can start anything. This way of looking at gentleness connected to the practices of using gentle movement in somatics, but in a new way – through the power of the word, *gentleness*. How could I continue to cultivate this gentleness in myself through my dancing? And how would this gentleness affect my dance training habits and my opinion of myself as a dancer? Through experimenting, I discovered that just having the intention of gentleness during a dance class changed the execution of my movement and my perception of my ability throughout the class. I found more ease in my body, played with a larger range of extension and qualities, and, simply put, had more joy while dancing. Working with an intention of gentleness granted me space to connect deeper with bodily sensation, which made each moment in a class more personally meaningful. Dancing for myself and for the needs of my body in that moment became a luxurious experience. I wondered how to extend these wonderful experiences to other dancers and if they would have similarly positive experiences.

I sought to research how dancers understand gentleness through their bodies. Choosing to explore gentleness through dance improvisation allowed for play and experimentation through movement. In this way, my own experiences of improvising by myself were extended to this research project, as improvisation was an ideal way to experiment with gentleness outside of the structure of a contemporary dance class or rehearsal. I aimed to uncover how dancers embody

gentleness and how they perceive the effects of gentleness in their dance habits or everyday habits. Through improvised explorations into gentleness, I questioned how dancers might develop strategies to combat some of the harshness in their dance training environments.

Ironically, in the process of researching the role of gentleness in a dancer's life, I lost much of the gentleness from my own. Although I had long prided myself on maintaining a good balance of work and rest, my unforgiving workload as a graduate student disrupted any kind of balance I had established. After years of doing my own coursework, thesis writing, research assistance, teaching multiple courses, and actively working as a choreographer and dancer in my university dance group, I found myself completely devastated by physical and mental fatigue. While I do not explore the effects of a graduate student workload on students' mental and physical health in this paper, it is painfully obvious to me that this issue is intimately intertwined with gentleness, or the lack there-of. I see the output demanded from graduate students akin to the quest for the perfect dancer body: It is, simply put, impossible. Working in a time crunch with an intense workload, the graduate student is not allowed much space to *feel* or to focus on the body's needs and desires. Rather, the focus of graduate school is to *do*, to complete more tasks to satisfy the requirements of the degree program. Despite being an unfortunately common occurrence, burnout is not easy to write about. Being burned out brings shame, a feeling of ineptitude and weakness. I was doubly ashamed by my experience, because of my solid history of balance in my life and because of my devotion to gentleness research. Indeed, my study had proposed an alternative to a harsh way of working, providing space and time to explore gentleness through a focus on bodily sensation. I thus found myself having to navigate gentleness both within the academic institution and my personal life. It was not a case of giving

up; rather, I had to return to a way of life that supported a healthier way of living while juggling the demands of the university.

To start, I took a well-deserved break of just over a month. In retrospect, this was barely long enough and hardly adequate to replenish my system considering my pace of the past few years. I rested. And continued to rest. I researched many ways to build back stamina, from conventional to alternative medicine. I took on no outside activities for several months. Not having the endurance for dance classes, I focused on gentle yoga, nature walks, and dancing quietly in my home. I started working on my thesis very slowly and for short periods of time. Focusing on small acts of success, I gently let go of my previous expectations for completing my thesis. It was a fine balance between maintaining some kind of writing schedule and giving myself permission to rest and enjoy life. For months, I experienced a perpetual cycle of gaining energy and then crashing when I overextended. Taking significant breaks gave me much more efficiency and motivation to work. Through this process, I experienced many aspects of gentleness, including some that my participants later revealed in my research study: difficulty with self-gentleness; gentleness as honouring your truth; and gentleness as meeting your body where it is. Though I have summarized my experiences here, know that it was neither an easy nor straightforward road back to my healthy self. In fact, it is an ongoing process. I traveled to the depths of my body at its most vulnerable point, and learned how to build up stamina through rest and ease.

The difficulty of recognizing and addressing burnout represents why research on gentleness is so necessary in the first place. In this way, my own experiences with gentleness while experiencing burnout are equally as valuable to share as the data from my workshop that follows. I experienced the irony of pushing too hard for a research topic that proposes the very

opposite: how starting from a place of gentleness may help our strength, our range, and our awareness in dance and in daily life. As burnout exists in numerous ways in the dance world and in daily life, we must address our approach to work and to workload. We must question how we place value on our bodies, our quest for productivity, and how practices in dance and in daily life affect our well-being. Many authors praise the ability of dance to establish new embodied understandings of our relations with others, of the world, and of our changing selves (e.g., Albright, 2009; Barbour, 2011, 2016; Cools, 2015; Fraleigh, 2015; Sarco-Thomas, 2013; Tsouvala & Magos, 2016; Warburton, 2011). Thus, the dance studio is an ideal place for experimentation and to practise ways of living out our lives in a safe space.

The purpose of my research was to uncover dancers' embodied experiences of gentleness through an improvisational dance process. My literature review highlights key concepts related to my study to provide context on gentleness in dance studies. In particular, I outline literature on the concept of embodiment, including how it is understood by scholars in different fields and how it operates in dance studies more specifically. I argue for the necessity of developing one's embodiment as a dancer to be healthier and more adaptable. Next, I provide background on improvisation in dance, including the qualities, benefits, and applications of experimenting through movement. I continue with a brief section of past literature on gentleness, which mainly outlines research about somatic studies. My literature review concludes with the research questions I developed from a gap in the reviewed literature. I then introduce my methodology for this research. Situated within an interpretive paradigm using an arts-based research methodology, I outline my research design, ethical considerations, and the methods used to conduct my data collection and analysis. Finally, I discuss the results from the participants' experiences and

understandings of gentleness and conclude with new directions for future research into gentleness.

Literature Review

In this section, I provide context on current understandings of embodiment, improvisation, and gentleness, particularly as they pertain to dance studies. Having anchored my research through the concept of embodiment, I first investigate the nature of embodiment itself: what it means to be embodied, what embodiment provides for the individual, and how dance can be an embodying process. Next, I delve into improvisation in dance as a form of embodiment. Improvisation enlivens dancers' bodily sensations and the connections between their internal and external environments. Finally, I look more specifically at gentleness as a concept that can be embodied and question the lack of research on using gentleness as a guiding force in dance. Ultimately, my study aims to lay the groundwork for how gentleness can be understood within the concept of embodiment and through the method of dance improvisation.

Embodiment

Embodiment is a complex and multidimensional term, frequently used by scholars who study the dancing body (e.g., Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; Barbour, 2011, 2015, 2016; Batson, Quin, & Wilson, 2011; Clarke, 2007; Davidson, 2016; de Lima, 2013; Fraleigh, 2015; Glaser, 2015; O'Flynn et al., 2013; Roche, 2011, 2016; Tsouvala & Magos, 2016; Ulmer, 2015; Warburton, 2011; Winters, 2008). Ulmer (2015) writes that embodiment "is a concept that encompasses many different definitions" (p. 37). Despite how ubiquitously *embodiment* is used, the concept lacks a common definition with which all scholars agree. Shilling (2003) highlights problems in conjecturing about the body when the physical body is often absent within "dominant conceptions of self-identity in the literature" (p. 178). Coupled with this absent body

is the issue of how embodiment is understood and used as a concept: Shilling (2003) argues that many approaches to understanding the body are passed off "as general theories when they actually revolve around the conceptualization of completely different and often equally partial views of embodiment" (p. 178). Thus, Shilling (2003) identifies the difficulty in theorizing the role of the body when we cannot even agree on what embodiment means.

Fraleigh (2015) also identifies incongruity among the definitions of embodiment. She marvels at the popularity of using the term, *embodiment*, in academic writing, "as though one had to do something to be embodied! Are we not embodied in being born?" (p. 162). Yet, Fraleigh (2015) further clarifies, "there is more to embodiment than just being here. Embodiment also promises an activity if we are to do it well and not just hang out with it" (p. 162). With this statement, Fraleigh (2015) suggests that embodiment demands a certain level of attention to one's body. It is not enough to be a body; rather, one must act in a specific, attentive way to become embodied. Thus, how we use the word, *embodiment*, depends on how we understand what it means to be embodied in the first place. Finally, Fraleigh (2015) highlights that dance "is fundamental to doing embodiment well" (p. 162). As she writes: "When we dance, we can fulfill ourselves, what we might be, what we are, and what we are becoming" (p. 162).

Definitions of embodiment. Amidst the confusion and contradiction involved in defining embodiment, some scholars agree that embodiment remedies Cartesian dualism, or the separation of body and mind (Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; Batson et al., 2011; Tsouvala & Magos, 2016). For example, from the field of cognitive neuroscience, some scholars frame embodiment as a move "away from Cartesian dualism between body and mind, towards a more integrative (albeit cognitive) understanding of human existence" (Varela et al., 1991 & Gibbs, 2006 in Batson et al., 2011, p. 185). The more specific term, *embodied cognition*, has developed

from cognitive neuroscience to address how "all aspects of cognition (ideas, thoughts, concepts) are shaped by bodily experience" (Varela et al., 1991 in Batson et al., 2011, p. 186). Similarly, Winters (2008) highlights that scientific research has historically separated the mind and body; however, research is now recognizing that the mind and body "are part of the same integrated system" (p. 89). Echoing this integrating nature of embodiment, Tsouvala and Magos (2016) emphasize how embodied knowledge places "the body in the center of all social action, experience, learning and research" (p. 30). These unifying understandings of embodiment reveal that the intellect does not operate independently from the physical body; rather, the two are integrated in a holistic functioning of the individual.

Further defining the concept of embodiment, Ulmer (2015) categorizes meanings of embodiment through different theoretical perspectives. She outlines phenomenological, new materialist, and Deleuzian understandings of embodiment, as well as contributions from the field of somatics. Ulmer (2015) notes that the concept of embodiment within dance research is often linked with "phenomenology and its related emphases upon experience and perception" (p. 38). Dance phenomenologists often rely upon Merleau-Ponty's "theory of embodiment" that situates the physical body as the source of an individual's experiences and understanding (p. 38). In short, "the body determines what shows up in our world" (Warburton, 2011 cited in Ulmer, 2015, p. 38). However, new materialism depends more on the materiality of the body rather than essential descriptions of movers' experiences (Ulmer, 2015). Embodiment takes on a different meaning, where it "is a matter not of being specifically situated in the world, but rather of being in the world in its dynamic specificity" (Barad, 2007 cited in Ulmer, 2015, p. 39). Rather than simply describing the experiences of a dancer, new materialists emphasize "dancers as knowing beings within dynamic systems of movement" (p. 39). Thus, through a new materialist

understanding of embodiment, the dancer gains agency and validity as an embodied knower (p. 39). Exploring the nature of embodiment further still, a Deleuzian perspective on the moving body links "materialism and expressionism" (p. 39). The body, according to Deleuze, "is ultimately an embodied memory" (Braidotti, 1999 cited in Ulmer, 2015, p. 39-40). Following this concept, some Deleuzian dance scholars "explore dance as a plural form of movement" (p. 40). Thus, a Deleuzian perspective of embodiment destabilizes the notion of a fixed bodily identity (Ulmer, 2015).

Embodiment also holds significance within the domain of somatics (Barbour, 2016; Batson et al., 2011; Eddy, 2009; Tsouvala & Magos, 2016; Ulmer, 2015). In the 1970s, Thomas Hanna developed the term, *somatics* (Fortin, Long, & Lord, 2002; Ulmer, 2015), to understand the body not as an object, but as "an embodied process of internal awareness and communication" (Green, 2002 cited in Ulmer, 2015, p. 37). More akin to a loose conglomeration of techniques rather than a distinct field (Eddy, 2009), somatics is "a collection of disciplines based on embodiment and sensory awareness" (Tsouvala & Magos, 2016, p. 30). Within somatics, "movement and awareness" are explored hand-in-hand, allowing the individual to learn experientially and pay attention to sensation (Ulmer, 2015, p. 37). In this way, somatic techniques also challenge Cartesian dualism, as they integrate the mind and body.

While embodiment may be best understood for unifying the mind and body, it plays many more roles in the moving individual's life. Barbour (2011) describes the magnitude of the concept, approaching embodiment from a holistic understanding of the individual: "Embodiment encompasses an individual person's biological (somatic), intellectual, emotional, social, gendered, artistic and spiritual experience, within their cultural, historical and geographical location" (p. 88). Embodiment, then, appears to integrate more than the mind and body. An

individual's embodiment develops from all facets of their being combined with the complexity of their environment. Embodiment is not simply a way of moving or being aware of one's body; rather, the process of becoming embodied involves the full cultural, social, and personal engagement of the moving individual. Barbour and Hitchmough (2014) echo this comprehensive experience of the individual. They use the concept of embodiment in contemporary dance "to simultaneously and holistically incorporate our differently nuanced and experienced constellations of cultural, social, intellectual, political, historical, spiritual, biological, artistic, environmental and emotional lives" (p. 64). While Barbour and Hitchmough's (2014) definition of embodiment may seem convoluted, it makes clear how embodiment addresses the richness and complexity of living in a moving body.

Other scholars also address the multifaceted nature of embodiment. Similar to Barbour (2011), O'Flynn et al. (2013) explore the multidimensional make-up of embodiment. O'Flynn et al. (2013) recognize embodiment "as being shaped by both the corporeal, sensations of the body and discursive meanings" (p. 131). Embodiment cannot be reduced solely to the experience of the physical body or to constructed meanings about the body, because both exist together at once (O'Flynn et al., 2013). Alexias and Dimitropoulou (2011) highlight the social aspect of embodiment, as embodiment "enables us to comprehend the manifestation of social behaviour as being inseparable from the body" (p. 87). Tsouvala and Magos (2016) view embodiment as a comprehensive concept, writing that embodiment "refers to multimodal, experiential, pre-reflective, practical, and tacit knowledge" (p. 29). Thus, embodiment not only encapsulates many parts of our being, but also the kinds of knowledge we develop and understand through our bodies.

In summary, the definitions of embodiment are as varied and complex as the scholars who employ the concept. Embodiment is often a remedy to Cartesian dualism, where the mind and body are integrated as a whole. The physical body is more than just an object; it is an experiencing vessel of perception, creating new knowledge stores through bodily experiences. Yet, embodiment means more than simply a mind/body integrator. Embodiment incorporates many aspects of the individual, such as emotional, social, spiritual, and environmental factors. Barbour (2011) underscores that, "most importantly, embodiment can also be understood through movement, an embodied activity" (p. 88). In this vein, I see movement as essential to understanding ourselves. It is important to understand embodiment so we can explore how it integrates all aspects of ourselves.

The necessity of embodiment. Perhaps dance scholars' desire to understand embodiment in its entirety stems from the need to improve the lives of dancers. The physical demands and social expectations of being in the dance world can place unnecessary stress on a dancer's body and sense of self. In an attempt to fulfill these physical and social demands, a dancer often becomes disembodied: She becomes less connected to or even ignores her bodily sensations and personal identity in favour of an illusive bodily ideal (e.g., Aalten, 2007; Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; McEwen & Young, 2011; O'Flynn et al., 2013). Due to the glorification of the 'sylph', the disembodied female dancer – often a ballet dancer – diets herself to the extreme to be as slim as possible (Aalten, 2007, p. 114). In addition, mirrors in the dance classroom often act as bodily surveillance, promoting the need for "the 'ideal' slim, toned, and fit body" (O'Flynn et al., 2013, p. 135). The dancer body, particularly the female dancer body, ironically becomes a passive body that is "looked at" (Thomas, 1993 cited in O'Flynn et al., 2013, p. 131). McEwen and Young (2011) similarly research the disembodied dancer body,

revealing how ballet dancers dissociate from daily pain as a result of competition and hypercritical bodily awareness. Barr and Oliver (2016) highlight dancers' hypercritical behaviour, particularly related to issues of body image in the dance technique class and the longstanding history of the "perfect body" (p. 102). While concerns of dancers' pain, injury tolerance, and self-esteem are often studied in the ballet context, they are important factors that affect contemporary dancers, as well (e.g., Markula, 2015; Thomas & Tarr, 2009). Although I have spent much of my two decades of dance training in supportive environments, I have certainly struggled with the emotional ride of injury and pain, as well as sometimes debilitating low self-esteem as a dancer.

Perhaps Alexias and Dimitropoulou (2011) best summarize the current crisis in dance training:

> The results of this research [on ballet dancers' embodiment] emphasise the irony of an art that is dedicated to the beauty and grace of the human body often being associated with mental, emotional and physical abuse by the subjects embodying the art of dance. (p. 99)

It is sobering that while dance brings so much joy to a dancer, it can also harm a dancer through unhealthy training and negative beliefs about the body. Embodiment plays a key role in a dancer's safety, well-being, and empowerment. A dancer gains autonomy of their own body: Tuning in to their bodily sensations in the moment allows them to make decisions that support their desires and their personal well-being.

Benefits of cultivating embodiment. Although the abundance of definitions of embodiment can sometimes create confusion, it also reveals the many benefits of embodiment for the dancer and community. Expanding the discourse around embodiment creates "new sets of embodied knowledges and embodied knowers" (Longley, 2009 in Ulmer, 2015, p. 37). One

benefit of being embodied is the improvement of an individual's perceptive abilities. According to de Lima (2013), perception "is scientifically acknowledged as the fundamental means of self-consciousness, and therefore the pillar of knowledge" (p. 27). By increasing perception skills through an embodied practice such as contemporary dance, dancers can better access their proprioceptive system and experience the delicate balance involved in this system (de Lima, 2013). In addition, an increased "somatic awareness" may even allow dancers "an enhanced access to those unconscious levels of perception" (p. 25). Accessing these unconscious levels creates a "particular ability to vividly perceive the somatic process of thought" (p. 25). Rather than always articulating our thinking verbally (de Lima, 2013), we can demonstrate our thinking through movement with the help of embodied practices like contemporary dance.

Many authors cite dance as a means to explore embodiment and therefore increase new understandings we have about the world (e.g., Barbour, 2011, 2016; Batson et al., 2011; de Lima, 2013; Tsouvala & Magos, 2016). Engaging embodied knowledge and learning can "generate multiple meanings within diverse artistic and educational environments" (Tsouvala & Magos, 2016, p. 29). These "embodied ways of knowing" allow us to understand ourselves and our environment as we consolidate various kinds of knowledge through our own bodies (Barbour, 2011, p. 91). In this way, Barbour (2011) identifies how "embodied knowledge is developed from experiencing knowledge as constructed, contextual and embodied" (p. 95). This approach to understanding knowledge as embodied recognizes the knowledge-making capabilities of the individual (p. 95). Barbour (2011) stresses the importance of honouring how we come to know through our embodied experiences, "such as dancing or paddling or playing the violin" (p. 95). She further describes the experimentation involved when our understandings of knowledge as embodied rub up against "dominant knowledge" (p. 96). As Barbour (2011)

writes: “In living out the possibilities, we experience and evaluate knowledge, sometimes discarding knowledge that is not relevant or liveable in our own lives. In this sense, embodied ways of knowing foreground knowing as creatively living in the world” (p. 96). Exploring the range of living in an embodied way allows a person the flexibility of problem-solving and adapting to change, both in the dance studio and in everyday life. The key to developing embodied knowledge is to live through a problem, to physically work through new combinations of ideas to develop new meanings about ourselves and the issues in our world. Researching embodiment through dance expands the definition of how we learn as humans.

In developing how we learn through the body, we develop our sense of self as dancers and humans in the world. In understanding ourselves, we develop a sense of belonging and connection to others around us. As Warburton (2011) writes, “dance is fundamentally about making those connections: to self, to others, to the world, and beyond” (p. 65). Dancing allows a dancer to develop “a sense of beingness in the here-and-now” along with feeling “a oneness with a larger entity” (p. 68). In other words, developing our embodiment through dance lets us simultaneously explore the minutiae of our bodies and the vastness of the world. Similarly, Barbour (2016) writes that “somatic, yoga and dance practices have the potential to connect personal experiences to our communities and the world” (p. 190). Through using somatic techniques in a contemporary dance class, for example, we understand our bodies in new ways that nurture “a new position from which to view the world” (Fortin et al., 2002 in Barbour, 2016, p. 193). Fraleigh (2015) echoes this relationship between one’s self and the world: “We dance to generate who we can become, indeed to realize more abundant embodiment and world-friendly connectivity” (p. 164). To be embodied is to enact processes “of self-becoming, of relational-belonging, and of our belonging to the world’s body” (p. 164). Our embodiment encompasses

our interactions with others and how we treat our planet (Fraleigh, 2015). Thus, exploring our embodiment through dance "makes it possible to gain an understanding of the self, of the others and of the larger world[,] thus offering the possibility of change" (Shapiro, 1998 in Tsouvala & Magos, 2016, p. 30). An individual can use dance as a way to navigate and create change within the fluctuating dynamics of society.

Exploring embodiment through dance can also foster greater empathy in the individual and community, especially kinesthetic empathy. Empathetic capacity is heightened in dance compared to other activities: "Empathetic response is arguably what most differentiates dancing from other skilled physical activities, such as running and sports; furthermore, the varieties of empathetic response in dance are arguably what distinguish dance from other performing arts" (Foster, 2011 cited in Warburton, 2011, p. 71). This quality of empathy makes dance particularly unique as it connects people viscerally and emotionally. Albright (2009) discusses findings from neurology that locate "internal perception" of one's body as essential to understanding another person's emotions (p. 149). She underscores that "the more aware we are of our own internal sensations, the more empathetic we are with other people" (p. 149). As we become individually embodied as dancers, we can better relate to people around us and affect how they relate to us. Barbour (2011) advocates "maintaining an awareness of, and respect for, diverse lived experiences" to increase our ability "to empathize kinaesthetically with others" (p. 100). Further, by using the arts to represent research, we can also allow "our audiences to empathize kinaesthetically with others" (p. 100). In this way, dance becomes a powerhouse for transformation, as experiences are shared between the individual body and the collective body.

Albright (2009) uses somatic practices in contemporary dance to emphasize this embodied exchange between the self and the world. She encourages dancers to use imagination

along with physical techniques to allow the world to "enter the space of their bodies" (p. 149). In doing so, the individual self is not experienced as an independent entity acting in the world; rather, "the self becomes an interdependent part that flows through and with the world" (p. 150). In developing our own embodiment through dance, we not only affect the embodiment of those around us, but also expand our relationship with the world that exists outside ourselves.

In summary, there are numerous benefits to developing one's embodiment and access to embodied knowledge through dance. In developing a heightened somatic awareness, dancers access new kinds of knowledge and perception, which broaden their understandings of themselves and the world. These new understandings help dancers to problem-solve and experiment, both in the dance studio and in their daily lives. Uncovering ways of knowing through the body allows dancers to live more creatively and dynamically. Through dance, we connect to audiences and people in our lives on a more visceral and emotional level. Thus, our embodiment can nurture the kinesthetic empathy and relationships we share with others.

Legitimizing bodily ways of knowing through dance research. Exploring embodiment through dance extends understandings of how humans use their bodies to learn, including outside of the dance studio. Movement can be understood as "the originating ground of our sense-makings" (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999 cited in Barbour, 2011, p. 89). Our interaction with our environment through the senses allows us to learn about and interact with the world. Thus, our "movement experience is of profound epistemological significance" (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999 in Barbour, 2011, p. 89). In this vein, Barbour (2011) calls for "embodied engagement" in research, whether one's research involves a creative practice or not (p. 86). She argues that the performing arts, such as dance, continue to be important "in expressing individual human embodied experience in an increasingly virtual and global world" (p. 86). Barbour (2011) advocates for

artistic research, as the role of artists in society is important: “Artists have the potential to significantly contribute to the generation of new understandings, not only of artistic practice, but also to knowledge and to society in general” (p. 86). Increasing access to our senses and embodied knowledge through dance can strengthen our connection with ourselves and our greater environments. As Batson et al. (2011) stress, “research in dance should always reflect the most basic tenet of movement and dance – to understand what makes us humanly unique and uniquely human” (p. 189). Through valuing embodied knowledge, one values “experiential and emotional ways of knowing” (Barbour & Hitchmough, 2014, p. 66). These ways of knowing are undoubtedly part of what make humans human. To move is to be human; to be embodied is to honour the richness of our ‘human-ness’.

Interestingly, O’Flynn et al. (2013) seek not to “*resolve*” differing views on embodiment, but rather to “*explore*” the concept (p. 132, my emphasis). I take this to be my goal as well: to contribute meaningful discussion to the vast scope of embodiment and what it means for a dancer’s physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness. In my research, I use the term, *embodiment*, to describe how an individual experiences and develops a concept (be it physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, cultural) through the body in space. Through dance improvisation, we can explore abstract concepts by playing with different qualities of movement and sensation. I now describe qualities of improvisation in dance and the ways in which improvising enriches a dancer’s embodiment.

Dance Improvisation

Similar to embodiment, dance improvisation can be difficult to define through one universal description. This is likely due to the ephemeral and ever-changing nature of improvisation, where “improvisations require different styles of thought at different moments in

their evolution" (Tufnell & Crickmay, 2014, Introduction). Improvisation in dance is often "described as an unrehearsed and spontaneous form of dance" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2017, p. 8). However, as Sheets-Johnstone (2017) urges, the creative process in an improvised dance "is not the means of realizing *a* dance; it is *the* dance itself. A dance improvisation is the incarnation of creativity as process. Its future is thus open" (p. 8, her emphasis). Similarly, Tufnell and Crickmay (2014) approach improvisation "as a source of creativity and as a way of opening imagination" (p. xi). As the authors suggest, "improvisation is a way of shifting the boundaries within which we experience our world" (p. xi). From these descriptions, it is clear there is no 'how-to-guide' on improvising in dance. Rather, to engage in any kind of direct research with improvisation, one must rely on the qualities, benefits, and explorations of improvisation. As dance improvisation is a rich and vibrant process, I would argue there are innumerable qualities and benefits one could list. However, I outline several major aspects of improvisation here, including: specific sensorial knowledge gained through improvising; connecting to one's self; playing with the unknown; and connecting to everyday life through improvisation.

Sensorial knowledge gained through improvisation. Through improvising in dance, dancers can access the unique embodied knowledge within themselves. This embodied knowledge often develops through focusing on sensation in the body. As de Lima (2013) writes, artistic practice, such as dance, is "a technology that develops a specialized access to sensorial perception" (p. 19). Through improvising in dance, the individual gains access to an abundance of possibilities in "an extended sensuous environment" (Sarco-Thomas, 2013, p. 91). Therefore, improvising feeds "our intuitive and imaginative world" (Crickmay, 2008, p. 1). Rather than being the means to an end goal, the body becomes a laboratory of sensation whereby the dancer can access finer states of perception and experience. For example, Hunter (2011) describes how

she and her dancers created a site-specific dance piece by first discovering the space "on a purely intuitive level, gathering experiential data" of the environment (p. 30). In this way, the improvising body acts as an archive of sensations and observations (Kendall, 2016; Sarco-Thomas, 2013).

Sarco-Thomas (2013) echoes the significance of improvisation in extending our sensual perception:

> Improvisation-based technologies that encourage movers to take perception seriously and explore affinities for moving 'like' another thing can develop the usefulness of our 'fleshy antennae' and provoke questions of how far these sensory motilities can be tools for research and communication. Engaging with such technologies through performance has the potential to provoke further examination of the kinaesthetically and affectively charged knowledges produced by one body moving, with curiosity, in relation to another. (p. 91)

In this way, the moving, sensing body uncovers new ways to communicate, learn about, and contribute to its world. Not only does improvising through movement promote heightened sensorial embodiment in the individual, but it also uncovers vital knowledge for the dance researcher to understand the dancing body. The process of improvising in dance is a form of research in itself: The dancer and dance researcher learn new ways of communicating and sensing in a particular moment and space.

Developing one's sense of self through improvisation. Tapping into one's sensory body facilitates an awareness of one's self, where one can explore past histories, imagination, and personal experiences (de Wit, 1994, p. 103). Rimmer (2013) uses improvisation in dance with her students "as an entrée to ownership and embodiment for one's own dancing rather than for

generating movement material" (cited in Barr & Oliver, 2016, p. 107). Thus, the dancers become invested in their own embodiment rather than focusing solely on the requirements of an external teacher or choreographer. This individual investment in one's dance echoes the empowerment found by the embodied dancer. Movement improvisation promotes access to sensorial knowledge (e.g., Sarco-Thomas, 2013) and thus can develop a dancer's body awareness. In turn, this newfound awareness, or embodiment, can help a dancer develop their sense of self as well as their role in the world (e.g., Warburton, 2011). Harrop (2014) beautifully describes the process of improvising in dance and what it can teach us:

> Through improvisation we are able to learn about ourselves in a wider context, beyond the dance studio, or performance arena. Being a dancer in an improvised performance can be about having the courage to embark on the journey of reflection and discovery, and paying homage to the findings of that journey. (p. 137)

Therefore, improvisation also requires a certain level of vulnerability and risk-taking from the dancer. The improvisation process may be "personally intense," potentially altering a dancer "from the inside – physically, mentally and emotionally" (p. 135). Despite these challenges, an improviser's vulnerability actually "allows the audience into the improvisation" (p. 132). An improviser can connect with an audience through honesty in movement (Harrop, 2014), attending to the sensations and impulses of the moment rather than trying to please an audience. Thus, improvisation challenges dancers to focus on personal sensation in their environment, rather than to focus on external rewards or demands from an audience.

Play and experimentation: possibilities in the unknown. Within improvisation lies an enormity of possibility. Improvisation "is living at the edge of the unknown" and therefore is necessarily creative and spontaneous (Crickmay, 2008, p. 1). Through improvising, dancers can

explore movement outside of their habitual patterns, finding themselves "in worlds that [they] can feel at home in and yet are new to [them]" (p. 2). Ritsema (2007) highlights the possibilities in improvisation by describing unknown worlds in improvised performance as "border zones" (p. 25-26). Within this zone, "things spring into action . . . almost of [their] own accord" (p. 26). Not only does the presence of a border zone provide new opportunities for movement creation, but it also destabilizes the elements of performance, from movement techniques to representation styles to lighting (p. 26). For example, Preece (2016) experiments with light and temporality in her dialogical improvisation with trees during the solstice months. She plays with her writing as well as her dancing, writing of being "a gravitational marionette: a dancer of and between sunrise and sunset . . ." (p. 237). Edensor and Bowdler (2015) describe the play involved in certain improvised, site-specific dances as "destabilising fixed meanings and purposes" (p. 713). Thus, play is a tool to become "conscious of practices and relationships we enact or engage without thinking" (Woodyer, 2012 cited in Edensor & Bowdler, 2015, p. 713). In this way, I see play as a means to reflect on aspects of daily life by experimenting through spontaneous movement-making. These movement experimentations uncover an embodied understanding of how we normally act or think in society and can contribute to new understandings of our current habits.

Improvisation in dance and everyday life. While playing with movement may seem specific to dance as an art form, it is something we do all the time in our daily lives. Fulkerson uses the analogy of "crossing the street" to underscore how we are constantly improvising in 'real life', even through the simple actions of choosing how, when, and where to cross a street (cited in de Wit, 1994, p. 105). Similarly, Tufnell (2008) compares the process of improvisation with conversing: As in a conversation, improvisation allows a person to be "drawn along in the moment by moment flow of sensation, interchange and choice, rather than a predetermined

intention or idea" (cited in Cools, 2015, p. 3). Paxton suggests that "improvisation is happening every minute," because we are constantly adjusting to the world around us (cited in de Wit, 1994, p. 105).

From these examples, it seems only logical that developing one's improvisation skills through dance can benefit one's problem-solving skills needed in everyday life. Whether inside or outside of the dance studio, improvising involves building relationships with one's own body, other people in the space, and the space itself. In this vein, improvisation is "generative," "relational," and "temporal" (Hallam & Ingold, 2007 in Cools, 2015, p. 6). Sarco-Thomas (2013) suggests that improvisation as performance can move us "towards practicing more nuanced perceptions of body and world," where performing becomes "the practical solution to sharing immediate, embodied discoveries" (p. 83). Albright (2009) outlines how exploring aspects of Contact Improvisation, such as how to use gravity and how to fall, can stabilize dancers in everyday life (p. 147). Thus, she explores "the connections between the physical sensation of gravity and the spiritual sense of being grounded in the world" (p. 144). In this way, the physical elements explored in dance improvisation can establish emotional or spiritual security for the individual in an ever-changing global context. If we already move and improvise all the time in daily life, perhaps we can affect our daily living through improvised explorations in the dance studio. How might dancers explore the concept of gentleness through dance improvisation, and what might this improvisation reveal about the dancers and their world?

Gentleness in Dance

Through improvising, a dancer may become more embodied, refining the awareness of their body and surroundings. However, despite frequently employing embodiment as a concept in dance studies, many scholars highlight the continued harshness of dance training on the

dancer's body and well-being (e.g., Aalten, 2007; Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; Barr & Oliver, 2016; McEwen & Young, 2011; O'Flynn et al., 2013). Not surprisingly, then, the term, *gentleness*, rarely appears in the dance literature. Some dance scholars propose introducing gentler approaches to training: Usually, gentleness is advocated through the use of relaxed warm-ups and cool-downs in dance technique classes (e.g., Malina, 2012) or through the use of somatic techniques (e.g., Ahsan, 2010; Diaz, Chatfield, & Cox, 2008; Eddy, 2009; Fortin et al., 2002; Williamson, 2009; Wozny, 2012).

Gentleness is sometimes mentioned in relation to warming up the body at the start of a dance class, where gentle movement is advised before performing rigorous activity (Malina, 2012, p. 23). Easily moving the joints allows the synovial fluid to act as a better joint lubricant (p. 24). This joint warm-up is especially important for 'mature movers', as "joint range [tends] to decrease with age" (Brodie & Lobel, 2016, p. 51). From my own dance experience, it seems common knowledge that, regardless of age, a dancer should ease into movement with a thorough warm-up to prevent injury or strain in a class or rehearsal.

Similar to the ease involved in warming up, somatic techniques encourage heightened body listening and "finding answers to bodily needs . . . through internal bodily awareness" (Eddy, 2009, p. 6). The conditioning, awakening, enlivening, and repatterning involved in somatic techniques often require a gentle approach, using easy touch and/or soft awareness on one's body (Eddy, 2009). Within somatics research, one often begins from a "gravity-reduced state," such as lying down, in order to "pay attention to bodily sensations emerging from within" (p. 6). Somatic practitioners often use gentle manipulations to "re-educate" an individual's body to move more efficiently and healthily (Ahsan, 2010, p. 47). Some dancers may even find these adjustments "too gentle" if they are used to the rigour of dance training; however, the slowness

and gentleness of the movement in somatics help the brain repattern movement in the body (p. 47).

More and more, contemporary dance classes incorporate somatic techniques to foster healthier movement and behavioural patterns in the dancer (e.g., Barbour, 2016; Diaz et al., 2008; Fortin et al., 2002; Fortin, Vieira, & Tremblay, 2009). For example, Barbour (2016) uses yoga and other somatic techniques within her dance class. As the students move as a group, they participate in "a gentle, improvisational, sensory engagement," where they can decide on their level of participation and rest (p. 193). I agree that using somatic techniques can greatly benefit a dancer's health and efficiency while dancing. Indeed, my personal practice as a dancer, choreographer, and teacher has been revolutionized through the gentleness and awareness gained through somatics.

However, in the dance literature, the word, *gentleness*, is either non-existent or rarely present. While gentle or soft movement is encouraged in somatic studies (e.g., Ahsan, 2010; Diaz et al., 2008; Eddy, 2009), the term, *gentleness*, is not often explicitly featured. In addition, although I recognize that contemporary dance teachers may use somatics in their technique classes (e.g., Barbour, 2016), I question how dancers are actually integrating principles of gentleness into their daily dance habits and mindsets. Why is a gentle approach to one's body and sense of self not always at the forefront of dance training? After experiencing the tangible nature of gentleness in my own body from my intuition to "be gentle," I know how powerful gentleness, as a word and concept, can be. Similar words, such as *soft* or *light*, do not have the same emotional and relational impact as *gentleness*. Thus, from my experiences of gentleness, I wonder how overtly using gentleness as a guiding principle for embodied explorations can affect dancers in their training and daily lives. Though not my specific research questions, these

important questions articulate the need for more gentleness in dance. Based on the gap in previous dance research, I thus investigated how dancers experience and make sense of the concept of gentleness in dance and how these experiences affect their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

Research in embodiment and dance improvisation supports the need to actively incorporate gentleness in dance. Alexias and Dimitropoulou (2011) lament that dance is supposed to celebrate the human body, but often causes harm to dancers when they develop unhealthy relationships to their bodies while training. Thus, incorporating gentleness in a dancer's life aims to address this harm and promote embodiment in a more accessible way. Instead of ignoring bodily sensations and personal needs, dancers may use an approach to gentleness to connect with parts of their bodies and selves they may normally ignore. Embodied dancers are more holistically integrated, as their mind, body, and all aspects of themselves function as one moving body (e.g., Barbour, 2011). Dancers also have access to more ways of knowing when dancers are more embodied, such as "experiential and emotional ways of knowing" (Barbour & Hitchmough, 2014, p. 66) and knowledge from "our intuitive and imaginative world" (Crickmay, 2008, p. 1). These ways of knowing allow dancers to explore new meanings in their own lives and the world. Focusing on gentleness in dance through improvisation may open up pathways to new knowledge by encouraging dancers to attune to their senses and to learn problem-solving skills in a safe and playful environment.

Perhaps closest to my understanding of gentleness as a deeply embodied method for dancers is Julyen Hamilton's beautiful description of stillness in dance: "Stillness is a quality of mind and body that you ideally always carry with you. And if you can tap into that stillness it seems to stimulate movement from a much deeper and more universal source" (in Mackrell,

1992 cited in Harrop, 2014, p. 135). Similar to a state of stillness, an approach to gentleness encourages the body, mind, and spirit to work together, where the body is prepared for all kinds of movement experiences to come.

Conclusion

Through reviewing the literature on embodiment, improvisation, and gentleness, I was led to question how contemporary dancers make sense of gentleness for themselves. What are contemporary dancers' embodied experiences of gentleness, as explored through dance improvisation? How does gentleness manifest through the body in a dance improvisation process? These questions guided my research on the effects of gentleness in a dancer's life. I now turn to the methodology I used to gather and analyze data for my research on gentleness.

Methodology

Qualitative Framework

My study explored contemporary dancers' experiences of gentleness in dance through improvisation and how these experiences affected their movement and relationship with themselves and others. In addition, my study investigated how gentleness manifested during a dance improvisation process, both for the participants and for myself as a facilitator. This research fit well within a qualitative framework, as it sought data about gentleness by "interact[ing] directly with people and events" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 5). My process of improvisation directly involved dancing with and observing the dancers as we explored gentleness together. I was interested in mapping the concept of gentleness to understand how dancers make meanings of gentleness in dance and their lives. Markula and Silk (2011) define mapping as a "research project that aims to provide a general overview or 'topography' of a behaviour, phenomenon, practice or 'field' of physical culture" (p. 8). Mapping is especially

useful when little is known about the subject matter (Markula & Silk, 2011). My research on gentleness in dance aimed to uncover individual experiences and meanings of a relatively abstract concept in the field of dance.

I situated my research within the humanist, interpretive paradigm. Based on the ontological basis that there is one reality, but multiple ways to understand it, the interpretive paradigm aims "to understand the individuals' behaviours, meanings and experiences within particular social settings" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 31). Through the improvisational dance process, I desired to understand the meanings individual dancers developed in understanding gentleness through their bodies. Within the interpretive paradigm, individuals come to an understanding of reality in their own way. As such, knowledge is considered to be subjective, as people "create knowledge through a subjective meaning-making process" (p. 33). My dancers created their own meanings of gentleness through the embodied knowledge cultivated through dancing. I also directly participated in the research as a simultaneous participant and observer/researcher in the dance improvisation explorations; thus, my own experiences with dance improvisation and gentleness informed this research process. I remained self-reflexive in researching a concept so close to my heart and discuss the issue of self-reflexivity later in this chapter in "Issues of Representation."

Arts-Based Research Methodology

Within the interpretive paradigm, and using the concept of embodiment, I adopted an arts-based methodology to frame my research. There are numerous ways to define what constitutes arts-based research, or ABR. In addition, while some researchers use *arts-based research* (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Conrad & Beck, 2015; Leavy, 2015), others use *arts-informed research* (Cole & Knowles, 2008), *art-based research* (McNiff, 2008), *artistic inquiry* (Hervey,

2000), or *practice-as-research* (Gardner, 2012; Piccini & Kershaw, 2003). These terms often refer to different purposes or levels of engagement with the arts or may vary based on geographical location or field of study (Sullivan, 2006). However, all variations depend on the arts in some way to conduct academic research. Conrad and Beck (2015) write that "arts-based methodological approaches are as varied as the artists and/or scholars who employ them" (p. 5). However, what "defines [these approaches] as arts-based, is the primacy given to interacting with and making art" (Conrad & Beck, 2015, p. 5). In line with this definition, my study engaged a dance improvisation process to uncover how a creative arts practice facilitated explorations into gentleness. Similarly, Hervey (2000) outlines three criteria for defining research as artistic inquiry: research that "uses artistic methods of gathering, analyzing, and/or presenting data"; that recognizes "a creative process"; and that is propelled "by the aesthetic values of the researcher(s)" (p. 7). My study addressed all three criteria. First, the dance improvisation process was the primary source of collecting data. Second, my research recognized the creative process inherently involved in dance improvisation: The dancers constantly devised movement and writing based on prompts, and I adapted my plans as the workshop naturally evolved. Finally, my research was driven by my own experiences with gentleness in dance and the power of improvising through movement to create this gentleness. Therefore, I relied on my values as a dancer/choreographer/improviser to design this study. Throughout my study, I use the term, *arts-based research*, or ABR, to refer to my engagement with an art-making practice.

Benefits of using arts-based research. There are numerous benefits to using arts-based research. Yet, as with any methodology, a researcher must choose something that suits the purpose of the proposed research study. I chose an arts-based methodology for several reasons. First, arts-based research proposes to "enrich an ongoing conversation" by "enhancing

uncertainty" (Barone, 1995 cited in Conrad and Beck, 2015, p. 6). While the concept of gentleness may be generally understood in an everyday setting, it can seem rather abstract in the dance context. The dance world can be tough, as a dancer's strength is based on physical prowess as well as mental and emotional fortitude. Mapping dancers' experiences of gentleness within the contemporary dance context requires a certain pushing the envelope of what is deemed 'normal' in contemporary dance training. Thus, my study sought to contribute to current discussions on dancer well-being by dynamically exploring gentleness through the dancing body. As improvisation necessarily relies on uncertainty to create something, using an arts-based approach for my research provided space to play with the unknown. Improvising provided the ideal medium for my dancers and me to explore new territory with gentleness in dance.

Second, arts-based research gives value to different ways of knowing and communicating knowledge, including bodily and sensorial knowing, intuitive knowing, and personal expression. I agree with Conrad and Beck's (2015) belief that arts-based "practices are fundamental to research and knowledge creation – fundamental to our very being" (p. 7). Researching through art accesses the many ways we come "to know through creating, embodiment, feelings, intuition, and spirit" (p. 11). My workshop process relied on how the dancers and I embodied different notions of gentleness, and I often used my intuition to sense in the moment what dancers needed next. Gardner (2012) emphasizes that universities define knowledge "through a selective inattention to bodily sensation and by apparently excluding aspects of experience that are, in consequence, deemed too private, personal or interpersonal" (p. 142). Using dance improvisation as the medium, I uncovered bodily knowledge that could not have been revealed without an embodied practice. Through improvisation, my study revealed valuable information about the relationship between vulnerability and gentleness. As Gardner (2012) explains of the role of a

practice: “Practices involve doing things, often without any intention of getting results” (p. 141). My research revolved around the practice of dance improvisation, rather than the creation of a dance performance for an audience. While the process of improvising in dance may indeed provide ‘results’ of finding new ways to move, its focus is on discovery in the moment and not on an end product.

Conclusion. Arts-based research methodologies rely on a diverse set of engagements with art practices. One may not necessarily be using arts-based research if one is simply researching an art form, such as dance, through traditional research methods. Although I employed several traditional methods of collecting data, such as field notes and interviews, I did so to collect data that always stemmed from the dance improvisation: Embodied experiences with gentleness happened in the studio, where participants moved and voiced their experiences. Thus, the process of dance improvisation was the heart of this study, and provided much of the data for this project.

Research Setting and Design

I structured the improvisation research workshop in a similar fashion to summer dance intensives, where dancers often dance every day up to a week or more. The dancers and I met for five days for three hours each day. I designed this time frame to provide an adequately immersive experience for the dancers to explore the embodiment of gentleness and to collect enough data to analyze. Meeting for three hours at a time allowed enough time for discussion before or after movement exercises. The improvisation workshop was conducted in a large dance studio to accommodate moving in the space. Each day, I actively participated in the improvisation and group discussions while also leading these exercises as the facilitator. Throughout the week, I also observed the dancers during our sessions and took detailed field

notes immediately after each session. Following the completion of the workshop, I conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant about their experiences during the week.

Sampling. In qualitative research, there are no strict rules about sample size; thus, the size of sample depends on the researcher's purpose of study (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 95). However, for qualitative research conducted at the master's level, Markula and Silk (2011) suggest that working with up to 10 participants is most feasible for the researcher (p. 95). Qualitative research selects participant samples "purposefully to seek answers to a specific research question" (p. 93). I defined my sample through convenience sampling, which selects "participants based on convenience [criteria] such as time-efficiency, cost or location" (p. 94). I sought potential participants from a contemporary and jazz dance group at the university, of which I have been a member for many years, as well as from local dancers I know in my community. In addition, I used snowball sampling, where I found one participant well-suited to my research purpose and asked them for suggestions on other participants who could be interested (Markula & Silk, 2011).

Finally, criterion sampling allowed me to select participants based on my predetermined criteria for the purpose of my study (Markula & Silk, 2011). My criteria were as follows:

- Over 18 years of age
- Have trained in contemporary dance for at least five years
- Are currently dancing, training, and/or performing in contemporary dance

I determined these criteria for several reasons. First, participants 18 years of age or older would have the ability to understand the nature of this study and could reflect on their current dance practices. Second, I was curious whether more experienced dancers, who have a varied and complex history with contemporary dance training, had experienced similar harshness to the

dance literature or had already experienced forms of gentleness in their training. I was interested in learning how gentleness fit into an established pattern of training and thinking about one's body. In addition, dancers with more training in contemporary dance could feel more comfortable with the improvisational prompts I provided, as they would have more experience than beginner dancers with abstraction in movement. Finally, as I was interested in the application of gentleness into contemporary dancers' lives, working with people who were currently active in the field of contemporary dance was important. This current involvement in contemporary dance would help dancers situate the concept of gentleness within their dance histories and current dance and life experiences.

For my master's research, I worked with three participants: two women and one man. I had an overwhelmingly positive reaction to my research proposal from potential participants, as almost 20 people were seriously interested in participating. However, many people could not take part due to scheduling issues. While it was initially difficult to find participants who could commit to the same time for the workshop, I was encouraged by the eagerness from the dance community. This significant response indicates a real craving for softness in the dance world. Though I had just three participants, this number was ideal for the level of vulnerability and intimate sharing required in the workshop. In fact, after conducting the workshop, I realized that more than three may have been overwhelming, both for the participants in feeling comfortable enough to share in a bigger group and for myself in collecting more data.

Ethical Considerations

Following approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta (Pro00081498), I sought participants for my study and began conducting my research. As my study involved working with "human subjects," I took appropriate measures to ensure my

"research participants [were] treated with dignity and respect" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 11). Since my research was conducted in a western culture, it revolved around the idea of respect as "the ideal of individual autonomy: a right to individual self-governance" (p. 15). My research supported the individual's autonomy, because it relied on the participants to share personal experiences both verbally and through movement. Thus, I took care to respect my participants' vulnerability and willingness to take creative and personal risks. I also supported participants by working in a safe and secluded studio space with a kind and welcoming atmosphere. As Markula and Silk (2011) stress, this "respect for human dignity is the base for all other principles of ethical research conduct" (p. 14). To practise ethical research in Canada, a research project must include these principles: obtaining "free and informed consent" from participants; addressing the needs of "vulnerable persons"; maintaining "privacy and confidentiality" of data collected; and ensuring "justice and inclusiveness" (p. 14). I now detail how each criterion of ethical research was addressed. I also outline specific ethical considerations for conducting arts-based research.

Free and informed consent. Once approved for ethical research, and once my participants were confirmed, I emailed participants an ethics board-approved information letter that explained the purpose of my study and how I would follow ethical research guidelines (see Appendix D). This letter also included the consent for participating, which participants signed at the workshop to signify they were participating "voluntarily, knowingly and freely" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 17) in the research project.

Vulnerable persons. I did not work with a vulnerable group, such as children, those with mental or physical disabilities, or the elderly (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 18). All my participants were over the age of 18 and thus able to understand the nature of the research project.

Privacy and confidentiality. I have ensured participants' anonymity by using pseudonyms any time participants' words or opinions are quoted in my thesis. This anonymity also covers non-direct quotes from participants, such as when I describe a participant's point of view, movement, or behaviour in the improvisation workshop. I describe these aspects of participants as they pertain to data for the study. To ensure the confidentiality of the empirical data collected, only my supervisor and myself had access to the data. Audio recordings of discussions and interviews, as well as written field notes, transcripts, and analyses, were stored on password-protected electronic devices and/or in a locked cabinet in my university office (such as in the case of field notes handwritten in a notebook). Personally identifying information, such as emails with participants and participants' contact information, will be deleted at the completion of this study. The consent forms and hard copies of interview transcripts will be destroyed five years after completing this study, following university protocol.

Justice and inclusiveness. As in any qualitative research project, my study aimed to benefit the participants in some way. Through researching the role of gentleness in a dancer's life, I sought to provide dancers with opportunities to find new meanings about themselves as dancers and as people. In addition, I hoped participants could uncover strategies to incorporate gentleness into their dance practices and thus improve their well-being as dancers.

Although I did not identify any particular harm from this study, I acknowledged that dance improvisation would involve working emotionally as well as physically. This research often required dancers to be open and vulnerable. Sometimes, they shared personal and/or painful experiences from their past dance training in the group discussions or individual interviews. In addition, I was aware that exploring movement through the body could open up emotions from past or present experiences. To address these concerns, I maintained respect and

awareness for the participants' wellness as we progressed throughout the study. I constantly checked in with dancers about how they were feeling throughout the workshop and interviews. I also provided the name of a counseling service in case a dancer needed to discuss an experience more fully with a professional.

Particular ethical concerns for arts-based research. Within the context of qualitative research in the arts, Sinding, Gray, and Nisker's (2008) article stresses that researching through new forms requires new responsibilities and awareness from the researcher. Sinding et al. (2008) raise important questions about ethical concerns related to arts-based research processes and representations. While the authors focus primarily on the ethics of "artistic representation[s] of research findings" (p. 459), their guidelines are helpful here to outline some of the implications for arts-based research processes. For example, the creative process can be emotionally demanding on participants, as they may be required to be vulnerable by sharing and re-living personal experiences (Sinding et al., 2008). In this case, the authors particularly describe a creative process that explored lived experiences of breast cancer. While I knew my research process would be less intense than that of Sinding et al. (2008), I acknowledged that participants could potentially experience strong emotions during the creative process. Indeed, I have experienced such feelings myself over the course of my dance training. Therefore, I made it clear to participants that they could opt out of a particular discussion or movement exercise if something became too intense for them.

Sinding et al. (2008) also discuss the issue of public access of arts-based research. Although there is a risk of identification, misrepresentation, and objectification of participants in qualitative research in general, these risks possess different qualities in arts-based research (p. 464). Much of the risks Sinding et al. (2008) describe in this circumstance pertain to how

research is represented in a piece of art, such as photos used in photovoice or participants' dialogue in a play. However, my research greatly minimized these risks, as it focused on the process of dance improvisation and not on creating a final dance performance to be shown. However, I still provided anonymity through pseudonyms and strove to present my participants as complex human beings and not as objects in a data set. Sinding et al. (2008) also outline risks to audience members who may experience intense feelings when viewing art that tackles difficult subject matter. However, my research held no risk for an audience, because the dancers did not present any kind of performance to the public.

Interestingly, Sinding et al. (2008) also point out the distinct potential for arts-based research "to respond to distress when it emerges" (p. 462). Unlike with traditional responses to participant distress, such as passing over a question or taking a break in an interview, ABR allows for new ways to navigate difficulty, such as using "play and movement" (p. 463). While designing this study, I imagined that although the dance improvisation could stir up emotions for participants, it could also work to dissipate emotional intensity and encourage lightness through play. Indeed, while participants sometimes shared difficult memories, they enjoyed the free play of improvisation and the delicate moments in quieter exercises.

Methods

For my research purpose, I used several methods to gain information about dancers' experiences with gentleness within the improvised dance setting: an improvisational dance practice with group discussion, participant observation and field notes, and one-on-one interviews. I located these three methods within the interpretive paradigm, as each method of data collection relied directly on the participants' experiences and meaning-making. More

specifically, I situated these methods within an arts-based research methodology, as each method contributed to a focus on "interacting with and making art" (Conrad & Beck, 2015, p. 5).

Dance improvisation practice and discussion. Each three-hour session with the dancers included a combination of improvisational movement exercises and group discussion. The dance improvisation practice I facilitated was accommodated well within an arts-based research approach, as it was non-linear and highly experimental. As Leavy (2015) writes of dance as an inquiry method, "dance-based practices can access bodily knowledge that is otherwise out of reach" (p. 156). Thus, to understand dancers' subjective experiences with gentleness in dance, I needed to have my dancers do the actual dancing and experience the embodiment of many forms of gentleness. As improvisation is rooted in spontaneity and unexpected revelations, it naturally required me to be flexible and adaptable as a researcher as I designed and facilitated the creative process.

I developed my workshop design from several sources: my own ideas about and experiences with gentleness in dance, as well as my background in dance improvisation; my supervisory committee member, Lin Snelling, who specializes in improvisation as performance; and improvisational and warm-up exercises from dance professionals and companies with whom I have worked, in which case I often adapted an exercise to focus on gentleness. Several reference books by dance practitioners and improvisers (Olsen, 2014; Tufnell & Crickmay, 2014) also gave me inspiration, although I did not use exercises specifically from these books (with the exception of using images from Tufnell and Crickmay's (2014) work for part of the workshop's sense explorations). I chose improvisational exercises that could facilitate play with different types of movement to explore a range of possibilities in how gentleness might manifest in the body. For example, I designed and chose exercises to explore different speeds, intensities,

and textures of movement in the body. I developed movement tasks to explore what constitutes a 'gentle state' in the body and how we could move from and within that state. I also looked to exercises that focused on the dancers' relationship to themselves and their environment. As the improvisation process progressed, I altered movement exercises depending on new findings that arose. A complete outline of my workshop design can be found in Appendix A.

In addition to dancing, my participants were asked to participate in group discussions about their experiences with the movement material. I audiotaped these discussions to record participants' responses for my subsequent data analysis. Incorporating discussion helped me understand how dancers experienced the movement explorations in their bodies and how they processed their understandings through their words. At times, discussion was also used at the beginning of a session to brainstorm ideas about the qualities and applications of gentleness. In my experience with dance improvisation and creative process, discussion has been an integral part of the process, as dancers are able to immediately share their discoveries and challenges from the movement exercise explored. This experience was indeed the case in my workshop.

The actual practice of improvising was vital to explore what gentleness meant to the dancers. As the word, *gentleness*, is not well-mapped in academic dance literature, I believe it needed to be explored in an embodied process that allowed for flexibility, play, experimentation, and failure. Improvising allows the dancer to acknowledge the body as it is that day and to move from the current state of the body. Gardner (2012) aptly points out that "despite the notorious habituality of our bodies (and the industrial metaphors that are often applied to them) we tend to never do things the same way twice" (p. 141). Through improvising, it was my hope that the dancers could: investigate comfortable patterns of movement; discover new patterns of movement; and allow intuitive, rather than prescribed, movement to flourish. Improvising

allowed dancers to access the bodily and sensorial intelligence already present within them to discover new meanings about themselves. Essentially, the act of dancing contributed to the dancers' sense of embodiment and therefore how they embodied gentleness.

Participant observation and field notes. As a direct participant in the movement research, I required a method that allowed me to collect data while being fully immersed in the physical activity. A researcher can use participant observation to observe and take part in the community that is researched in an immersive way (Markula & Silk, 2011). Thus, I used participant observation and field notes to facilitate, participate in, and record data from the dance improvisation sessions. By participating instead of simply observing, I hoped to let my participants feel more relaxed in a space where we were all moving together. Not only did my participation underscore the overt nature of my observation, but it also developed a rapport with my fellow dancers (Markula & Silk, 2011).

I organized my observations based on several levels of specificity. Markula and Silk (2011) outline descriptive, focused, and selective observation as three progressively more specific ways to observe a field. Descriptive observation involves documenting all details of the environment and activity (Markula & Silk, 2011). In my field notes, I recorded all structural aspects of the dance studio, as well as summaries of the improvisational exercises conducted. I also described participants' behaviour and participation in the improvisational exercises. Focused observation "concentrates on more defined activity or location in the field" (p. 165). Throughout the improvisation sessions, I focused on specific elements to observe, such as how specifically creating a gentle phrase or environment influenced the dancers' movement and the feeling in the room. Finally, selective observation involves "further specified observation of a more specific aspect of an activity or location" (p. 165). I imagined these specific aspects would likely reveal

themselves as we progressed throughout the workshop. Indeed, my notes became even more specific throughout the week, as dancers brought up particular issues and experiences on which I reflected in my notes.

Immediately following each movement session, I took these detailed field notes on the space and activities of the session "to provide enough empirical material for analysis" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 165). Thus, the text samples for this method were the field notes recorded each day for the five-day workshop. I wrote both observation notes and personal notes. Markula and Silk (2011) outline observation notes as including "descriptions of the field, the participants and possible research notes connecting these observations to cultural context or to previous literature" (p. 165). In this vein, I described my observations of the dance studio and how the participants moved and behaved. I also noted connections between my improvisation sessions and previous research on embodiment, improvisation, and/or gentleness in dance. My personal notes fleshed out my voice as a researcher and included "personal feelings, struggles, doubts or self-reflections" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 165). In this research, my voice also needed to be present, as I was implicated in the dance practice as a participant and facilitator. It was also important to have self-reflexivity as I was researching a field in which I was so personally invested. Doing participant observation requires extensive planning of one's study "to bring in the self-reflexivity required for the added role change from an insider/practitioner to a researcher/ethnographer" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 163). Although in the field of dance and improvisation for many years, I stepped into my role as researcher in designing a workshop with a specific research purpose.

My methods of observing and taking field notes fit well with the subjective nature of knowledge in the interpretive paradigm. As the nature of dance is fleeting, my field notes could

only be so ‘accurate’ and thorough in capturing all the discoveries made by the dancers. Thus, the process of writing field notes emphasized the subjective epistemology of the interpretive paradigm. I recorded my own observations and feelings about discoveries and challenges of each session. Within the context of an arts-based research approach, the field notes helped me put words to the temporal, relational, and ephemeral qualities of dance.

Interviews. Conducting interviews helped me learn about participants’ experiences in and following the workshop and understand more about them as dancers. These interviews were particularly useful to gain information that participants did not share or did not feel comfortable sharing during group discussions in the workshop. Interviewing within a qualitative framework allowed me to learn my participants’ “feelings, experiences or knowledge(s)” through talking with them one-on-one (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 81). I was less interested in the ‘truth’ of what gentleness means in dance and more interested in how dancers experience gentleness for themselves. Thus, an interview format situated within the interpretive paradigm allowed me to collect empirical data about participants’ experiences and personal meaning-making. These interviews also provided important data about how participants experienced an artistic research process.

Using “open-ended questions,” I conducted semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth information from my participants (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 86). The nature of semi-structured interviews allows “the researcher to be an active participant in the interview situation,” discussing any new information that may come up throughout the interview (p. 85). My role as a “subjective leader” (p. 85) fit well within the interpretive paradigm: I was not seeking to be objective, but rather to participate in the interview enough to propel the conversation forward and collect more empirical data from the interviewee.

Interview guide and pilot interview. Based on my literature review and research questions, I created an interview guide (see Appendix C) that was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. This guide included pre-planned questions that were "designed to be flexible to adjust to each interview situation" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 86). I then conducted a pilot interview with a trusted colleague in my faculty who has also worked in contemporary dance for many years.

Sampling and interview situation. I interviewed all participants who took part in my study. I planned to conduct interviews in a 'formal' or dedicated setting where the interviewees felt comfortable (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 90). Thus, interviews took place in public, but quiet places, and included common student areas and private rooms at the university. Using everyday language, I avoided academic jargon to encourage open and comfortable participation from the interviewees (p. 90).

Techniques of Analysis

As my research involved a variety of data-collecting methods, I used several analysis techniques according to the type of empirical material collected. The data was analyzed either through thematic analysis or through a specific method of textual analysis.

Thematic analysis: Data from discussions and interviews. I used thematic analysis to analyze my participants' responses from discussions and interviews. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (p. 79). With my study situated within the interpretive paradigm and an arts-based research methodology, I valued the flexibility of thematic analysis to analyze empirical data that was

connected to a creative process.[1] Thematic analysis allows for flexibility in several ways. First, it belongs to a group of analysis methods that "can be applied *across* a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches" (p. 78, their emphasis). However, on this note, a researcher must make clear their paradigmatic and epistemological assumptions (Holloway & Todres, 2003 in Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis also involves flexibility through the actual process of analyzing, where the researcher makes several important decisions about how they will structure the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, the researcher must decide on "what counts as a pattern/theme" in the data (p. 82): Thematic analysis allows the researcher "to determine themes (and prevalence) in a number of ways," so long as the researcher remains consistent in these decisions (p. 83). The researcher may also decide between providing "a rich thematic description of [their] entire data set" or, conversely, "a more detailed and nuanced account of one particular theme, or group of themes, within the data" (p. 83). As I analyzed my empirical data from my dancers' responses, I focused on themes related to all data collected.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline the six-step process to using thematic analysis. First, the researcher becomes familiar with the data set by "transcribing data (if necessary)," reading the data multiple times, and making notes on initial impressions of the data (p. 87). Next, the researcher creates "initial codes" that highlight interesting aspects of the data (p. 88). A code can

[1] Thematic analysis sometimes receives criticism for not being a 'branded' or specific-enough method of analysis, such as IPA or grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 97). Yet, as Braun and Clarke (2006) argue, this criticism arises largely "from the very fact that [thematic analysis] is poorly demarcated and claimed, yet widely used" (p. 97). Braun and Clarke (2006) underline that thematic analysis can be done in a rigorous manner to "produce an insightful analysis that answers particular research questions" (p. 97). My choice to use thematic analysis was based on my interpretive positioning and arts-based methodology, as I intended to map the experiences of my dancers through an artistic approach. I did not seek to develop a theory from my data (i.e., using grounded theory) or to hold to the tenets of phenomenology (i.e., using IPA as a method of analysis). Therefore, I valued thematic analysis as an appropriate method for analyzing my participants' responses.

be described as “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63 cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). After coding, the researcher groups these codes into broader themes and identifies relationships among codes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Often, using visual aids such as a mind-map allows the researcher to more easily classify codes into principle themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fourth step of thematic analysis involves the researcher creating a “thematic map” by assessing the themes on two levels: ensuring the themes relate to all individual codes and to the whole set of data (p. 91). Re-coding may be needed at this stage if some data has been left out from the initial coding (p. 91). The fifth stage of thematic analysis more clearly defines the identified themes by describing each theme in detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize the importance of finding “the ‘story’ that each theme tells” and “to consider how it fits into the broader overall ‘story’ that you are telling about your data, in relation to the research question or questions” (p. 92). Finally, the sixth and final step of thematic analysis involves creating a report of the analysis that “provides a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell” (p. 93). In this report, the researcher should choose “vivid examples” from the data that best encapsulate the main points of analysis (p. 93). I followed these six steps, from reading to coding to finding and defining themes, and have included specific examples from the data to support my analysis in my results section.

Analysis of field notes. Once all field notes were collected, I followed Wolcott’s (1994) analysis method for “ethnographic material” to analyze my field notes (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 166). The researcher begins with the description phase by systematically sorting empirical material to create “a ‘story’ from the field” (p. 167). The details may be organized

chronologically or based on a logical order the researcher designs (p. 166). I followed a chronological order to organize my field notes. Next, the researcher analyzes the data to find patterns, first displaying the data through charts or diagrams to compare details (p. 167). Finally, the researcher interprets the material in the context of the larger cultural field and the theoretical framework (p. 167). For me, this meant situating the data within embodiment and improvisation in dance, as well as working within the interpretive paradigm and the context of arts-based research.

Issues of Representation

My writing inherently involves self-reflexivity on my part, as I acknowledge my involvement in contemporary dance and my investment in this particular research on gentleness. Qualitative research involves varying levels of self-reflexivity, as "qualitative researchers acknowledge their subjective influence on the research process" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 178). Per Markula and Silk's (2011) recommendation to openly address one's "beliefs and assumptions that impact the study" (p. 212), I outline my personal values and assumptions about gentleness in dance throughout this study. However, I also situate these beliefs within the larger dance culture and literature on embodiment and improvisation. This reflexivity thus prevents any "navel gazing" that sometimes occurs when researchers seem to represent their participants' voices, but actually focus the representations on themselves (p. 193). While personally invested in gentleness to create more empowering spaces for dancers, I acknowledge that not all my participants have experienced the same values of gentleness as myself. Therefore, I present my research data honestly, incorporating my own observations about gentleness while recognizing my views towards the subject.

Validation

Validating qualitative research brings its own set of issues, due to the diversity within qualitative research and the multitude of ways to define "good quality research" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 196). As my research is situated within arts-based research, it can be evaluated through validation criteria used in ABR.

As diverse as evaluative strategies for qualitative research may be, so too are the criteria for evaluating arts-based research. There are different sets of criteria proposed by different researchers (e.g., Barone & Eisner, 2011; Conrad & Beck, 2015; Hervey, 2000; Leavy, 2015). Leavy (2015) emphasizes, "not only do criteria [to validate arts-based research] not fit each project but each researcher may value and thus prioritize different criteria" (p. 268). As she writes: "*This is a messy terrain*" (p. 268, her emphasis). I have adopted the evaluation criteria for validating arts-based research suggested by Barone & Eisner (2011) and applied by Conrad and Beck (2015). Barone & Eisner (2011) suggest six criteria for arts-based research evaluation: incisiveness, concision, coherence, generativity, social significance, and evocation and illumination. I suggest using these principles, because they are well-defined and because several scholars adhere to them.

Incisiveness. Research that is incisive must be "penetrating" and "sharp in the manner in which it cuts to the core of an issue" (Barone & Eisner, 2011, p. 148). There should not be extraneous details that distract from the argument of the research (Barone & Eisner, 2011). As Barone and Eisner (2011) suggest, incisiveness in ABR "may be found through the observations that are embedded in the research text" (p. 149). These observations can help "wak[e] the reader up" to new understandings about the world (p. 149). In my research, I use specific and vivid examples from the participants to illustrate how they experienced gentleness through their

bodies. These examples sometimes highlight physical and emotional hardship and thus shed light on the necessity of gentleness in the dance sphere.

Concision. The researcher must decide which are "the most essential elements" of the research to include (Conrad & Beck, 2015, p. 17). As Barone and Eisner (2011) write, "any additional material . . . waters down the power of the work, and hence its effectiveness" (p. 149-150). To include the most cogent aspects of a research project, a researcher needs to identify a theme, or "controlling insight," that guides the inclusion or exclusion of certain material in the research (p. 150). Barone and Eisner (2011) warn that this theme may not be apparent to the researcher at the start of the research process, but may come after extended "time spent in the field" (p. 150). While collecting my data and making observations, I noticed themes arise in the material. However, after thoroughly analyzing the data, I was careful to include only the themes and sub-themes which were most crucial to my research purpose.

Coherence. A coherent ABR project is one "whose features hang together as a strong form" (Barone & Eisner, 2011, p. 151). In general, the arts teach how "to look at the whole of the work and to see the kinds of interactions that exist between and among the qualities that the individual has created" (p. 151). In this way, the coherence of my arts-based research likely mirrors the way a dancer or choreographer determines the coherence of a dance: As in a dance, the research parts must contribute to the whole, or the purpose of the research. I weave all parts of my project together through the guiding concept of embodiment, aiming to showcase how gentleness may be accessed through the dancing body.

Generativity. Generativity of an ABR project refers to how "the work enables one to see or act upon phenomena" (Barone & Eisner, 2011, p. 151-152). While similar to generalizability in "traditional research," generativity should not be taken to mean the same thing (p. 152). Arts-

based research should follow the example of the arts, which inspire new ways of thinking about familiar parts of society or highlight "aspects of the world we had not seen before" (p. 152). In this vein, I situate the concept of gentleness within the field of dance culture and study how gentleness may be understood through the body. Thus, my research reveals new ways of thinking about gentleness and its role in the dance field.

Social significance. An arts-based research project should raise "important questions" and "focus on the issues that make a sizable difference in the lives of people within a society" (Barone & Eisner, 2011, p. 153). Yet, Barone and Eisner (2011) warn that "significance doesn't speak for itself": The researcher must clearly lay out "an interpretive or thematic frame" to explain why a project is valuable (p. 153). I outlined my framework in my literature review, where I situated gentleness in dance within the concept of embodiment and process of dance improvisation. Considering the vast research on harshness in dance (e.g., Aalten, 2007; Barr & Oliver, 2016; Markula, 2015; McEwen & Young, 2011; O'Flynn et al., 2013; Thomas & Tarr, 2009), and continuing in the tradition of studying somatic processes, my interpretive research is significant in uncovering how dancers' embodied experiences of gentleness may change how they live their lives in the future. Therefore, my research is framed within embodiment in the larger context of contemporary dance and somatic studies and underlines why this research on gentleness matters now.

Evocation and illumination. These last criteria pertain to how a "reader/viewer *feels* the meanings of the work" (Barone & Eisner, 2011 in Conrad & Beck, 2015, p. 18, my emphasis). The 'reader' – who Barone and Eisner (2011) emphasize is someone who derives meaning from any medium (such as books, paintings, music, or dance) – has some sort of "aesthetic experience" from the work (p. 153-154). Thus, an ABR project is not only understood

cognitively, but also on a visceral or affective level. My research includes both description and specific direct quotations that illustrate the rich bodily experiences of my participants and myself. In this way, I attempt to evoke the feeling level of dance that is often so difficult to represent through writing.

Barone and Eisner (2011) write that the second part of these criteria relates to how a "work illuminates a terrain, a process, an individual"; this is often done "by defamiliarizing an object or a process so that it can be seen in a way that is entirely different than a way in which customary modes of perception operate" (p. 154). Through my dancers' embodied experiences of gentleness in an improvisational dance context, my study sheds light on new understandings of the concept of gentleness and its application in the dance field. Rather than relying on data solely from traditional methods, such as interviews, my research illuminates new understandings about gentleness through a bodily method of conducting research.

Evocation and illumination work together "to illuminate cognitively and to prompt the percipient to respond emotionally, as well" (Barone & Eisner, 2011, p. 154). This well-rounded approach can inspire deeper reflection in the viewer and may even affect viewers' future actions in the world (Barone & Eisner, 2011). My research relied on methods that provided corporeal, embodied data as well as textual data. From these findings, I aim to cognitively and emotionally expand the understandings of dance and gentleness for dancers, dance educators, and dance researchers.

Concluding thoughts on validation. Although these principles outline how to evaluate arts-based research, they should be "a starting point" (Barone & Eisner, 2011, p. 155). Barone and Eisner (2011) suggest using one's "own judgment in applying these criteria," but also one's imagination to uncover other ways to validate future ABR projects (p. 155). Leavy (2015) leaves

the arts-based researcher with practical and hopeful advice: “Begin from where you are, learn as you go, trust your intuition, take risks, balance your goals and abilities, and accept that no research product can be all things to all people” (p. 285). Following these suggestions, one could also evaluate my research in terms of how it promoted openness, vulnerability, and risk-taking. I have found these qualities are often part of the art-making process and that they fit well within the dance improvisation method around which my research revolved. Ultimately, I combined research, artistry, and instinct to discover my dancers’ experiences with gentleness. I now discuss the results from my study and the themes that emerged through the data analysis process.

Results and Discussion

As I analyzed the data from discussions, field notes, and interviews, three main themes emerged: Navigating Gentleness; Relationship with the Body; and the Individual’s Sense of Self. Not all participants are quoted equally under each theme, as each participant’s experiences relate to different aspects of gentleness. However, my study attempts to represent participants’ responses equally throughout the course of this chapter. I also interweave my own feelings and experiences of gentleness as a facilitator, researcher, and co-participant.

Navigating Gentleness

The participants revealed how they understood gentleness, both as an abstract concept and how they made sense of it in different environments. In the workshop, we put some of our discussions into action by embodying qualities of gentleness in our movement; we therefore learned more about the concept of gentleness through how our bodies moved and reacted in a given situation. Interestingly, however, much of what the participants shared, particularly in our discussions, revolved around the continued harshness in the dance environment. According to the participants, gentleness is not usually encouraged in the dance world and is especially difficult to

maintain while trying to succeed as a professional dancer. Thus, I titled this theme, "Navigating Gentleness," as the dancers and I experimented with how we experience gentleness and how we integrate it in an external environment, especially with other people.

Qualities of gentleness. One participant asked if I had a dictionary definition of gentleness with which to work. I did not. In fact, it never occurred to me to provide a 'textbook' definition, as it seemed counter-intuitive to the ontological claims and methodology of this study. As this study is rooted in the humanist, interpretive paradigm, where there is one reality we come to understand in different ways, I was interested in the dancers' lived, personal, and embodied experiences of gentleness. In our discussion on how we defined gentleness, my participants revealed both stereotypical qualities of gentleness, as well as surprising ways to define it. I first asked the general question, "What is gentleness?", and then prompted the dancers for gentle situations, actions, or moods. Their answers ranged from human qualities, emotions, and states of being to objects, textures, and actions. I contributed the idea of "porch in the summer," but all others came from the participants. Below is a table of the responses:

Table 1: Participants' Definitions of Gentleness

Human Qualities	Objects	Textures	Actions
opposite of rudeness mindfulness/awareness kindness empathy sympathy compassion loving/love light (all meanings) caring self-respect support strength (in an abrasive world) confidence humility/humble friendship family femininity	kitten smell of baby detergent bedroom stuffed animal a good latte a homemade muffin porch in the summer	softness light (all meanings)	flowing vs. raging holding a baby caress flow softly watching clouds floating in water walking on raspberries

Some definitions, like Eric's "walking on raspberries," were surprising and even made us laugh. When I sought to clarify Eric's answer, he explained that walking on raspberries is like walking "so you don't break them." While unusual, this image gives a clear sense of the physical embodiment of gentleness, moving with finesse and tenderness to avoid crushing a soft berry. Amy also presented something in which I strongly believe, but which is perhaps less understood in daily life, in mentioning how gentleness implies strength. As she explained, "It can be hard to be gentle in a very abrasive world." Many of the participants' meanings revolved around self-awareness and humility, while other definitions implied one's relationship with others. As I suggested situations or actions that might embody gentleness, participants came up with creative images and behaviours that they felt embodied gentleness. For example, Amy suggested actions associated with babies, such as "the smell of baby clothes [or] baby detergent," while Charlotte described items of comfort and happiness, such as "a good latte" and "a good muffin that you made." Even the experience of sharing these meanings was gentle in itself. People gave answers slowly at first and then built up to more. There were many acknowledgments of approval and recognition, through sounds of "mmm" and "yes" when someone suggested something that struck a chord. Some resonating images were the action of floating and the softness of foam on a latte.

To research how gentleness can be embodied through movement, I asked participants to create 'gentle phrases'; these were phrases of movement dancers choreographed by themselves based on our group definitions of gentleness and on our sense explorations. Compared to the phrase he created without the intention of gentleness, Eric described how his gentle phrase was much more sustainable and enjoyable for his body: "I could have done it for eight hours, I think, and I'd be OK." Through embodying a gentler approach, Eric was able to focus on his body's

needs in a deeper way. I was encouraged by this connection between gentleness and sustainability. As an observer, it was also interesting to note how gentleness manifested in the dancers' movements and actions. While exploring a gentle state through the body, Eric kept soft hands that were slightly curved or cupped. I noted how "tender" this movement was. Similarly, while exploring the idea of a gentle texture, the dancers used movement that was "soft, flowing, easy, [and] minimal," with all dancers eventually ending on the floor (field notes). It seemed as though everyone enjoyed themselves as they explored this luxurious movement. I noted how, in exploring ranges of speed, we used a "luxury of time" to warm up as slowly as possible. The feeling in the space was as one might expect: The room was quiet, the movement was subtle and soft, and there was a lot of stillness and internal direction of the gaze. In speeding up and then playing with speed and quality of movement, I appreciated how "people honoured it according to their individual need." Amy spent a lot of time on the floor, but also did some big kicks standing. Eric often closed his eyes, playing with articulation of joints and momentum between the floor and standing. Charlotte had very minimal movement, often just walking, but exploring speed through the length and pace of her steps. In Amy's interview, she shared how finding gentleness even in fast movement created a "levitating" feeling, which she really enjoyed.

On the last day of our workshop, we revisited the dancers' personal phrases from Day 1 – which were made without any intention of gentleness – as well as their gentle phrases. Neither Amy nor Eric could remember their gentle phrases after a few days away from them. Both expressed similar experiences that their gentle phrase had depended on their feelings at a particular time and thus could not be reproduced at a later date. As Amy explained: "I created [it] for myself in that moment." Similarly, Eric was in "a certain headspace" when he created his gentle phrase, where his movement was "based off an emotional sort of feeling." While the

gentle phrases were fleeting, they proved to be more emotionally meaningful to the dancers. I am fascinated by the connection between gentleness and one's current state of being. The dancers' experiences reveal a kind of tuning in to a deeply embodied state through starting with an intention of gentleness. In this way, Amy and Eric experienced the embodiment dance provides by connecting to "the here-and-now" that Warburton (2011) describes (p. 68). Perhaps, as with dance, tapping into gentleness is a means by which we access presentness. Is gentleness as ephemeral as dance, expanding one moment and disappearing the next?

Our landscaping exercise also revealed more about the physical manifestations of gentleness. The dancers were asked to create a gentle space by designing the studio with still body sculptures. While this is an exercise I have done numerous times in other workshops, I added the layer of crafting a gentle environment with our bodies. All dancers began by sitting on a bench, facing the dance space; then, up to three dancers at a time entered the space to create a landscape of sculptures. Dancers used outstretched arms and different levels. Often, the movement was very simple, such as sitting on the floor or lying down. Surprisingly, Charlotte stayed on the bench throughout the entire exercise and did not create a sculpture in the space. I do not know her reasons why, but would hazard she was following her needs and impulses at that time. However, her constant presence on the bench as the other participants and I went up to create sculptures was very grounding for the space. Each time we returned to the bench from the 'stage' area, she received us back with a smile. In this way, Charlotte balanced the space, carving out gentleness from the audience perspective, as well.

Part of how participants made sense of gentleness was describing how it manifests in a space. Eric understood gentleness in dance more as an environment, rather than a subject matter. Thus, gentleness in dance can be a way of designing an inviting, comfortable dance space. As

Eric described: “How do you not introduce unnecessary non-gentleness or cruelty” in the dance space; and “How do you allow people to comfortably show their work, show their choreography, or partake in an improv and feel like they’re totally accepted?” He also stressed the importance of the balance between creating a “friendly” space and needing to “push people a little bit.” There must exist some push-and-pull between comforting and challenging dancers. Charlotte described how this balance is created through the right “mental setting,” where the teacher offers a “buffet” of suggestions to “feed people, and they will give it back to you.” From this, Charlotte suggests a teacher sets the tone for learning in the space by providing numerous options for challenge and discovering. In turn, the students give this nourishment back through their energy and movement, because they feel comfortable in the space.

In the dance environment with others. Through our research into the qualities of gentleness and the forms gentleness takes, the dancers revealed how they experienced gentleness with other people in the workshop space. I noted how articulate and thoughtful my participants were, each completely invested in individual learning as well as their role in the workshop. The dancers’ understanding of gentleness with others began by simply noting how positive the interactions with others can be while working together for an intense period. Eric enjoyed connecting with others, using the example of dancing tightly in a circle with everyone doing their gentle phrases: “I just love working in closer proximity to people and then, you know, the possibility of some interaction or something like that is great.” In addition, I observed lots of happy energy from everyone during our long free improvisation on the third afternoon. During this improvisation, Eric and Charlotte shared an enjoyable moment moving and talking together, which Eric described as “very playful and fun.” Charlotte shared how nice it is to “find your people” with whom you really connect during an improvisation. At the end of the week, she

commented that the last day of a workshop always feels different from the first, because you have developed relationships with the people with whom you have worked all week. Charlotte suggested the "only reason to do [the workshop] with other humans is the relationship"; otherwise, she suggests, we could just dance by ourselves at home. In this vein, Eric described how sharing longer periods of time with others allows you to "get a lot closer," where "you feel like you can share more." Eric highlighted how a dance workshop setting allows people to share their vulnerabilities with others in the space.

In his interview, Eric beautifully described his interpretation of gentleness in dance as encompassing both the individual and the environment. Depending on the day, he thought of gentleness in one of two ways. One way involved gentleness of the self, of "being gentle to yourself and your body." The other questioned: "How do you run a workshop or a dance class in a way that makes everyone feel accepted and comfortable to basically be honest"? He called this situation "an environment of trust." Eric expressed how workshop environments sometimes elicit feelings of inadequacy in dancers, especially when dancers compare themselves to others. Thus, he reflected deeply on how you can "set things up in such a way" that will nourish dancers to feel safe and welcomed. I enjoy Eric's description, because it highlights the importance of a gentle atmosphere in taking risks with more confidence. I worked to create a safe environment for my participants, of course from following ethical procedures of research, but also in embodying gentleness in my role as facilitator.

Thus, in designing this workshop, I considered the structure of the workshop itself as our starting point for delving into gentleness. In turn, this choice affected how our week progressed and how some participants viewed my role as facilitator. I outlined four tenets for myself as a facilitator from which to operate in the space:

- No rushing
- No worrying
- Ease
- Allow space for stillness, quiet

Of course, it was not always possible to uphold these principles. Worrying or wondering is a natural response to implementing a new kind of workshop. But in holding these ideas as my underlying intention for the workshop, I was already establishing gentleness through the very structure of the environment. This matrix of gentleness in place allowed the plans of the workshop to breathe and flex with spontaneous discoveries. I constantly checked in with how participants were feeling and what they needed, be it a change of pace, more relaxation, or a new piece of music. Charlotte described how my gentle "tone" and "letting people do what they wanna do" helped shaped how she understood gentleness during the workshop. As she described, my own gentleness as a facilitator "put [them] in a gentleness setting." My initial desires for ease and not worrying gave me the space to organically provide new instructions in the moment. There was room to take more time if we needed to explore something past what I had planned in my outline. We could luxuriate in times of quiet, such as in the waiting time during the ritual exercise. We could also play with spontaneous dynamic activity, such as on the last day when we performed our gentle phrases to dramatic music as if on a runway.

Our group dynamic also shifted throughout the week depending on the needs of each participant and the needs of the space. In our sense exploration, particularly when using photographs as inspiration, Charlotte used very simple movement to stabilize the space. While three of us danced with vigour and larger movement, Charlotte walked slowly and methodically from one end of the room to the other and back, tracing the ballet barre under the windows with

her hand. I was impressed with Charlotte's commitment to this simple, balletic walking, maintaining a strong and solid presence while the rest of us danced freely in the space. Eric described Charlotte's movement as "steady," "like the metronome," and "the foundation" of this exploration. He added that it is "more interesting to watch something" that has contrast like that. Yet, this beautiful contrast unfolded naturally from Charlotte's own gentleness with herself. As she later explained of her experience in this exercise: "I'm all about 'less is more', so I stayed in 'less' and it was a lot of work to stay in 'less'. But it was being gentle, for me." By honouring her desires of the moment, Charlotte actually created a natural balance of the space. I am reminded of Fraleigh's (2015) conviction that in dance, the personal body is inseparable from "the world's body" (p. 164). Charlotte created a strong and much-needed effect in the environment simply by following her internal rhythms. Later in the week in a different exercise, Eric discovered how he could navigate other participants' movement while honouring the structure of his own body. In the kindness exercises, where we supported each other through movement or stillness, Eric "found it very difficult" to copy some of Charlotte's expansive movement because of the range of movement in his pelvis. He tried a few variations, discovering different pathways to support but not necessarily copy Charlotte's movement. As he underlined, "I had to support my own self, too." While the experience of following new movement can be "uncomfortable at first," Eric highlighted how "you learn something new. You put something new in your body." I appreciate Eric's thoughtfulness in sharing his embodied experience of difficulty and adaptation. Extrapolating Barbour's (2011) notion of embodied knowledge as "living out the possibilities" against "dominant knowledge" (p. 96), both Charlotte and Eric were able to problem-solve through their moving bodies to support themselves and the environment.

Their bodies became vehicles to experiment and play with different solutions for their desires and the task at hand.

The dancers also outlined some of their difficulties with certain parts of the week, and how they navigated these challenges.[2] In particular, participants found exercises without set time limits to be more challenging. However, I had purposefully designed some exercises without time limits to create more space for us to explore gentleness. During exercises involving unstructured play, Amy "found the play to be a lot more challenging when [the duration] was unknown." She preferred not to spend too long on one task. Eric described how a time limit requires more diligence of awareness: "As soon as time's involved, you have to be a little bit more disciplined, a little bit more aware." Yet, Charlotte believed the opposite, explaining, "If time is not involved, then you have to be really disciplined." She shared that "it's a little scary without a time constraint," but actually enjoyed this challenge of maintaining stamina and motivation in an open-ended exercise. I shared that "time plays into gentleness" quite significantly, describing how "I find it harder to be gentle when you don't have enough time." Thus, a lack of time constraints provided this space to explore gentleness more deeply and to consider our relationship with gentleness under tasks that required more endurance.

The participants also had to navigate some ambiguous directions and open improvisations, which they usually found more challenging than exercises with clearly set tasks. In designing this workshop, I imagined that open-ended instructions could allow dancers to play with their personal interpretations of gentleness; however, I also knew that too much freedom

[2] On a practical note, the dancers greatly preferred discussions over journaling. Despite their preference, I found writing to be a useful tool for movement inspiration and personal reflection. The participants also struggled to find gentleness from some of the sharper texture objects in our senses explorations. I had purposefully included a variety of textures, not necessarily to elicit feelings of gentleness from all objects, but rather to explore different kinds of texture in general.

could make some dancers feel lost, so not all tasks were designed to be open-ended. Eric preferred specific directions, such as using "imagery" or personal memory, over more "vague" instructions, such as being directed to do movement "gently" or "kindly." Charlotte shared that in general, she prefers "very clear parameters" while improvising; otherwise, she feels an improvisation can go "all over the place, and it's just physical movement for the sake of physical movement." While I agree that improvisation can sometimes devolve into moving without feeling or knowing why, I also question the 'problem' of that. Perhaps moving just to move is simply another way to explore our embodiment. I am curious about our ability to move in a limbo zone, where we learn to sustain ourselves without external direction. For example, all three dancers enjoyed the free improvisation on Day 3. However, they also immediately brought on props with which to play, creating a self-imposed constraint to anchor themselves during an open exploration. Throughout the workshop, I pushed the limits of the length of an exercise, as well as the ambiguity in some of my instructions, to investigate how participants explored gentleness through different levels of comfort.

Our kindness exercise proved to be a great example of this play of time and instruction. After individually free writing on when we are kind to ourselves, the participants and I chose a strong image or phrase from our writing as inspiration for our movement. We then took turns being the leader, improvising movement based on our writing as the three other dancers supported the moving dancer in whichever way they saw fit: copying, echoing, contrasting, or just observing. The first time we tried this exercise, each dancer had two minutes to be the leader before organically allowing another dancer to take the lead. The timing of this exercise was almost magical: Each person intuited two minutes exactly, and we balanced leading and supporting to end the day exactly on time. The next day, however, I left the exercise more open,

giving no time limits for leading. Afterwards, some dancers shared they were still thinking of the two-limit constraint and thus were very lost when the exploration went longer. At times, we lost track of who was leading and muddled through together by making choices in the moment. In the last few minutes of the exercise, I felt I had not yet been a leader, and so I danced more dynamically. The other dancers were quite fatigued at this point: Amy curled in a ball on the floor, and Eric and Charlotte joined her, providing an anchor of subtle, low-level movement. Despite some of our challenges, I loved this exercise. Together, we discovered what support can mean and how to support even when you are tired. My dancers supported me at the end with their grounding on the floor; yet, the dancers later revealed that they felt *I* was supporting *them* by dancing so they could rest after a long exploration. Thus, I enjoyed the juxtaposition of the same exercise under two very different time constraints. Both situations gave us important information on internal timing, sharing space, and navigating support for our own body while embodying it for someone else.

Dealing with harshness. Harshness was seen as an unavoidable force in life and dance, with gentleness being more difficult to establish and sustain. The perpetuated harshness in dance was resoundingly understood to be negative and detrimental to dancers. The dancers revealed how ballet and contemporary dance are pitted against one another, while the professional dance sphere leaves little to no opportunity for gentleness to thrive. In opposition to these arguments about the negativity of harshness in the dance world, one participant shared her views on the potential benefits of harshness. Finally, I discuss how participants experience and negotiate harshness in their dance and daily lives.

Dance culture. Gentleness was often perceived as difficult to create or maintain within the severity of dance culture. This perception is certainly in line with the literature on harshness

in dance culture: Authors such as Aalten (2007), McEwen and Young (2011), and Thomas and Tarr (2009) discuss the prevalence of pain and risk culture involved in dance training. Amy explained how gentleness may be useful at an individual level as dancers train day-to-day, but is not built into the structure of dance institutions: "Gentleness is a good coping mechanism, I feel, for individual dancers to feel better about themselves, but will that carry them through to be, you know, a prima ballerina or the head of a dance company? I don't think so." In the world of professional dance, Amy feels "gentleness isn't something that you have or you can afford to have." Amy's word choice of "afford" suggests gentleness is a sort of luxury, not a common modality for success.

Ballet versus contemporary dance. With two of the three participants having a strong ballet background, much of what we discussed about harshness revolved around ballet. This came as no surprise, as many scholars detail the continued harshness of competition, pain, and body image issues in the ballet world (e.g., Aalten, 2007; Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; McEwen & Young, 2011). Participants emphasized how ballet demands a certain body in order to succeed. Amy explained how the end result matters more than the effect of ballet movement on a dancer's body: "Who cares how you can get it there, but if you're wanting to do, like, this Italian fouetté thing, it doesn't matter if your ankles are wobbly . . . you need to do the Italian fouetté." Amy's statement reveals a priority on aesthetics over the health of an individual's body. Despite having encouraging and well-intentioned teachers during her dance training, Amy shared that an "undiscussed expectation" exists to achieve a specific technical look. This expectation places inordinate pressure and pain on the growing dancer. The standard of perfection seen in professional ballet dancers causes dancers in training to embody certain "physical traits," where sometimes "serious cognitive, emotional and physical health problems arise" (Pierce & Daleng,

1998 in Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011, p. 90). In addition, dancers tend to ignore pain, becoming injured through "the result of chronically overburdening the body" (Aalten, 2007, p. 110). Disembodiment seems to be a natural consequence of focusing on how a body *looks* rather than *feels*. Charlotte agreed with Amy's statement that, in the ballet world, "you have it or you don't." In her interview, Charlotte elaborated that some bodies simply cannot be ballerinas, such as if they have flat feet or if they are older. She emphasized how "great ballerina[s]" succeed only if they "have the physicality, first of all, to get there," along with great discipline in their training. Both women emphasized the importance of *having*, rather than being or feeling, in order to succeed in ballet. This value of possessing a body, rather than feeling through a body, conflicts with an ability to be gentle, particularly in dance training.

The participants also brought up the distinct need for belonging to a particular dance group and the effects that need has on the harshness one may experience as a dancer in training. Charlotte described her past challenges with not belonging to the contemporary dance world: "Contemporary dance, like any other art form, if you're not made for it, you will get the message that you're not made for it eventually." From this experience and from her experiences in different dance genres, Charlotte has preferred to do solo dance work. Through her description of not being "made" for something, Charlotte implies success is finite and predetermined by one's physical body or personality. This fixed idea of one's bodily potential conflicts with Fraleigh's (2015) notion of embodiment as a continuing process (p. 166). Fraleigh (2015) highlights embodiment as "ongoing and never quite complete" and "a process of becoming that entails the whole person" (p. 166). Amy also experienced a lack of belonging, but instead with the ballet community in her high school dance program. Though she originally enrolled in the contemporary stream to suit the needs of her body, Amy "didn't belong with the contemporary

group." At her school, contemporary dancers were seen as "delinquents," those "who couldn't do ballet" and who had no discipline. Thus, Amy switched into the ballet stream, but felt a disconnect between her mental and physical state. She had the mentality of being "a ballet dancer, like as far as the structure and the discipline and the wanting to be there and the willingness to work and put in the time"; however, her body's limitations and pain ultimately led her to leave the dance program. That Amy felt her only option was to leave dance altogether speaks to the extreme level of harshness still present in dance, regardless of dance style. Eric described this rivalry between dance styles such as contemporary and ballet as "a deeper cultural . . . issue" of comparing skill levels, in dance or any discipline. He suggested that if you do not like how someone judges your dancing, perhaps that company is "not right for you," and you can find a group where you feel better. Yet, I wonder how easy it is to change being part of a dance group, especially if, as Amy suggests, a dancer desperately wishes to belong to a certain dance style or company.

In addition, ballet continues to hold a level of prestige for dancers. For example, Amy and Charlotte shared that big dance companies look for ballet training in dancers, whether the company is a ballet company or not. Amy described how dancers seeking employment with "professional contemporary dance companies" are required to "make the ballet cut" before they are even seen for the contemporary portion of the audition. Charlotte agreed that big contemporary companies require ballet proficiency. From my own experience, I am surprised that I sometimes compare my dance abilities to ballet dancers, despite being a confirmed contemporary dancer. Similarly, while Amy currently dances with an open and "friendly" contemporary company, with dancers who have "the same discipline and drive" as ballet dancers she has met in the past, she still encounters "insecurities about [her] lack of ballet technique."

Both Amy's and my experiences reveal how much we have embodied ballet standards into our standard of success as dancers. As I shared in our discussions together: "I can't unlearn the idea that ballet is the top, best thing you can ever accomplish. Because it's actually just one form of dance." Though the four of us did not discuss this idea much further, we briefly talked about the importance of ballet in our western society and how ballet does not carry the same weight in other cultures around the world.

Professional versus recreational dance. We also discussed the objective success needed to succeed professionally in dance. Charlotte described dance as being "cruel," because so few 'make it' at the professional level. Eric pointed out how dance culture, especially in North America, demands such extreme expectations from the individual compared to other professions, where a person does not have to be at the top of their field to find success. He felt that arts programs have more pressure to showcase the best because of where they receive funding. Amy added that since funding for dance often "comes from audience members," performances must be top quality in order for dance companies to stay financially afloat. As Amy described, no one will pay a lot for the ballet "to see some mediocre dancer." In essence, a dance company's financial success relies on the perfection of the dancer. Thus, a professional dancer must be extremely skilled, both technically and artistically. However, this demand for perfection takes a toll on a dancer's well-being, where they can feel "defeated since the 'ideal' seems always out of reach" (McEwen & Young, 2011, p. 157). On the recreational side of dance, Eric described his positive experience in a recreational dance group that emphasizes an individual's personal development, rather than competing with others. Overall, gentleness seemed to be easier to create in non-professional settings.

Briefly, Eric touched on issues of low self-esteem while in a recreational dance program, where he compared his dance skills with others' abilities early on in his training. Through age and learning to accept himself, he learned to let go of most negative self-talk. The power of the 'ideal' set out by professional dance likely trickles down to recreational spaces, as well, where dancers still compare themselves and try to attain a certain skill set. Professional dance, often professional ballet, can be seen as the epitome of success for a dancer at any level.

Potential benefits of harshness. Most of the data collected about harshness in dance revolved around its detrimental consequences for the dancer. However, one participant highlighted how harshness may benefit dancers and even act as a form of kindness. For Charlotte, discipline greatly developed her potential in ballet while training in a pre-professional program in her twenties. Describing herself as "very goofy," Charlotte appreciated her teacher's advice to be more serious, or to "act Russian," and to push her limits of flexibility. Charlotte said this period of great discipline "was the best." She "became serious," progressed much more in school, and grew her artistry, with the "potential to go beyond fun." Charlotte described how she "needed to be broken" in ballet to help her progress, using the wonderfully oxymoronic phrase, "I let myself be caressed by that discipline." In this way, Charlotte believes, "discipline is love, self-love." While you may suffer through discipline in dance, Charlotte said, "you'll get the reward" through your achievement, particularly in ballet.

For Charlotte, gentleness revolves around being "truthful" or direct with someone, instead of covering up truth with politeness. As she described: "If the intention in the mind is *gentle* and *graceful*, the physical body can move any *way*" (her emphasis); thus, the body can express a full range of emotions, even a "violent side." In this way, Charlotte understands gentleness as inherently "mixed with *violence* . . . or the perception of violence" (her emphasis).

She illustrated the interplay of gentleness and violence through the example of someone who wants to pursue ballet professionally, but who has physical limitations:

> Let's say that I'm trying to be a ballerina, but I have flat feet . . . And if my teachers fool me into thinking I can be a ballerina, and I am *21* and I don't go to school to develop *any* other skill because I think, but they're *gentle* by not telling me, 'You will never be a ballerina.' . . . Is that gentle, no, for me, it's violence. (her emphasis)

Charlotte's word choice of teachers who "fool" their students reveals how gentleness that is always 'sweet' is inherently violent if it is dishonest to the dancer.

It is certainly fascinating how Charlotte upsets the typical understandings of gentleness. But I wonder about the origin of her interpretation of gentleness. For Charlotte, it is the manner in which truth is told which provides the gentleness, not necessarily the content which is gentle. As she explained, she has "lived long enough to see the damage of gentleness." I tend to agree that directness if usually best. However, I have never considered gentleness to mean being dishonest or being falsely sweet to spare someone's feelings. Likely, I did not make this feeling clear in the workshop, as my intention was to give freedom to the participants to make their own meanings. While a kind of grace that Charlotte described may be found through a dance teacher's honesty, I question the effect of Charlotte's high-level ballet training on her view of gentleness now. As McEwen and Young (2011) explain, "dancers often feel that they have little choice other than to begrudgingly conform and accept the expectations around them, however severe, dangerous and even abusive they may seem" (p. 169). Harshness and violence can become commonplace – even accepted as something positive. But perhaps Charlotte's definition of gentleness is a question of semantics, of how we individually define words like *gentleness* and *kindness*. Thus, I am torn. I understand where Charlotte is coming from. But I have a sneaking

suspicion that dance culture is so ingrained with harshness that it becomes a natural way of living for many dancers.

Daily life and gentleness as protection. Through our discussions, the participants revealed how daily life itself can be very harsh. There was consensus, at least between Eric and Charlotte, that we still need to develop more gentleness in everyday life. I was curious how focusing on gentleness in an intensive situation would affect the dancers in their daily lives, if at all. Most dancers did not experience any major changes, likely due to the very short gap between finishing the workshop and conducting the individual interviews. However, Eric and Charlotte did notice some changes in their interactions with others following the workshop. Eric found he was "a little bit more playful and gentle" and even noticed a difference in how he handled conflict with a stranger. On his way to the workshop one day, he witnessed a cyclist cut off and almost hit two pedestrians. Instead of resorting to frustration with the cyclist, he used a "nice gentle voice" to explain the situation calmly. As Eric explained: "I'd like to think that my response [to the cyclist] might have been quite different had I not been doing the workshop." Eric was pleasantly surprised by the cyclist's response, where the person "wasn't defensive or aggressive." Charlotte also enjoyed using the listening skills she practised in the workshop. Instead of interjecting or giving advice while interacting with her son, Charlotte tried to "just listen." She saw the potential for future workshops in gentleness, highlighting that "it's very nice to spend five days thinking about gentleness." Though these changes were small, they point to the potential of embodying gentleness to affect how we carry ourselves through the world. This effect of embodied gentleness relates to Alexias and Dimitropoulou's (2011) notion that embodiment encompasses the intertwined nature of our social selves and our bodies (p. 87). As the authors suggest, "thought, will and action are interconnected within the body, which

constitutes a biological and embodied social entity" (p. 88). Both Eric and Charlotte applied their explorations of gentleness to everyday social interactions. Thus, the practice of embodying gentleness in a dance setting may imbibe the body with more softness for future interactions with others.

Participants also expressed how they use gentleness in daily life to protect themselves in different ways. Practices such as self-gentleness, yoga, or prayer provide solace to these dancers. Charlotte was very clear in her relationship with gentleness, describing how being gentle with herself is a "survival skill." She has come to not "expect gentleness from anybody" except herself. In this way, she has come to understand that everyone has "their own busyness and their own misery"; thus, people's behaviour is rarely personal. Charlotte also described how humility can protect dancers from comparing themselves to others. She talked about approaching a dance exercise with "the mindset that this is work. I am working on my craft. Humble. Then it doesn't matter who's looking at you or not." As the participants earlier described gentleness as being humble, one could see humility as a form of gentleness for the self. Amy found comfort in the gentleness of yoga after the harshness of her high school dance program. She felt able to "express" herself through movement, but without "the judgment and . . . the expectations or the pressures that you would feel in a dancing world." Based on our discussions and interview together, the philosophy of yoga seemed to allow more gentleness for Amy than dance training situations. Through our work on personal rituals and our discussions thereafter, Eric reflected on the role of prayer as a way to reflect and have gratitude "at the end of every day." There was great gentleness in Eric's desire to reconnect with prayer as a ritual, as he shared how that time allows you to think about "how you could be a better person tomorrow and the day after." While not all participants described gentleness as a form of protection in dance situations, their daily

practices of gentleness have provided them strength through challenging situations in life. I see gentleness in a similar light as Paxton's view on improvisation, where we improvise all the time because we constantly adapt to changing environments (in de Wit, 1994, p. 105). In this way, these little moments of gentleness afford us the flexibility to problem-solve obstacles and pain in our lives.

As our discussions on harshness in dance led to these tangents of harshness in everyday life, they highlighted again how dance life and daily life are interwoven. Many dancers' identities centre around how they succeed in the studio and on stage, which affects how they feel on a daily basis. Conversely, it seems logical that if dancers experience harshness in their day-to-day lives, they take some of this into the dance studio with them. As the participants demonstrated how gentleness can help during difficult life situations, perhaps accessing gentleness can also help in dance environments. In addition, dance may be a way to effect change in daily living by practising gentleness in small ways in a studio before trying it on the street or at home.

Relationship with the Body

I hesitated to separate the data into themes of 'body' and 'self', as I did not want to reaffirm a Cartesian dualistic approach that separates body and mind. However, the sheer amount of data in each category revealed how important each distinct aspect is to the whole dancing individual. Thus, the "Relationship with the Body" theme highlights specific experiences of the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual body. I explore the dancers' belief in the significance of technical training; the limitations they felt with their bodies; their understanding of body awareness; and conclude with how we can learn through our moving bodies.

Role of technique. Our conversations often centred around technique, especially as a tool to achieve professional acclaim. Though the dancers did not define what they meant by *technique*, their discussions revealed a traditional understanding of the word as standardized movement from contemporary dance and ballet (such as great flexibility, use of turn-out, height of jumps/leaps, and extension of the legs). Standardized or traditional technique of this kind is often seen as an external measure of success, especially in professional dance. Charlotte received external validation for her technical skill in her ballet program, saying, "I made everybody happy," because of her natural flexibility. Amy described how the need for a high level of technique, either in training or in a professional company, may "not [be] verbally expressed"; however, something like the height of your jump or your flexibility gives you a certain level of "affirmation." This validation for technique may stem from how a dancer is trained to look in the first place. Indeed, as Aalten (2007) explains of ballet training in a dancer's formative years, "training is aimed at *creating* a dancer's body, using the ideal body as yardstick" (p. 113, her emphasis). The constant attention to the value of strong technique ingrains the importance of possessing certain physical skills. Charlotte described this exact situation that she experiences while watching dancers perform: "And even if you think you're not looking for technique, when you're drilled as a professional dancer, that's all you're looking at, basically, you know?" Again, technique is something dancers are trained to both *have* and to *see*, a tool by which we measure who is a 'good' dancer or not.

Technique was sometimes pitted against artistry, while at other times, it was clear both were needed to succeed as a dancer. In our first task of creating a personal movement phrase, Amy worried she focused too much on technique, believing that others in the group brought more artistry to their phrases. Yet, later in the week, Amy emphasized the importance of

technical training to an audience who is coming to a show. She described how only a small "niche of people" would want to see more experimental dance work, especially from dancers who may have less technical training; that kind of expressive dance is "way too far out there in left field for [some audiences] to really appreciate it." In discussing success as a professional dancer, Amy revealed there exists the "social expectation" to have "obvious ballet training" along with "good artistry" to call yourself a professional. Though Charlotte suggested we get rid of these cultural expectations altogether, she had corroborated Amy's statement earlier in the week, suggesting that "good dancers" have "the whole package" of artistry and technical prowess. Thus, while technique and artistry may be juxtaposed as opposites, they are often expected to work together for someone to be considered a great dancer.

One participant emphasized the importance of technique to keep dancers safer. Eric described how working on technique allows him the freedom to dance in any way he chooses. Safety is key:

> I like to do technique and all that in order to become better . . . first, become a better dancer, and also because I find the more I do the better condition my back seems to be in because I condition. You don't . . . make mistakes, jeopardize your back or ankles or whatever things that get hurt.

In this case, Eric's understanding of technique seems to be more about honouring the natural alignment of the body, rather than achieving a specific movement, such as a high kick or jump. For Eric, dance training has given him a heightened body awareness, through the focus on alignment, initiation of body parts, and not forcing certain things in the body. Technique, in this sense, affords us the knowledge to move our bodies efficiently and safely, giving us freedom to move, especially in improvised dance. In this way, one could say that technical training helps

dancers tap into their embodiment. This embodiment is "'a total kind of awareness'" that allows dancers to integrate their physical, emotional, and spiritual bodies (participant Ali cited in Barbour, 2011, p. 91).

Limitations of the body. Participants sometimes discussed their bodies in terms of their limitations. Through many of our discussions about limitations, the dancer body was seen as an object that can thwart a dancer's aspirations in dance. A dancer's anatomy may overrule their passion and determination if they cannot achieve certain technical skills as a professional dancer. As mentioned previously, Charlotte described the near impossibility of becoming a ballerina if a dancer has "flat feet." Thus, a dancer's physical body can make certain elements of success out of the dancer's control (Amy). As Amy explained:

> Even if you are 100% dedicated and, you know, do the eight hours of rehearsal a day, if you aren't able to turn out your legs as much as you're supposed to, like, anatomically, if you're not able to rotate your femur, then you're done. It doesn't matter. So, it's not even just having the passion, it's also having the genetics and the actual skill to be able to make it.

Charlotte agreed as Amy described this situation. Both dancers' experiences in ballet reflect research on the attempt for the 'ideal' ballet body: Ballet dancers approach their "body as the object of a constant struggle for control" (Turner & Wainwright, 2003 in Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011, p. 94). Eric suggested that the success and happiness a dancer has "depends where you go," outlining how different dance environments value different skills and body types. As Eric explained, "maybe you can find another one [dance style] that will work for you." However, Amy stressed that a dancer may only love ballet, so much so that "they want, more than anything, to have hip replacement surgery" to be anatomically right for ballet. Her

extreme statement falls in line with Alexias and Dimitropoulou's (2011) findings, where dancers aim to exceed their anatomical constraints on a regular basis to improve as dancers (p. 96).

In a completely different conversation, Charlotte also described her body as an object, albeit briefly and with less harsh language. In a discussion at the end of a very intense day of research, which culminated in asking the dancers to create a gentle phrase for themselves, Charlotte revealed that she does not generally enjoy creating choreography for herself. She prefers either to improvise or to do "codified" choreography. Charlotte described this choreography as being very set for dancers: "I don't mind choreography if somebody tells me, 'do this, do that' . . . and then I execute. Because there's a *leader* and I'm the instrument" (her emphasis). Charlotte's word choice, specifically "execute" and "instrument," emphasizes the body as machine, performing according to the choreographer's design. This understanding of the body as an object falls in line with Aalten's (2007) discussion that dancers in the professional world "generally treat their bodies as objects controlled by their minds" (p. 111). In addition, Charlotte's word choice underscores Alexias and Dimitropoulou's (2011) findings, where all of the ballet dancers they interviewed "referred to the body as a tool" (p. 98). Yet, in her interview, Charlotte revealed she enjoys simply moving to music, or dancing "freely." It is interesting to compare how she describes her body as an object in one dance environment and as a free sensation-seeker in another. Is this desire to be an "instrument" in someone's choreography the result of many years of ballet training? Does it stem simply from a love of discipline? Or is working in set choreography a chance to relax into someone else's vision? While I love to improvise movement on my own, I also enjoy dancing in someone else's choreography. In addition, dancing in set choreography does not necessarily make a dancer view their body as an object. Based on Charlotte's two descriptions of her body, a dancer's perception of their body

may change in different environments depending on the dancer's desires and experiences at the time.

Out of all the participants, Amy most clearly revealed the disembodiment dancers encounter when the physical body acts as a barrier to success. Amy described how she was roadblocked by her body in her ballet program: "I would just be constantly in tears, because, no matter what I did, I'd never be able to have 180 degree turn-out and be able to hold it there without my knees just screaming at me." Through this description, she separates brain from body, describing her body as vehemently rebelling against her mind's desires. This splintering of the whole self is directly in line with the disembodiment many scholars describe in ballet training (e.g., Aalten, 2007; Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; McEwen & Young, 2011). In her interview, Amy used the term, "dance privilege," to describe dancers who have "very natural talent" and professional training. These dancers can afford to be lighthearted and gentle with themselves, because their anatomy and subsequent advantage in training give them a leg up in the professional realm. As Amy explained of these dancers: "You *have* the talent, you *have* the ability, you *have* the body, so it's *easy* for you to say the things that you're saying" (her emphasis). Once again, this emphasis on *possessing* a certain kind of body that can then progress more easily in professional training highlights the dissociation from one's body. A dancer is limited by that which they lack; there seems no other way around it and no way to remedy this 'lacking'.

Amy reveals a clear hierarchy between those who can easily 'do' dance and those who must work without the benefit of perfect anatomy. Her account of suffering is also extremely vivid. As Alexias and Dimitropoulou (2011) explain of ballet dancers: "The pursuit of the ideal body is associated with the pursuit of the ideal self and anything rupturing such relationship is

equivalent to mental conflict" (p. 90). Amy's embodiment of pain through tears and frustration highlights this disruption of self. After many years of training and my decision to follow an alternative path in dance, I admit to believing all dancers should have the right to access gentleness. Yet, Amy's experiences shed light on the complexity of gentleness in different contexts and different bodies. Dancers working in highly competitive professional structures may not have the luxury of gentleness. In addition, Amy's comments reveal that even the process of trying to get into these professional institutions may not allow someone to be gentle if they are not born with a certain body type.

Perhaps most disheartening to me, however, are the many times Amy blamed herself for her difficulty with some of the discussions in the workshop. In her interview, when describing her strong feelings that came up during certain workshop discussions, Amy placed the onus on herself, in comments such as "it's all *me*, and I'm aware of that" (her emphasis); "this is just totally me"; and "I know this is my fault and my issues that I'm dealing with." Amy's repetitive blaming reveals an internalization of self-culpability for difficulties she feels in the dance context. This blaming is directly in line with McEwen and Young's (2011) assertion that "dancers frequently blame themselves for their pain and suffering which, in turn, can lead to negative self-dialogues or poor emotional self-conceptions" (p. 163). While Amy certainly acknowledged the external harshness of dance environments in other discussions, she was quick to blame herself in her interview for any trouble she had with painful feelings. Her visceral reactions reveal the rubbing up of the illusive ideal dancer body (e.g., Aalten, 2007; Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; McEwen & Young, 2011; O'Flynn et al., 2013) against the emotional reality of living in a body that does not seem ideal for ballet. Barbour (2011) understands embodiment as "a holistic experience" that is specific to the individual, including aspects such as

a person's biology, emotions, and cultural experiences (p. 88). Thus, Barbour's (2011) notion of embodiment supports Amy's embodiment of pain and harshness from the dance world, expressed through tears, impassioned speech, and frustration in her body. Gentleness, as a concept and practice, disrupts Amy's sense of self, because it does not exist in her body or dance life. The idea of worrying less or being kind to one's self is jarring and incongruous to the physical and emotional grit associated with making it in dance.

Surprisingly, injury did not come up as much as I anticipated in our discussions about body awareness and gentleness. Yet, injury still remains a sort of limitation or challenge, which a dancer must navigate. Eric briefly referenced injury in describing "getting injured here and there" as a challenge he has faced in dance; however, he did not elaborate much more than that. While I feel injury is still a huge part of bodily limitations for dancers, it was interesting to note that participants rarely mentioned it in our time together.

Listening to the body and body awareness. All dancers in my study had high levels of body awareness, as all three participants articulated their bodily sensations and experiences in great detail. Much of how the dancers described body awareness and embodiment was in line with the literature; in particular, participants echoed the idea that embodiment is an integrating force for the individual, particularly of the mind and body (e.g., Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; Barbour, 2011; Batson et al., 2011; Tsouvala & Magos, 2016; Winters, 2008). The participants described body awareness as a connecting or unifying state, where the mind, body, and all other aspects of the individual work as one. For Amy, the "heightened" body awareness afforded by working in a workshop setting was "to be expected." As she explained, in daily life, "you don't really have a lot of opportunities during the day where you [are] just solely focusing on listening to your body and moving how it's being called to move." Amy's eloquent suggestion of allowing

the body to move how it is "called to" negates a 'top-down' approach to working, where the mind dictates the body's movements. Rather, Amy gives the body priority to move intuitively and construct meaning through movement. This approach echoes Tsouvala and Magos' (2016) understanding of the "living body as an essential part of the deep structure of all knowing" (p. 29). The dynamic body is trusted to work as a whole unit, rather than needing the mind to control the outcome of a movement task.

Amy also described embodiment as being "in the zone," where you are "so immersed in what you're doing" that you are not "separating yourself from what you're doing." Rather, you are "being what you're in, totally" (Amy). Amy used the example of a dancer in this state: "You don't view yourself as a person dancing. You view yourself . . . *as* the dance and *as* the movement" (her emphasis). Embodied movement is less about doing and more about *being*, a state of integration where the individual functions as a complete whole. Amy's experience is supported by de Lima's work (2013), where the "intensified sensorial awareness" developed through dancing "leads to the dancer's perception of self not as being in movement, but as 'becoming movement'" (p. 20). Ironically, this state of 'being' contradicts some of the participants' earlier ideas that dancers need to possess certain skills and physical attributes. Yet, Amy described several moments in the workshop where she was not cognitively aware of her movement. This feeling was a new experience for her, where the movement "was just coming out of nowhere." This led Amy to believe "there [was] a mind-body connection" that delved into her "subconscious." This feeling of having the movement easily flow without directly dictating the body to move with the mind suggests an embodied state of integration. Sheets-Johnstone (2017) exactly describes this integration in improvisation, where "movement and perception are seamlessly interwoven; there is no "mind-doing" that is separate from a "body-doing"" (p. 9).

Charlotte was similarly interested in the wholeness of body awareness. Coming from a strong yoga background, Charlotte views the "physical body" as a temporary vessel. Therefore, she focuses more on "the astral body, which involves the mind, the ego, our social construct . . . and our emotions." Barbour (2011) and Barbour and Hitchmough (2014) describe the body in a similarly holistic way, where embodiment includes the spirit and the social experience on top of the mind and body. Charlotte agreed that the body and mind work together, as "everything is connected": Her mind and "physical body" affect each other. Both Amy's and Charlotte's understanding of embodiment is in line with many scholars' belief that embodiment combats Cartesian dualism (Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; Batson et al., 2011; Tsouvala & Magos, 2016).

Participants also highlighted how body awareness involves a specific awareness of many things, including internal and external space, the body's patterns, and truth or honesty in the body. Body awareness involves both external awareness, such as "proprioception" and "really being in tune with where your body is in space," as well as awareness of one's "internal space" (Amy). de Lima (2013) recognizes the unique proprioceptive abilities of dancers, as they spend so much time on "the experience of movement itself" (p. 20). Amy described dealing with an injury as a prime example of maintaining body awareness: Dancers need to understand the "limits" of their bodies when injured, as well as rehabilitate through specific training. Similarly, Eric defined body awareness as a way of tuning in to the body "before partaking in any sort of physical activity." He stressed the importance of understanding "how warm your body is and how you *use* your body" (his emphasis), such as recognizing the alignment of your knees or how you initiate turn-out. Eric described how he listened to his body through identifying his movement patterns throughout the workshop. When he would find himself doing familiar

movement in an improvisation, he realized, “maybe that’s just a path to something new, ‘cause you have to do this now because your body knows it and just wants to do it.” By honouring his body’s patterns, Eric allowed them to transform into new movement.

Charlotte described body awareness as an even further level of listening: that of listening to one’s internal voice. For Charlotte, “body awareness is awareness of some kind of truth,” something that is personally significant and “real” to her. Charlotte’s body awareness revolves more around her “situation in time and space, [her] age, where [she’s] at,” than around “the muscles and bones” of her body. Dancing from a deep place is “enriching” for Charlotte, who also finds “it enriches other people” when she dances from a place of personal honesty. Charlotte’s understanding of embodiment as a vast concept connects to Warburton’s (2011) suggestion that dance connects us to ourselves and to other people and the greater community (p. 65). In this way, Charlotte’s description of body awareness also echoes Fraleigh’s (2015) belief that the personal body is intertwined with “the world’s body” (p. 164): Dancing helps us develop ourselves and “more abundant embodiment,” as well as our relationship with the world (Fraleigh, 2015, p. 164).

Participants also described what affects body awareness and how body awareness is best accessed. For example, Eric described how age affects body awareness: More experienced dancers may have fewer major realizations about their body awareness, because they have already trained and learned so much about their bodies. As Eric is already very in tune with his body, he did not notice a great change in his body awareness as a result of participating in the workshop. However, during the workshop, Eric “felt less pain each morning,” even on the last day of the workshop. He described this reduction in pain near the end of an intense week as unexpected, something that I attribute to the workshop’s focus on gentleness.

In addition, participants underscored the importance of dance training for accessing body awareness. They also highlighted how an intensive dance workshop definitely heightens body awareness or gives a reminder to tap into body awareness. Eric underlined the significance of dance training in developing body awareness. He described how concepts such as proper alignment and turn-out initiation were not things he was "really aware of until many years into dance training." When asked about his body awareness in his daily life compared to in a dance setting, Eric described having "a lot more awareness" in dance: He connects to greater sensation in his body, such as his "skin" and "feel[ing] things stacking on top of [his] bones." Eric explained the value of a workshop setting: "It's good to do the workshop, I think, because you become aware of a lot of parts that seem to get neglected, probably, when you're just doing your day-to-day rushing about." Diving into an intensive dance experience creates space to notice the unnoticed and reconnect us with our bodies. Charlotte echoed this value of a dance workshop, as participating in this workshop reminded her to "keep moving" to benefit her whole body. Though she teaches movement all the time, this workshop reminded Charlotte of the energy gained through being active: "So, it's the moving part, you know? Moving the energy through the body and then it keeps giving. The body keeps giving." Charlotte described how she "would have more energy" after each day in the workshop, where she could do activities afterwards, such as "gardening," with more vitality. Amy also described the workshop as a body awareness reminder, a way of "refreshing your memory. Like, oh, yeah . . . this is what it's like to have an extended period of time listening to your body." Though Amy was already quite "body-aware" before entering the workshop, she found the process of exploring her embodiment "nice to come back to and . . . to practise." Being advanced dancers, all participants came into this study with a

strong core of body and self-awareness; however, all responded that the workshop allowed them to revisit their moving body in a deep way.

In a particularly profound moment at the end of Day 2 of the workshop, the dancers and I tapped into deep listening to our bodies. Performing with the dancers, I was moved by the beauty of four people moving together as a micro-community. As I wrote in my field notes:

> I felt a surge of emotion – joy and feeling overwhelmed, at four dancers coming together in a place of trust, performing their gentle phrases in a slow, simple, easy way. It felt like we were creating something together, like building up our power through a quiet, gentle ritual.

I am often moved by the dynamic of silence in art, and the power of silence at this moment was thick in the air. The dancers connected to themselves in what they needed for their bodies, and I felt myself expanding to connect with my peers and environment. Through developing personal embodiment through practices like dance, people can establish a greater bond with the world (e.g., Barbour, 2016; Fraleigh, 2015; Shapiro, 1998 in Tsouvala & Magos, 2016; Warburton, 2011). Slow-moving and soft, our movement together felt like a preparation, a gathering of energy to harness our strength before starting something new. It was a beautiful, fleeting moment to have that luxury of silence in the midst of a busy world.

Though I enjoyed this experience of performing our gentle phrases as a group, the dancers later revealed they were quite fatigued after a long day and were less inclined to create gentle phrases in the first place. I had not fully considered the relationship between gentleness and fatigue before this workshop and thus find my participants' experiences with fatigue to be enlightening. Charlotte honoured herself by infusing her gentle phrase with the lower energy she felt at the time. Amy similarly responded to this exercise, commenting, "I was just letting my

body move to however it was moving." Eric described the possibilities with and honesty of fatigue: "Working with fatigue forces you to find easier ways of doing things. And then it's easier on your body. Maybe it's more, even more honest . . . I think it makes you more vulnerable, more honest, being fatigued." Eric actually described how the phrase he created on the first day was "harsh" on his body because "we developed it early" in the workshop day, and he therefore had more enthusiasm to create something bigger. Interestingly, he described that with this first phrase, he "didn't have enough fatigue yet" to create something gentler for his body. I have often viewed fatigue as a negative aspect of training, especially in its relation to injury (e.g., Aalten, 2007). But perhaps a fatigued state allows a dancer to be gentler by focusing on the most efficient way to move. At the same time, more gentleness may be needed when fatigued so that a dancer does not push too far past their limits. Thus, there is a recursive relationship between gentleness and fatigue, where both affect each other. Fatigue can help a dancer filter out instructions from a facilitator or teacher in order to hone in on the most important aspect of a task for them at that moment. While I do not recommend dancers be fatigued while dancing, fatigue is something all dancers experience to some degree, either through daily life or endurance in dance. Perhaps gentleness affords the dancer a different kind of stamina to continue through fatigue. For future research, I am also curious about the benefits of fatigue without reaching exhaustion.

Concluding thoughts: learning through the body. Working in an intensive workshop environment with a focus on gentleness allowed us to learn how to adapt to our environments by listening deeply through our bodies. In this way, my participants and I navigated challenges in the workshop through returning to bodily sensation. For example, Eric used an image he had described in one of the free writing exercises to negotiate tenderness in his back, envisioning

"dancing with a bowl of soup in [his] belly and . . . not spilling it." This personal image allowed Eric to "get warm" while protecting his back, thus preventing any pain after moving. As Eric emphasized, "I might have to use that image more often!" Similarly, Amy honoured her body's needs at the beginning of the workshop, as she came following dental work. Through adjusting to her lower energy, Amy experimented with floorwork and thoroughly enjoyed finding "some new ways to move." Charlotte experimented with not letting her previous dislike of journaling affect her experience of writing in the workshop. Rather, she decided to "let go of that" and just focus on "being in that moment" with the writing. With this, Charlotte "finally enjoyed" the journaling through her openness to follow the writing tasks without judgment.

Being immersed in the movement also allowed me to learn, through my body, what participants were feeling and what they needed. As the workshop naturally evolved, I adapted by using "my own sensations and timing to guide both the timing of the group and how I worded tasks." Relying on my body in this way echoes Albright's (2009) reference to "internal perception," or "*interoception*," from neurology as being "fundamental to reading another human being's emotional state" (p. 149). While moving in the workshop, I discovered how changing the intensity of my voice while giving instructions could embody the kind of energy needed from the dancers in a particular exercise. I could also viscerally understand some of the dancers' choices, such as when we played with the flannel fabric on our heads during the texture exploration. Attuning to the moment in this way allowed me to improvise not only within an exercise, but also within the workshop structure itself. On Day 3, after the intensity of Day 2 and a structured exercise on Day 3 that did not go as well as planned, I needed to "breathe some air into the space." Thus, I introduced a half-hour free improvisation performance, where dancers had no guidelines or restrictions. It was tremendous fun. The dancers brought on props, and we ended by

facing the mirrors, snapping and singing as if in a chorus line. While I did not actively discourage using mirrors throughout the week, we never faced them on purpose, as mirrors can negatively impact a dancer's body image and physical and mental health (Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; Barr & Oliver, 2016; McEwen & Young, 2011; O'Flynn et al., 2013). Our exploration with the mirrors runs in line with Woodyer's (2012) claim that play makes us aware of "practices and relationships we enact or engage without thinking" (cited in Edensor & Bowdler, 2015, p. 713). Playing with mirrors on purpose highlighted our complex relationship with mirrors as dancers and provided a positive example of using mirrors.

I consider all participants, including myself, to have developed the "embodied knowledge" Barbour (2011) describes, that "arises in the lived experience of combining different ideas through experimentation" (p. 95). By experiencing, through our bodies, the "possibilities" of resolving a problem (p. 96), the participants and I gained new insight into how to approach our bodies and needs in the workshop. We relied on sensation in our bodies to guide our movement or outlook during a particular task and ultimately were able to problem-solve challenges in this way. While facilitating the workshop, I experienced the real immediacy of improvisation, what Crickmay (2008) writes of improvised performance as work that "remains in dialogue with what is present" (p. 2). Though not performing for an audience, I performed my role as facilitator through connecting to bodily sensation, thereby kinesthetically relating to my participants and the space.

Individual's Sense of Self

This theme explores how the dancers construct their identities and relationship with themselves, particularly in relation to gentleness. All four of us entered the workshop with different experiences and meanings of gentleness. Some approached gentleness with familiarity,

having already established gentle practices in their daily living, while others experienced more difficulty with accessing gentleness. The ease with which dancers experienced gentleness often depended on age or past training experiences in dance. All participants, including myself, enjoyed many moments of happiness and positivity throughout the workshop. I also briefly discuss the role of gender in our experiences. Finally, I explore the vulnerability required in a workshop that relied so heavily on new ideas and innovation in the moment.

Dancer identity. When asked to define themselves as dancers and how this affects their choices and behaviour as dancers, all three participants surprised me with their answers. I was expecting typical responses of dancer identity, such as defining oneself as a contemporary, mixed-style, or recreational dancer. Surprisingly, Eric and Charlotte both described themselves as "free" dancers. Eric's "ultimate goal is just to free dance," using his technique to support him to dance wherever and however he chooses. In this way, he enjoys improvising and performing, but also dancing "at weddings, at concerts, [and] at festivals." Charlotte also likes to "dance freely" and enjoys the simplicity of dancing "with music." Yet, Charlotte described her dancing as "grounded dance," which involves improvising within a set of "principles" or a certain atmosphere, such as in flamenco dance. Eric and Charlotte's descriptions of free dancing represent a kind of gentleness, a self-invitation to explore, seek, and experiment as one desires. Amy felt she could not pinpoint herself as a dancer "objectively," wondering: "In relation to other dancers, where do I fall?" When expressing her "inner experience" as a dancer, Amy described herself through critical adjectives and phrases, such as "tentative," "fearful," and "definitely [having] qualities of a pretty strong inner critic." She embodied some of these characteristics by taking long pauses and showing hesitation in response to the "loaded question" of defining oneself as a dancer.

Amy's response reveals much about dance culture. Her severe self-criticism falls in line with Barr and Oliver's (2016) understanding of the "perfect body . . . that serves as a self-imposed assessment tool by and for students" (p. 101). This obsession with reaching an impossible ideal affects a dance student's self-belief (p. 102). While Amy never mentioned her weight or thinness as a goal for her body, she focused on issues of her basic anatomy and subsequent failings in dance technique. Thus, her quest for perfection was more so a push for the body that can bend, lift, leap, and stretch the way those who are genetically blessed may do, especially in ballet. Amy also shared how she could only explore physical gentleness through exercises in the workshop, describing how "the emotional side of being gentle in dance is not even in the picture. . . . I'm not even *close* to that" (her emphasis). However, Amy's previous experience with yoga first allowed gentleness in for her, as she noted how "applying gentleness in everyday life happened when I started with yoga." I am heartened to hear of Amy's embodiment of gentleness through a movement practice and that she could experience some gentleness during the workshop. However, the gentleness she experiences from yoga "hasn't quite crossed over into dance yet." Thus, I am left both encouraged and disheartened: Yoga has infused Amy's life with more gentleness, but dance has not been able to provide the same gentle influence.

Through my surprise at all participants' descriptions of their dancer identities, I realized I had unintentionally set myself up to understand them in a disembodied way. In asking the dancers to define themselves, I had expected to learn how their embodiment of a particular identity, such as a 'contemporary dancer', might affect their understanding and experience of gentleness. Yet, all participants defined themselves through lived experiences, rather than predetermined labels. From this, I wonder if dance educators and scholars may unintentionally

perpetuate a disembodied approach to dancer identity by categorizing dancers instead of celebrating dancers' unique meanings they make about themselves. In particular, I am reminded of Thomas' (1993) idea of the "passive female body" that is so heavily scrutinized for size and shape (in O'Flynn et al., 2013, p. 131). Perhaps it is not only how a dancer's body is looked at, but also how it is talked about and labeled, that contributes to a disembodied understanding of a dancer's body. Thus, I am humbled by all participants' honesty, especially Amy's vulnerability and humility in her current journey as a dancer. I appreciate the dancers' ability to shed light both on my own biases and the structure of thinking in the dance world.

Gentleness towards the self. All participants showed gentleness towards themselves in different ways, with several dancers already coming into the workshop with established self-care practices. Both Eric and Charlotte already have very positive self-talk. Charlotte was clear that she has "no time to waste on negative self-talk," describing herself with confidence: "The self-talk is like, I'm in awe. [Laughs.]" Similarly positive, Eric maintains an easy attitude, telling himself, "just take it easy" and "take rest when you need it." He also described his self-talk in relation to working with other dancers in a workshop setting, saying, "be gentle with yourself and really listen to your fellow . . . dancers [and] respect the space that you're in together." Charlotte also maintained self-gentleness in the workshop by managing her energy during times of endurance and returning to a "replenishing" Butoh exercise during certain times in the workshop. She often uses this Butoh exercise when she needs an "extra dose of gentleness." I enjoy Charlotte's turn of phrase, where gentleness is a "dose" that can be infused into any situation that requires more softness or returning to the self. While Amy experienced conflicted feelings with self-talk, she also experienced gentleness in the workshop. She enjoyed our group discussions, where it was "nice . . . talking through emotions and feelings and experiences with

other people." Thus, Amy found solace and a sort of "validation" from discussing with fellow participants. I also see self-gentleness in Amy's description in her interview of dancing in the comfort of her home, where she will "throw on some music sometimes" to "groove out." This feeling of freedom and fun in an intimate space reminds me of my year of experimenting with dance in my home, where I felt freer to dance in any way. In this way, gentleness towards the self may be easier to establish when working in a private space alone.

Age. Despite having a small number of participants, I was fortunate to work with a group who represented almost four decades, with ages spanning from early 20s to mid-50s. Of course, more research is needed into any connection between age and the experience of gentleness. However, in this study, there was certainly a correlation between being older and showing more gentleness towards oneself. The two older dancers, aged 41 and 56, seemed more able to be gentle with themselves; in fact, they already approached their dancing with more gentleness even before this workshop. Both Eric and Charlotte suggested that with age comes less desire to focus on aesthetics or technical ability and more interest in how one's individual body feels and creates. Charlotte described letting go of the need to prove one's ability: "Because with time and . . . *age* and experience, there's less, 'oh, am I good enough?' You get over that at one point" (her emphasis). Amy, the youngest dancer of the group, responded to this: "It's nice to know!" For Charlotte, dancing is not about proving herself to others, but is rather about being a moving body performing a task in a situation: "It's not even about *me* if I'm dancing. I'm just a body moving in space" (her emphasis). Continuing in this advice to Amy, Eric reassured her: "You've got another 10 years, another 20 years. Don't worry, don't worry." Through giving advice to younger dancers, the older dancers of the group demonstrated a kind of maturity gained only

through embodied experience. With age, it seems one worries less about showing off skills and more about enjoying the materiality of movement.

Both Eric and Charlotte described how the physical limitations of an older body actually open up their approach to dance. Eric explained how his investment in dance has changed since starting dance in his 20s. He described the positive influence of aging: "You start to realize that a lot of this other stuff doesn't really matter. As you get older . . . your body can only do so much and so you learn to, I would say, dance more *efficiently*, or dance, you know, looking after yourself, but also, there [are] so many other *possibilities*" made available when you are older (his emphasis). Eric echoes some of the literature on approaching dance with gentleness as one ages, such as through more thorough warm-ups for the joints (e.g., Brodie & Lobel, 2016). Yet, Eric goes beyond just looking after the body to underscore the knowledge one gains from maturing as a dancer. Physical limitations can actually spur a dancer on to find new ways of creating, moving, and sensing in space. Barbour (2011) underlines that "an embodied way of knowing" recognizes "knowledge as constructed or created rather than existing as independent truths 'out there in the world'" (p. 95). Aging, then, acts as a dynamic process of embodiment, whereby the individual makes sense of their changing body through movement. Charlotte echoed Eric's experiences with age, explaining how with a more physically limited body, "you have to find other things that are much more fascinating and interesting. And you know what that is? It's *you*" (her emphasis). Here, Charlotte emphasizes coming back to one's self, rather than projecting one's desires outward while comparing technical abilities to other dancers in the space. Yet, I wonder if younger dancers are afforded this luxury of focusing on themselves while they attempt to climb up the ranks of professional dance. In addition, I wonder if older dancers

may find more gentleness because they are no longer training and performing with the same intense schedule as younger dancers. Is growing older the only way to achieve self-gentleness?

This workshop also provided Charlotte with a new outlook on her relationship with age. Through dancing in the workshop, she realized her "need to move more" to feel leaner and better in her body. She realized how aging can affect your mindset as a dancer, such as feeling like your dancing life is in the past and not part of your present reality. But this workshop gave her a reminder to appreciate her "body the way it is" and to continue to move in ways that make her happy.

Interestingly, starting dance later in life, such as in one's teens or adulthood, seemed to decrease the need for perfection in one's dance performance and technique. Eric commented that he has "a bit of the 'didn't start dancing lessons officially 'til I was 21 advantage'," describing how the insecurity one can experience with one's dance ability often starts at a younger age. It is also important to note that being a man may also have contributed to Eric's "advantage" in being less insecure about his dancing. Later, I briefly explore the issues of gender in dance that came up in the discussions. Amy corroborated Eric's comments about starting dance later. She noted that several of her female dance friends who started dance in their late teens do not seek the same level of perfection in their technique as dancers who start dance training very early in life. As Amy explained again at the end of the week, her "friends who started dance when they were older" do not worry about the issues of 'natural talent' or being objectively good enough to find work in the professional world. Amy's friends "just dance 100% for themselves and for their body." But, as Amy cautioned, when you start training

> from the time you're . . . 4 years old and you're, you know, in a ballet class, or even – it probably starts when you're around adolescence and . . . your first time wearing pointe

> shoes or something like that, that's when it really, like, when everything really hits you in the face.

With this vivid, embodied image, Amy alludes to the extreme pressure placed on a growing dancer to reach certain criteria as they train more seriously in dance. Gentleness may not be available for younger dancers because of the intense structures of training and competing. While there may be a connection between age and gentleness, one must dig deeper into why a young dancer may not experience gentleness. It may be a consequence of having less life experience and less time to cultivate kindness towards the self. However, it may also be a result of severe training conditions while growing up as a dancer.

Happiness and positivity. Despite some difficulties with emotional gentleness, all participants shared experiences of happiness, enjoyment, and positivity from exploring in the workshop. All dancers enjoyed the play in the workshop, whether it was during a free improvisation or a set task. Charlotte expressed the positivity she felt at the end of each day: "I always felt, all five days, really positive . . . I was grateful, I was happy, I was, wow, look at this. This is awesome." She noted the "luxury" and "privilege" of working in a beautiful space where you can be "with lovely people and move around" in a workshop environment. Charlotte felt accomplished at the end of a workshop day, describing how she thought, "I've really done something with my day." Eric echoed this sentiment of using one's day well, where dancing for an extended period makes "you feel like you started the day right." He described how working in the workshop unified the mind, and he ended a day feeling "very relaxed and very focused." As Eric enjoys using play in general, he enjoyed playing with the other dancers, especially in the free improvisation exercise. He noted the rarity of adults being able to play together, particularly the unlikelihood of adults playing "outside this [studio] space." Amy shared a particularly

positive moment for her during the landscaping exercise, where dancers were asked to design a gentle space with their bodies. Initially, Amy was uncertain, wondering, "what do you *mean*, just put your body and make the landscape?" (her emphasis). But suddenly, Amy "felt very inspired for some reason," adding to the landscape "pretty much every single time and . . . it was *great*" (her emphasis). She noted that she did not feel embarrassed about contributing so much compared to others. It is encouraging that the dancers enjoyed the workshop and had moments of personal success throughout our time together. I experienced many happy moments during the week, especially when we supported each other in the kindness exercise. While I had high hopes for this exercise, I did not anticipate some of the absolutely beautiful movement that evolved, nor the intimacy of sharing support so deeply with others. The discussion that followed was particularly insightful, as the dancers expressed how they understood and gave support. It was truly a highlight of the week and reminded me of the beauty of improvising so intimately in a group.

A note on gender. While gender did not surface enough in the data to be considered a distinct theme or sub-theme, it is important to note that participants briefly discussed the unique dance experiences of women and men. Charlotte identified the heavier expectations placed on women in dance versus men, because the number of women often greatly outweighs that of men. Thus, the scarcity of men makes them more in demand for certain roles. In regards to how dancers are judged for their technique or bodies, Amy was clear that "men can get away with a lot more." Again, Amy confirmed the continued pressure for women in dance to have perfect bodies (see also Aalten, 2007; Barr & Oliver, 2016; O'Flynn et al., 2013). Eric also shared how gender in dance is approached differently in different cultures, using an example of the importance and prevalence of men in dance in Russia. Of his experience dancing in Canada, Eric

shared that he does not "mind being on the dance floor [as] the only guy sometimes"; however, he wishes dance for men could be seen as "less taboo." He shared his pain at the stigma surrounding how men should dance: "just side-to-side footstep" and standing on the perimeter of the room. Eric wishes dance could be understood more playfully, "rather than [something] so serious."

Vulnerability, uncertainty, and honesty. In a workshop that required risk-taking and openness, the theme of vulnerability undoubtedly arose, both for my participants and for myself as a facilitator. Vulnerability often stemmed from the uncertainty of a given situation in the workshop or from the honesty required in sharing personal experiences and movement phrases. Some of the greatest insights my participants and I gained came from breaking open a little and being vulnerable with each other.

The participants experienced vulnerability, evidenced through my observations and their comments throughout the week. Just entering into this kind of workshop may have brought uncertainty for these dancers, as they came into a foreign space and subject matter with new people. But staying in these vulnerable and uncomfortable moments sometimes presented lovely surprises. For example, I observed and noted that Amy "seemed a little nervous" to participate in our free improvisation. However, she then took the initiative to kick-start the performance by bringing in props from the edges of the room. Amy also participated many times in the landscaping exercise later in the week, despite initial misgivings about how to shape a gentle space through the body. Charlotte opened up in sharing how she has worked to stay gentle with herself and not take others' negativity to heart. She also really enjoyed the quiet moments in the ritual exercise, where the dancers and I waited in a room off the studio as each dancer took turns performing their ritual by themselves in the studio space. As three of us at a time waited

together, Charlotte found it "really lovely" to be able "to know each other a little more" through quiet conversation. I found it wonderfully ironic that the one part of the workshop I had not thought anything of – the waiting time while a dancer performed alone in the studio – could provide spontaneous gentleness and comfort among peers. In his interview, Eric described how sharing vulnerability as a group creates a safe space. As he explained, "when you have other people and they're sharing their vulnerabilities or whatever, then you're more likely to share yours, as well." In this way, Eric feels dancing with others "make[s] you a bit more honest." Eric enjoys honesty in dance, describing honest movement as something "vulnerable" you share while working closely with others. I appreciated my participants' willingness to be open and vulnerable. They inspired me not to worry about being honest myself or "to hide behind the role of 'facilitator'" (field notes). In this way, their vulnerability in being so candid allowed me to relax into my own truth.

However, most of my own vulnerability grew from being a simultaneous facilitator of a new research project and a fully committed participant. After the workshop ended, I was disappointed to not feel overwhelmingly happy about the week. Through reflecting in my field notes, I realized my feelings were expressions of vulnerability and fatigue, likely from juggling all my roles in the workshop. Designing, facilitating, and participating in the workshop challenged me to make quick decisions in real time based on the feeling in the room. I wondered about several aspects of the workshop, including my music choices, the balance between moving and talking, and how participants would "buy in" to an abstract exercise. Occasionally, I was self-conscious about working with dancers older than me, despite being well-prepared with decades of embodied experience and a well-researched literature review and project design. Therefore, I leaned on the confidence of my preparation, along with intuition based on my own

body's sensations, to forge ahead. Sometimes sticking with something, even when it was uncomfortable, was a strategy to deal with uncertainty. This strategy is commonly used in improvisation (e.g., Lin Snelling similarly suggested that dancers must sometimes stay with an improvisation exercise to see where it goes). These embodied experiences gave me a wealth of knowledge to guide me through new territory in the workshop.

By the end of the week, I wondered whether this workshop was revolutionary in its own way because the facilitator was so vulnerable. As Barr and Oliver (2016) write of dance teaching: "In most Western-based dance forms, dance technique centers on the teacher-as-authority modeling and explaining the movement" (p. 98). My study sought to open space for dancers to explore instead of prescribing what it means to be gentle in dance and life. In my field notes, I reflected on the simplicity I experienced during the Rewriting Distance exercise (from Lin Snelling and Guy Cools), where each person performed about a time they felt truly gentle. I described my experience of performing, particularly when lying down for several minutes with my back to the audience:

> I was finally able to . . . let down and be what I needed to be. Soft. . . . And it was simple writing, simple movement. Even just sitting and then lying down. That's a very vulnerable thing – maybe one of the most vulnerable? To fully let down in front of your students, your participants. The people relying on you to make this workshop run. Where is the learning in that?"

Through it felt strange to be so still, Amy "enjoyed watching [me] just lie there." Through my stillness, I embodied my vulnerability and the courage to give in to it. I also relaxed while witnessing the vulnerability of my participants in this same exercise, such as when Eric whistled a song while lying down. My vulnerability, especially in times of uncertainty, allowed me to

probe deeper into the gentleness I could show myself. I relied on advice from my supervisory committee member: “The plan guides you until something else becomes evident” (Lin Snelling). Thus, being vulnerable taught me to trust the process, my participants, and myself. As I wrote in my notes before the final day of the workshop: “Trust it’ll be as it should be. Because the people showing up are coming with the bodies they have worked in all week. They’re coming in with what they need. They will show you.” Trusting the improvisation process and myself felt like relaxing into gentleness, into the belief that our dancing bodies could create what we needed.

As with improvisation, gentleness is often an act of courage. Harrop (2014) writes of the courage involved while improvising: “It can be accepting yourself for who you are and allowing the audience to see who that person is through your movement” (p. 137). In this way, we all bravely shared ourselves in this workshop, allowing others to see us through our embodied selves. It is a circular lesson, then: Vulnerability and uncertainty can open you up to staying gentle with yourself; yet, being gentle and trusting the flow of a process may require vulnerability and being comfortable with the unknown.

Summary

Gentleness was understood in a variety of contexts through the themes of Navigating Gentleness, Relationship with the Body, and the Individual’s Sense of Self. While gentleness was often defined as something soft or flowing, it was also interwoven with discipline, hard work, and truthfulness. My participants generally understood gentleness as something exterior to the dance community and often as a foil to the perpetual harshness of dance training. Yet, gentleness allowed the dancers to learn their bodies’ abilities and limitations and to be in touch with themselves and their identities. In this way, I could tap into the immediacy of my embodiment in the moment, relying on my body’s sensations to guide the structure of the

workshop. The participants and I understood gentleness differently according to our background, age, dance training experience, and preconceived notions of gentleness. The gentle structure of this workshop facilitated vulnerable and open sharing where participants could both discuss and dance in a way they could not always do in daily life. Through discussion, participants were able to deeply articulate their embodied experiences and therefore uncover more insight about themselves. As a facilitator dancing alongside my participants, I realized how vulnerability and gentleness work together, particularly during times of uncertainty. Trusting the improvisation workshop process can be an act of gentleness in itself. Ultimately, gentleness was a personal concept for all of us, serving both as a challenge and a protection in navigating uneven ground in the dance studio and daily life.

Conclusion

Based in the humanist, interpretive paradigm and rooted in an arts-based research methodology, this study uncovered how contemporary dancers made sense of gentleness through a dance improvisation process. Based on my review of literature, gentleness, as a word and concept, can seem rather abstract within the field of dance. While the word, *gentleness*, may have a distinct definition outside of dance, the actual ways in which the individual body lives out gentleness are diverse and multidimensional. Some of my findings highlighted traditional understandings of gentleness supported by the literature. For example, participants described gentleness as being soft, flowing, and light, which are qualities I see as being vital in dance warm-ups (e.g., Brodie & Lobel, 2016; Malina, 2012) and in somatic techniques (e.g., Eddy, 2009; Williamson, 2009; Wozny, 2012). However, my findings revealed greater complexities in the process of embodying gentleness, as well as the ever-present dichotomy of gentleness and harshness in the individual and collective. For example, the participants' experiences of

gentleness varied depending on their age, relationship with self, and negativity in past dance training practices. This negativity echoed the literature on harshness in dance training (see Aalten, 2007; Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; McEwen & Young, 2011). The research process revealed information about gentleness that could not be found through interviewing alone. More specifically, the arts-based approach, rooted through the concept of embodiment, allowed for knowledge gained through the body to surface and be honoured. I now summarize the results of my research and underline the significance of gentleness research in present-day dance studies. I outline several limitations of this study and point to future potential for research into gentleness in dance.

Summary of Findings

Departing from the previous literature, participants described gentleness in a variety of ways. Their definitions and experiences of gentleness developed from the improvisational dance process, as we explored the concept of gentleness through movement, writing, and discussion. The dancers understood gentleness in familiar terms, such as something that is soft or comforting. Yet, the dancers also responded with surprising definitions, such as being strong in an unforgiving world or speaking honestly and with directness. We explored gentleness together by supporting our own bodies, looking after others around us, and navigating difficulty in a challenging situation. In general, open-ended tasks proved more difficult to participants because of their ambiguity, and I reflected on potential benefits of using ambiguity on purpose. Participants defined gentleness both within the context of dance culture as well as more broadly in daily living, including gentleness as a cozy environment and human qualities such as compassion and support.

Gentleness was also defined in relation to harshness and its continued presence in dance and daily life. Mirroring the literature (e.g., Aalten, 2007; Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; McEwen & Young, 2011), the dancers described dance culture as demanding the impossible, often resulting in physical and emotional pain for dancers. With their backgrounds in ballet, Amy and Charlotte highlighted the intensity of the training environment for striving ballerinas and the necessity to have a specific body type in order to succeed. The participants also shared how gentleness cannot thrive as well in professional environments, as dancers must meet strict aesthetic expectations to be deemed successful. However, Charlotte shared that some harshness in dance is useful for a dancer to reach their potential past what they could have imagined. For Charlotte, gentleness involves discipline and directness, rather than sugar-coating an unpleasant reality.

It is impossible to experience and discuss dance without exploring dancers' relationships with their moving bodies. Dancers in this research revealed the value, necessity, and status of technique, both in honing one's craft and in attempting to break into the professional sphere. The dancers also discussed their bodies in terms of limitations. A dancer's actual physical anatomy may dictate what the body can do and thus challenge a dancer when they cannot change something about their body. This ability, or lack-there-of, may dictate a dancer's success in a specific dance style. Amy, in particular, revealed a disconnect between her passion for ballet and the abilities, or limitations, of her body. She underscored the "privilege" of dancers who are born with natural flexibility and range. Conversely, the older dancers of the group discussed a positive aspect of body limitations. Dancers can listen to their limitations to learn what their bodies specifically need.

The research data also highlighted participants' sense of self. Age, past training experiences, and how the participants view themselves as dancers were all factors in determining how the participants currently experience and maintain gentleness. All participants uniquely defined themselves as dancers, describing their identities through specific, lived experiences rather than pre-set classifications or labels. The way participants defined themselves revealed how they currently experience and use gentleness as dancers, as some approach their dancing with more ease and others with high criticality. Age seemed to benefit one's self-esteem and ability to be gentle, as the mature dancers shared how they focus more on personal enjoyment than on comparing themselves to others. All dancers experienced positivity from our week together, finding that dancing in a workshop setting allowed them the luxury to hone in to their sensations and to find connection with others. Finally, I reflected on the vulnerability and honesty demanded from a workshop such as this, which requires such openness from its participants. Flowing with the improvisation format as new ideas unfolded, I especially accessed gentleness as a means to be kind to myself as a facilitator. I now underscore the significance of research into gentleness in dance and the specific ways my research highlighted the importance of gentleness.

Significance of Studying Gentleness in Dance

My study supported findings from previous literature on the continued severity of dance culture. In addition, my study shed light on the significant lack of research into using the concept of gentleness as a guiding force in dance training. Dance scholars continue to outline the systemic problems of harshness in dance and its detrimental effects on dancers (e.g., Aalten, 2007; Barr & Oliver, 2016; Markula, 2015; McEwen & Young, 2011; O'Flynn et al., 2013; Thomas & Tarr, 2009). The data revealed that harshness in dance works in opposition to

gentleness, as all participants in this study shared how dance culture often perpetuates non-gentleness for dancers. In my literature search, gentleness was briefly mentioned in regards to teaching mature dancers (Brodie & Lobel, 2016) and to warming up before any dance activity (Malina, 2012). Most often, the key word, *gentleness*, was associated with somatic techniques, where a softer or slower approach can encourage deeper tuning in to the body (see Ahsan, 2010; Diaz et al., 2008; Eddy, 2009; Fortin et al., 2002; Fortin et al., 2009). Thus, this study proposed using the concept of gentleness as a framework to foster dancer well-being.

My study provided data on how an intention of gentleness affects the individual dancer on a physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual level. Moreover, this study delved into how gentleness can be accessed through improvisational dance, thereby exploring gentleness beyond the somatic or contemporary technique class. As improvisation in dance can also be used in dance rehearsals and as dance performance, my study suggests the potential to explore gentleness through improvisation in numerous dance environments, such as on the stage. As seen from the data, this study revealed how the concept of gentleness can literally change the body's movements. For example, Eric's gentle phrase created more ease for his body. In addition, both Amy and Eric created gentle movement based on specific emotional connections in the moment. Tapping into gentleness further allowed participants to tune in to the needs of their bodies, such as dealing with fatigue, during the workshop. Focusing on gentleness through an improvisation process also enabled dancers to problem-solve and adapt to difficulties. For example, Amy embraced her uncertainty in the landscaping exercise to participate many times in creating a gentle space. In addition, Charlotte navigated some movement explorations by staying with minimal movement that suited her needs of the moment. Finally, all of us explored the notion of support and kindness through movement, which affected how we balanced the space and each

other. Several participants also found that being immersed in research on gentleness offered them calmness and more clarity when interacting with others outside of the dance studio.

Charlotte's revelations about possible benefits of harshness lead me to question the relationship between hard work and gentleness. I wonder how much of Charlotte's belief in discipline comes from a personal preference and how much may stem from an ingrained mindset of the 'no pain, no gain' attitude in ballet. Although my participants came from different training backgrounds in dance, they all acknowledged the intensity of the dance workspace. Our discussions often revolved around undue harshness, such as emotional pain from not having a certain body type for a specific dance style (Amy). However, a certain level of intensity in dance, such as building one's endurance, may positively challenge a dancer, as seen from Eric's suggestion of finding a balance between comfort and challenge in the dance space. Indeed, dedication, perseverance, and reaching past one's limits are often necessary to pursue a passion, be it in the dance world or beyond. Thus, what is the relationship between hard work, or discipline, and gentleness? Can discipline operate as a tool of growth, or can it become so ingrained in a dancer's body that it is disguised as a positive force? The answers to these questions may lie in how we define and experience harshness, discipline, and gentleness for ourselves. For example, if gentleness is always viewed as sparing someone's feelings or as dancing in a soft way, it can easily be viewed as a practice that is not helpful in training situations.

My impetus for this gentleness project stemmed from the feeling that the balance between hard work and gentleness is skewed, where gentleness is usually forgotten. The absence of softness in dance culture is increasingly clear with the extensive research on the physical and emotional toll of dance (see Aalten, 2007; Alexias & Dimitropoulou, 2011; Barr & Oliver, 2016;

McEwen & Young, 2011; O'Flynn et al., 2013; Thomas & Tarr, 2009). Yet, I am not arguing for the dissolution of hard work and dedication. Rather, I am calling out the loss of balance between softness and rigour in the dance world. Perhaps a balance never existed to begin with. How can we work in a disciplined way, but come from a place of gentleness? Perhaps this is a case for working intelligently instead of only persevering with brute force. Charlotte's suggestions about the benefit of harshness are enlightening of how success in professional dance operates: The system itself is built on a demand for perfection, though discipline may positively challenge a dancer to push past their perceived limits. It is also important to distinguish between *harshness* and *discipline*. One may not imply the other. To me, harshness is never a positive thing; however, discipline can help us buckle down and problem-solve challenges. I wonder how gentleness and discipline operate in a dancer's experiences of training and in how a dancer treats themselves. This study highlighted some of these issues, but is only a start into the complicated issue of working intelligently.

The significance of this study also lies in how it is possible to gain knowledge through the body. The arts-based approach allowed participants to find new information through sensory exploration, free improvisation, set improvisation 'scores' or structures, writing prompts, and verbalizing experiences through group discussions. As Conrad and Beck (2015) advise, "arts-based research should not be seen as a scientific activity, but a vigorous, partly intuitive process for meaning making in its own right" (p. 17). I relied on my intuition to follow the flow of the workshop through my own body and through observing others, changing plans if need be to accommodate the needs of my participants. For example, letting go of my plan on Day 3 of the workshop allowed us to play in a free improvisation. In this way, the improvisational dance process offered me flexibility as a facilitator. The process also created space for vulnerability and

risk-taking, two essential components of an experimental study about an abstract concept in the dance world. Thus, the focus on doing the dancing, rather than only talking about it, fostered an immediacy of experience that gave rich data on how gentleness is felt in the body. Barbour (2011) writes that "as individual researchers, the knowledge we gain through arts research and practice is embodied knowledge that is available to us not only in performance and research, but also in our everyday lives" (p. 100). We then disperse this knowledge with people around us and our greater society (p. 100). Taking Barbour's (2011) assertion to heart, one can see how an individual who is experiencing gentleness can positively affect their future actions and can impact others around them. The participants shared some of these small changes that resulted from a week studying gentleness, where Eric had a smoother interaction with someone during a conflict, and Charlotte focused on listening to her son. This study is a ripple in a wave of many, where the effects of gentleness in dance and daily life can be explored more and more.

Limitations

Being a study designed from my own body and my influences from other dancers, this study was grounded in what I have experienced about gentleness and my beliefs on the matter. Self-reflexivity is vital in qualitative research such as this. As Markula and Silk (2011) advise: "An internal dialogue regarding self-reflexivity characterises qualitative research: How much of the self to let in and leave out?" (p. 76). As my project was inspired from such a personal place, it relied heavily on a personal relationship with gentleness and, in fact, was fueled by this. My experiences of gentleness through my own dance practice and daily life influenced the design of the exercises in the workshop, as well as how I facilitated the workshop with an accommodating and open manner. My past training in dance, including from local figures in contemporary dance, has also influenced me. Thus, I acknowledge that my views on gentleness as a universal right are

shaped by how I benefit from my socioeconomic, racial, and cultural situation. While I believe that gentleness is needed in dance and can greatly benefit dancers, I know that not all dancers' journeys to accessing gentleness may be similar to my own, nor may they be easy or even possible to accomplish.

This study was also designed around my beliefs on gentleness, harshness, and the interaction between the two. I questioned how much contrast to provide between gentleness and non-gentleness. Rather than set up a clear binary of gentleness and harshness, I wanted to leave open the idea of gentleness to participants. (Ironically, harshness did arise in my findings in clear opposition to gentleness). I provided contrast in the workshop through different textures, speeds, and qualities of music to explore how gentleness influences activity that appears less gentle. However, I did not give equal time to gentleness and harshness in our tasks, believing we already experience so much harshness on a daily basis. Thus, my research went to the extreme of providing as much space as possible for gentleness in an environment where gentleness is not actively encouraged. This space for gentleness resulted in quite a lot of freedom for the dancers, especially in how they warmed themselves up by the end of the week. At times during this process, I wondered if I gave too much freedom to dancers in my study. In her interview, Charlotte shared that she understood gentleness according to my meanings as a researcher. Likely, Charlotte thought I defined gentleness as always being soft, careful, and kind, perhaps because we focused on many of these qualities in the workshop. Yet, a dancer can be all of these qualities while still being sharp, strong, and fast in their movement and behaviour. Gentleness is often soft, but it need not be saccharine. Rather, I see gentleness as a force, an intention that gives us strength for anything. Thus, Charlotte's understandings of gentleness in this workshop were heavily affected by how she thought I defined gentleness. This fact reveals how this study

was limited by how people individually define gentleness to begin with. However, this 'limitation' was also the goal of the study, to shed as much light as possible on individual dancers' embodied meanings of gentleness.

While it is fortunate to have worked with participants of different ages and of diverse training backgrounds, I see several limitations regarding participation in this study. This workshop was conducted in the summer in an intensive format. While many summer workshops are organized in this manner, the schedule of this research project limited who could participate, which determined our small number of participants. As potential participants were sought from a local, university dance group, as well as my local dance community, this study was limited by who I know and who participates locally in dance. Many, if not the majority, of dancers I know in my community are white and identify as women. All participants in my study are white individuals and all speak English; however, not all participants speak English as their first language, and most of us speak more than one language. There was only one man in the group. I am not aware of participants representing the LGBTQ+ community, but only because no participant overtly shared this information. All dancers were able-bodied. While some participants may be experiencing mental or invisible disability, they did not mention these aspects throughout the course of the study.

While an interpretive approach allows the researcher to explore individuals' subjective experiences, it does not offer strategies to question power relations in society that shape the individual experience. An interpretive approach to research values "the 'humanist self': the individual who can, without consideration of external factors, lead the life of her/his own choosing" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 38). This approach is useful in "answering the call for more subjective perspectives on research" (p. 38). However, it does not offer many tools to address

how “the construction of individual meanings is influenced by the historical, political, cultural and economic context of one’s experiences” (Markula, Grant, & Denison, 2001 in Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 38). It is not a stretch to imagine how gentleness, as a concept in dance and in daily living, is experienced differently by marginalized members of society who face oppression on a daily basis. In addition, one cannot simply instruct dancers and dance educators to ‘be gentler’ in their dance practices, as this greatly oversimplifies institutionalized problems in dance. Thus, the interpretive approach of this study did not allow much problematizing about how power issues affect individuals’ experiences of gentleness, other than a brief discussion about gender.

Future Research into Gentleness in Dance

Research about gentleness in dance can benefit from doing more workshops of this kind, with different facilitators and participants. Having more perspectives on gentleness as a guiding concept will naturally produce more information about how gentleness manifests through the body, as this type of study relies on the personal, lived realities of dancers. In this way, research into gentleness can benefit from including many voices and embodied experiences of gentleness in dance. While we had a fairly homogenous group of participants, we very briefly discussed cultural expectations in the dance world and the differences between western and eastern dance communities. Thus, more embodied experiences of gentleness should be explored among diverse racial, linguistic, and cultural groups. In addition, the brief mentions of gender in the data from this study point to further research needed about the impact of gender on an individual’s experience of gentleness. I am also curious about the role of age in accessing gentleness, as this was an aspect that often arose in the data. More research can be conducted with various age groups into how gentleness is created and managed in different training environments. There are numerous theoretical possibilities from which to approach gentleness in dance, which can further

address some of the factors mentioned above, such as race, culture, gender, and age. A critical approach, for example, can address the politics of gentleness, situating individuals' experiences of gentleness within "the oppressive ideological structures that limit the individual's free and conscious actions" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 45). A poststructuralist perspective can examine the construction of the individual self as it explores gentleness while remaining "a subject within power relations" (p. 51). Through exploring more individuals' perspectives, as well as different theoretical approaches, gentleness in dance can be better understood and problematized.

In addition to the research possibilities of using gentleness as a guiding force, future arts-based research about gentleness in dance can play with the typical structure of a dance workshop. In particular, I am interested in workshops that test the balance between giving dancers freedom and constraints. Imposing constraints in an improvisation task can certainly foster more creativity, as dancers need to problem-solve around obstacles. But giving more freedom to dancers can also be a radical act. Dancers are so often told where to stand and how to hold their bodies. Thus, when given so much freedom, what kind of endurance or mindset is necessary to maintain their interest and creativity? It can be a bold act to be so open, to genuinely create space for the unknown, even if it feels we are dancing through confusion. By dancing, we do come *through* something: We explore our state of being through the moving body. It is daunting to purposefully embrace uncertainty in a dance workshop, and a facilitator may be naturally disappointed when things work out differently than imagined. But there is so much room for growth through this approach, as both the facilitator and the dancers constantly juggle physical and emotional stamina while finding personal fulfillment through dance.

While somatic studies have laid out a solid foundation of using gentle movement, dance culture and society as a whole still need to explore and appreciate the values of gentleness. We

are learning more about the brutality of burnout in all disciplines and the ramifications of working tirelessly without ease or points of rest (e.g., Achor & Gielan, 2016; Johnston, 2019). Dance training and performance have embraced this harshness for too long. While dancers need to consistently practise their craft to learn and progress, based on my study, they need more support and embodied information to do this efficiently, easily, and joyfully. Using the concept of gentleness as a tool for well-being may provide strategies to combat the negativity dancers face in both professional and recreational spaces. Starting from a place of gentleness may foster greater compassion, adaptability, and strength, both for dancers and within dance companies. Looking to the future, I see gentleness in dance as a source of power, a force which nurtures our movement, our relationship with ourselves, and our interactions with our world.

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APPENDIX A: Workshop Design and Outline

This outline has been altered from its original design, as plans changed throughout the workshop. I have reflected here the actual activities we practised during the workshop. If I used or adapted exercises from dance practitioners/companies with whom I have worked, I have credited them here. Any questions in italics are guiding principles that I had in mind or that I asked the participants during a particular exercise.

Overall Goals of Workshop:

1. To explore *qualities of gentleness* and *how gentleness manifests in the body*
2. To explore the effects of *moving from a gentle state* on the body and psyche

contextualized within:

- How dancers explore their personal embodiment
- How improvisation in dance facilitates discovery and play about gentleness

Main Tenets for Workshop:

No rushing
No worrying
Ease
Allow space for stillness, quiet

Day 1

THEME: Introduction (to gentleness); exploring oneself as a dancer through the physical

OBJECTIVES:
- Familiarizing oneself with one's body
- Exploring the body in detail through weight, gravity, flow of sensation
- Introduction to creating from words and everyday actions

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS:
- Developing personal body awareness in the present moment (how dancers experience their embodiment)
- Expanding perceptive abilities, both internally in the body and externally in the space
- Exploring the connection to self through the body

1. Introduction
- My background and impetus for this project
- How I define *harshness* in the dance training environment
- Outline for week
    - Play! Take risks. Be silly. Workshop is dependent on participants.
- Signing consent forms (2 copies)
    - Research requires ethics approval.

2. Warm-up 1: Floor to Standing Improv (many people use this; suggested in this case by Lin Snelling)
- Feel weight of your body on the floor; release to gravity and open body to floor (first: notice, but don't change; then: release)
- Slowly explore your way to standing, feeling transfer of weight within body; stand up, then down again, then back up. Go right into:

3. Warm-up 2: Body Inventory (from Kathy Metzger-Corriveau)
- Ease into movement one body part at a time, warming up from the feet to the crown of the head
    - *How is each part of your body speaking to you today?*
- Finish with whole body movement through the space

4. Movement Exploration: 3 Volumes Improv (from Kidd Pivot)
- Start on the spot. Move from the 3 volumes of the skull, then ribcage, then pelvis. Explore initiating from these places with the rest of the body following – stay true to which body part is the leader
- Move from the feet: tops, sides, bottom, toes; let feet be the leaders in space
- Move from the shoulders, then elbows, then hands (symmetrically, then asymmetrically)
- Move from the spine (any volume); freeze in a position, then move that position to a new location, keeping the spine in the exact same position; then move from feet
- Free exploration: Choose a leading body part to take you in space

5. Create a movement phrase
- Any movement of your choosing – can be your favourite movement or something you just create now

6. Share twice and discuss
- First time: everyone just watches
- Second time: audience receives/watches the dance with gentleness (idea from Lin Snelling)
- *How did your experience dancing and/or watching change?*

BREAK

7. Group brainstorm/discussion: *What is gentleness?*
- Create a word bank/working definition as a group

8. Improvise on these words
- Explore qualities of a few words or phrases through movement

9. Take one of these words/phrases and apply it to your phrase
- Move from the gentle improvisation directly into your phrase – see how it blends
- Practise your phrase several times, improvising how you apply these words

10. Share phrases and discuss experiences

11. Gentle Action (inspired by Rhonda Day)
- Lying on floor, settle back into your connection with the earth and gravity. Imagine yourself performing gentle actions, such as: pulling a thread off a jacket; untangling a chain by shaking it gently in the palm of your hand; braiding a child's hair; holding the hand of someone who is sick
- Imagine your own gentle action
- Embody the feelings, experiences from this action. Move at whatever scale you like.
- Write about this experience and/or share in group discussion

12. Cool-down: Floor to Standing Improv
- More condensed version of the warm-up
- Release into the floor; let the day go
- Allow yourself to build back up to standing, ready to leave the space

13. Final group discussion on the day's experiences

Day 2

THEME: Exploring qualities of gentleness (tangible and abstract)

OBJECTIVES:
- Creating movement through the senses
  - Using images and music (sight and sound)
  - Using texture, real or imagined (touch)
  - Using imagination (taste and smell)
- Exploring speed and weight (of gentleness) [I moved this exercise to Day 3.]
- Playing with opposites

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS:
- Improvisation allows for heightened exploration through the senses
- Using play and experimentation to allow for possibilities in the unknown (i.e., How does gentleness operate through the senses?)
- Connecting to personal embodiment through the senses
- Gaining new understandings about gentleness through bodily knowledge

1. Warm-up: Check-in through transfer of weight (TOW)
- Start with very easy TOW standing
- Introduce one volume at a time: ribs, pelvis, head, feet, armpits/shoulders, whole arm, whole body

2. Senses: Hearing (working from music)
- Improvise to playlist I created (about 15 min.) based on how the music makes you feel
- *Which type of music feels best in your body?*
- Gentle sounds: After the music, each person reads aloud some of the gentleness definitions from Day 1 as the others move to these words. Listen to the rhythm of the words we developed. *How does the rhythm translate into movement?*

BREAK

3. Senses: Touch (working from textures)
- 6 stations with different texture bags: pinecones, rocks, bubble wrap, dried grasses, flannel fabric, beveled plastic beads
- Each person spends 3-5 min. at each station and then we rotate – Explore a texture with your body and then embody it through movement
- After exploration: Improvise on the textures that felt best in your body; improvise on textures that felt foreign or less comfortable
- *What is a gentle texture?* (can be in the room or imagined)
  - *How do you move through/in this texture?*

4. Senses: Sight (working from images; I used images from Tufnell and Crickmay (2014) and *Shall We Dance* (2008) – photography by Brian Lanker and foreword by Maya Angelou)
- Look at different images together
  - Nature, humanmade structures, dancers/dance environments
  - *Which images speak to you? Which ones do not? Which is a gentle image?*

- Choose an image that speaks to you (either a 'gentle' image or not)
    - Explore lines, shapes, pathways from the image in your body
    - Explore moods you feel from the image
    - Be inspired by the environment in the image to create movement

5. Senses: Taste (working from imagination)

- Lying on the floor, imagine . . .
    - What did you eat today?
    - What are you craving now?
    - *What is a gentle taste?*
- Start moving, using a gentle taste as inspiration
- Explore the range of that taste: Build up the movement or feeling of that taste and then condense back to your first seed of inspiration; continue this cycle of building and condensing

6. Senses: Smell (working from imagination)

- Lying on the floor, imagine . . .
    - What smells the best to you? What smell makes you feel relaxed, safe, excited?
    - *What is a gentle smell?*
- Be inspired by a gentle smell to move – *How are you moved by a scent?*
- Explore the range and then condense back down. Move right into creating a gentle phrase.

7. Create a gentle phrase

- From all of these sense explorations, be inspired to create a gentle movement phrase for yourself (your *gentle state*)
- Choose a gentle image, texture, taste, etc. as a starting point

8. Share these gentle phrases

- Perform phrases together in a tight-knit circle
- Repeat three times at own pace

9. Final group discussion on the day's experiences

- *How did you feel throughout the sense explorations?*
- *How did gentleness manifest for you, or not, through the senses? What worked, and what proved to be difficult?*
- *Share some of your favourite parts of the sense explorations*
- *How did you problem-solve any challenges today?*

Day 3

THEME: Kindness and gentleness as well-being

OBJECTIVES:
- Putting the two previous days' research into specific contexts
- Exploring the relationship with the self
- Exploring the dancer identity

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS:
- Addressing harshness in the dance training environment and personal life
- Abstracting from bodily knowledge to support and reflect on other areas of life
- Developing one's sense of self and dancer identity through dance improvisation

1. Warm-up 1: Orange Peeling and Line of Sensation (from Kathy Ochoa)
- With the floor as partner, explore weight and flow of sensation in your body as if you are the orange being 'peeled' by the floor (a body part is always in contact with the floor – keep the contact continuous and don't 'jump' between body parts)
- Then play with the floor and the air as the 'peelers' (can move up off the floor)

2. Warm-up 2: Revisit 3 Volumes (from Kidd Pivot)
- My adaptation: This time, start on a micro level. Start really, really small (barely noticeable – almost a warm-up of the internal body)
    - *Bring senses in – how you feel in that quiet state*
- Get bigger and bigger into whatever movement you need to warm up (switch among volumes)

3. Speed Exploration
- Using one movement or type of movement, move extremely slowly, on any level
    - Notice: levels, weight distribution, quality of movement
- Gradually speed up: 5% speed (very slow) to 100% speed (fastest speed), then back down to 5%
- Try again: build up to 100% speed and immediately back down to 5%
    - Feel the reverberation of the fast movement in this much slower pace
    - *Can you keep the quality of the fast movement while moving slowly?*
- Change levels/movement and speed back up to 100% at your own pace
    - *Can you keep the quality of the slow movement while moving faster?*
    - Get softer and softer the faster you go

BREAK

4. Design your own sacred ritual
- Construct a personal ritual that is uniquely sacred to you
- Can include anything: movement (dance or pedestrian), speaking, writing, etc.
- Everyone creates individually in a spot in the room
- Once finished, each dancer performs their ritual in the space by

themselves (other dancers wait in a separate room connected to studio)

5. Free improvisation (~ 30 min.)

- Now that we have connected to the space with our rituals, create a performance together
- No limits; can use movement, speaking, props, partner work, etc.

6. Kindness Dance (and Writing)

- 5 min. inkshedding (write continuously with pen on page whatever comes to mind): Write from the prompt: "I am kind to myself . . . "
- Read over writing and underline what stands out to you as important
- Take one of these words/phrases and improvise on it
    - Each person takes turns being the 'leader' for about 2 min. The leader improvises on their kindness writing while the rest of the group supports this person with movement or stillness. Then, switch to the next leader.
    - *How do you support someone? What does support look and feel like – copying, feeling energy, echoing movement, watching?*

Day 4

THEME: Translating to other spheres: playing with others and the space

OBJECTIVES:
- Playing with space: personal, partner's, external environment/studio
- Embodying another person's experience and adapting it

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS:
- Exploring kinesthetic empathy as one aspect of embodiment
  - Witnessing another person's dance
  - Dancing with a group
- Increasing perception of space and the role of the self/body in space

1. Inkshedding again on "I am kind to myself . . . "
- Read over and underline important words/phrases

2. Individual Warm-up: Body Inventory (from Kathy Metzger-Corriveau)
- Each person warms themselves as they need, with added layer of dancing their kindness story
- *How does your kindness story influence your warm-up today?*

3. Revisit Kindness Dance (30-40 min.)
- As before, one person leads while the other three support

4. Group discussion
- Discuss feelings from the warm-up, kindness writing/dancing, and supporting
  - [This was a long discussion – about 50 min.]

5. Rewriting Distance (developed by Lin Snelling and Guy Cools: https://rewritingdistance.com)
- An improvisation performance form
- 3 roles: *Performer* (can dance, write, speak, etc.), *Witness* (on a chair), *Audience* (can be more than one person; behind the witness chair)
- Paper and markers available on stage
- Participants move through the roles at their own pace, always moving from audience to witness to performer
- The performer dances for the witness
- My added prompt: *Imagine a time or moment where you have been or have felt truly gentle. When have you experienced a specific feeling of gentleness?*

6. Brief group discussion to wrap up day

Day 5

THEME: Moving from a gentle state; applying all other days to this day
[Per Lin Snelling's suggestion, this day was left more open to allow space for findings that arose throughout the week.]

OBJECTIVES:
- Opportunity for dancers to crystallize their findings from the week
    - Their voice, personal embodiment, gentle state
    - How do they work best as dancers? What are their specific needs and wants?
    - What do they need from this last day of the workshop?

LITERATURE CONNECTIONS:
- How does exploring gentleness affect your well-being as a dancer? In your daily life?
- Exploring new understandings of the self and world through embodied explorations to allow dancers to problem-solve and adapt
- Re-visiting personal embodiment from Day 1: How do you feel in your body and in the space after five days?
- Exploring vulnerability and risk-taking in the dance improvisation environment

1. Warm-up 1: Walking in the space
- Play with speed, rhythm; move back and forth through the ranges of both
- Luxuriate in exploring this simple movement
- Let your walk express all of your desires (modification on an exercise from Kathy Ochoa about desires)

2. Warm-up 2: Long improvisation to excavate body and space
- About 30 min.
- Everything you need and want right now in this moment (idea of needs and wants modified from Kathy Ochoa)
- Play variety of music

3. Revisit gentle phrase and your original phrase from Day 1
- *How do you experience these phrases again?*
- *How do the two work together?*
- *Which parts do you choose to keep? Discard?*

4. Share these phrases all together, runway-style
- Perform as if on a runway from one side of the room to the other
- More dramatic/intense music
- *How does it feel to perform this phrase on our last day?*

BREAK

5. Share sacred rituals from Day 3
- Perform rituals for each other and explain their significance
    - [One participant taught us their ritual, as it was a teachable phrase from their mentors.]

6. Landscaping with body sculptures
(from many people, but I first learned this from Tony Olivares and Kathy Ochoa)
- Dancers create a 'landscape' in the space by freezing in still sculptures
- Up to 3 dancers enter the space to create a landscape; then clear the space and repeat

- My added prompt: *How do we construct a gentle space with our bodies and attention (i.e., from the inside and outside of the viewed sculptures)?*

7. Group discussion inspired from quote: "How do you access your best dancing when improvising?" (Olsen, 2014, p. 71)

- *What does 'best' mean?*
- *How can you dance 'the best' for yourself all the time? Is this possible? What circumstances allow you to dance your best?*
- [I originally planned to revisit Rewriting Distance based on this quote; however, this quote elicited such strong feelings from the participants that we had a long group discussion instead.]

8. Brief cool-down (5 min.)

- In a circle, generate heat between palms and then open them out to people beside you; feel heat and connected energy
- All together, dance in circle to say 'goodbye' to the week and 'hello' to the days ahead

APPENDIX B

Table 2: Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Years of Dance Experience	Dance Styles Trained In	Time Currently Training in Dance	Dance Improvisation Experience
Amy	23	~ 17	Ballet Jazz Tap Contemporary Musical theatre Irish Hip hop	6 hours/week	Minimal
Eric	41	~ 20	Mainly modern Swing Ballroom Contemporary Capoeira	1.5 hours/week	Significant
Charlotte	56	50	Mainly ballet Modern Contemporary African Butoh Flamenco Character Traditional dances	More sporadic – travels to intensive workshops (1 or 2 weeks at a time) or trains on own	Some in school; a lot in African dance

APPENDIX C: Interview Guide

Study Title: A Gentle Dance Force: Contemporary Dancers' Embodied Experiences of Gentleness Through Improvised Dance

Introduction & Welcome (Reminder that you can pause/skip questions)

Background & Demographics

1) How old are you?

2) How long have you been dancing?

3) What dance styles have you trained in?

4) How much do you currently train in dance? In contemporary dance?

5) What is one success you have experienced in contemporary dance? Why was it a success for you?

6) What is a challenge you have experienced in contemporary dance? How have you dealt with this challenge?

Embodiment

Body Awareness

7) What does the phrase, *body awareness*, mean to you?

8) How would you describe your body awareness during the workshop? Did it change in any way throughout the workshop?

9) During the time of the workshop, how did you feel about your body awareness while you were dancing compared to going about your daily life?

10) How would you describe the relationship you felt between your body and mind during the improvisation workshop (e.g., did they feel like separate entities, did they work as a single unit, etc.)?

11) At the end of a day of dancing in the workshop, how did you feel in your physical body? How did you feel emotionally?

12) How do you feel about your body awareness now since taking part in this improvisation workshop?

Embodied Identity

13) How do you describe yourself as a dancer?

14) How do you feel about your identity as a dancer now compared to before the workshop?

15) What are some things you learned about yourself during this workshop?

16) Could you describe a particular challenge or difficulty you faced throughout the course of the workshop? How did you deal with this challenge or difficulty?

17) Could you describe a moment during the workshop where you felt particularly successful or happy as a dancer? Were there any moments where you felt empowered?

Dance Improvisation

18) What is your past experience with improvising in dance?

19) What drew you to take part in this improvisation workshop?

20) What are some patterns you noticed about yourself during the improvisation sessions?

21) What is something new you learned through improvising in this process?

22) How did you feel about using play in the workshop?

23) How much do you feel you 'play' or use play in your current dance practice?

24) What role do you feel play has in a dancer's life, if at all?

25) How did you feel about using writing and discussion along with moving in the workshop?

26) How would you describe your attitude about improvisation, in dance or in general, since taking this workshop?

Gentleness in Dance

27) How did you understand gentleness throughout the course of the workshop?

28) What were some qualities of gentleness you explored during the workshop? How did you explore these qualities (e.g., through movement, writing, talking, etc.)?

29) How did you feel gentleness in your body throughout the workshop?

30) During the workshop, could you describe one moment where you distinctly felt gentle or felt gentleness in your body?

31) During the workshop, how did you feel about exploring gentleness with other dancers in the same space?

32) Was there an aspect of gentleness we explored in the workshop that you had difficulty relating to? Could you describe your experience with this difficulty?

33) How would you describe your self-talk as a dancer since taking the workshop?

34) Since participating in this workshop, how do you experience gentleness in your dance life? How do you imagine incorporating gentleness into your future dance practice?

35) How do you experience gentleness in your everyday life since participating in this workshop?

36) How would you describe your interactions with others since participating in this workshop?

Conclusion

37) Do you have anything you would like to add about your experiences either during or after the workshop?

APPENDIX D: Information Letter and Consent Form

Study Title: A Gentle Dance Force: Contemporary Dancers' Embodied Experiences of Gentleness in Improvised Dance

Research Investigator:
Mariel Day
3-211 Van Vliet Complex
Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2H9
mlday@ualberta.ca

Supervisor:
Dr. Pirkko Markula
4-423 Van Vliet Complex
Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2H9
pirkko.markula@ualberta.ca
780-492-7192

Dear Participant:

You are being asked to participate in this study about gentleness in contemporary dance because of your experience with contemporary dance. You may have been asked to participate because of your involvement with Orchesis Dance Group at the University of Alberta and/or with the greater Edmonton dance community.

Purpose
Previous research in dance reveals the continued harshness of the dance training environment. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore contemporary dancers' experiences with gentleness through dance improvisation. While I agree that gentleness often implies moving slowly or softly, I am also interested in exploring gentleness as a state of being from where dancers begin dancing. This study aims to understand how exploring gentleness affects how dancers move and perceive themselves as dancers. I hope to contribute to how dancers can use gentleness to enhance their physical and emotional well-being in dance. The results of this research will be used in support of my MA thesis at the University of Alberta.

Study Procedures
This study will involve you taking part in a 5-day dance improvisation workshop for 3 hours each day. Breaks will be implemented each day. The workshop will take place in a dance studio at the University of Alberta and will involve improvisational movement tasks as well as group discussion and informal writing about your experiences. After the workshop is completed, you will be interviewed one-on-one about your experiences with gentleness and in the workshop. You will be interviewed only once in a location of your choosing close to the university. This interview will likely last from 30 minutes to an hour, depending on how you respond to questions.

For this study, I will be using the dance improvisation workshop, participant observation, and one-on-one interviews to collect data. I will be an active participant in the workshop, and so will be moving alongside you as well as facilitating the exercises. I will take detailed notes after each 3-hour improvisation session in the dance studio about my experiences facilitating the workshop. I plan to interview all participants involved in my study.

Benefits

Through this dance improvisation workshop, you may develop your body awareness and access to your senses. This new awareness may benefit how you perceive yourself as a dancer and how you interact with the world around you. Exploring gentleness in a dance context may allow you to understand yourself better as a dancer and what you need in your personal dance practice. Thus, you may develop strategies to deal with any harshness, either from yourself or others, that you experience in your life as a dancer. I hope this study will contribute to how we approach dancers' well-being and how dancers can take care of themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally for greater longevity in dance.

Risk

I identify this study as being of minimal risk, which means that possible risks involved in this study are no more than what you would experience in your everyday life. Physical risks in this study will be no different than those normally associated with taking a dance class, and may be even less than a normal dance class because of the focus on gentleness. You will likely share personal experiences through the group discussions and your interview. In addition, exploring movement may open up your emotions from the past or present. I will provide a respectful and supportive atmosphere.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate. During the workshop and interview, you may opt out of an exercise if you do not wish to participate in a particular movement, discussion, or interview question. You may withdraw from the study, or withdraw any of your information from the study, up to three weeks after your interview is completed.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

This research is intended for my master's thesis, which will be presented through a written thesis and an oral defense. Since you will be involved in group work through dance and discussion, you will share your experiences and will dance with other participants. Only you, the other participants, and myself will be present during the dance improvisation sessions. In my thesis, should I ever quote your words from the study, I will assign you a pseudonym to protect your identity. When describing the workshop, I will not describe you in a way that can identify you to the public.

I will audio-record the group discussions, as well as the interviews, so I can write out the recordings of your experiences word for word. This process will allow me to organize the information from discussions and interviews in the analysis of my study. I will store audio recordings on my password-protected phone, and then transfer them onto my password-protected computer. The transcripts of interviews and group discussions will be typed and stored on my password-protected computer. Any hard copies of research data, namely the signed consent forms, transcripts, and my field notes containing my experiences as a facilitator, will be stored in a locked cabinet in my office at the University of Alberta. My supervisor will be able to view the transcripts, but only I will have access to your personal contact information.

I may use my handwritten field notes for future projects involving improvisation dance classes, and thus, I will keep them indefinitely. I will also keep my electronic files, including a list of participants' names and pseudonyms, in case I need to access this study for my future academic work. I may use the data I get from this study in future research, but if I do this it will have to be approved by a Research Ethics Board. Immediately following completion of this study, I will delete all email threads that personally identify you, as well as my computer document that lists your phone number and email address.

Further Information

If you have any questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact myself through the contact information listed above. The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call 780-492-2615. This office is independent of the researcher.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

_____	_____
Participant's Name (printed) and Signature	Date
_____	_____
Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Date