

This is a version of a paper presented at the Dance and Somatic Practices conference at the University of Coventry on Saturday 15 July 2023. In the presentation, author names were removed from the papers for reasons described below. I have included them here to follow regular citation practices.

Abstract

On the pages of the Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices – and elsewhere in dance scholarship – artists, scholars, teachers and practitioners are not shy in making claims about the benefits of somatic practices. Such claims are endemic and appear unlimited in scope: becoming pain free (Eddy, 2009), greater physical expression (Batson and Schwartz 2007), physical harmony (Mullan 2014: 259), challenging the “dominant discourses” re sexual abuse (Beaudry 2015), “the potential to question and critique the dominant social discourse and practices of neo-liberal societies” (Fortin 2017: 146), and “a pedagogical foundation for the vitalising and integration of the learners’ sexually potent self into training and performance processes” (Kampe 2015: 200). In this presentation I discuss the nature of the claims made on behalf of somatic practices through the flagship Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices, and what these claims might say about our responsibilities within and beyond dance research.

Somatics Unlimited

The things we say

Here are four claims made on behalf of somatics and drawn from the pages of the Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices.

Embodied perspectives can enrich traditional theories and approaches (Meier et al 2012, in Petsilas et al. 2019: 182)

these [somatic] practices can refine bodily perceptions, which can contribute to improvement of technique, aid the development of expressive capacities and prevention of injuries. (Fortin et al. 2009: 50)

[Eye contact in Authentic movement] can communicate so many feelings as well as compassion or empathy; it enables a direct meeting from the depths of the souls, without words. (Halstrup 2015: 290)

By adopting a somatic approach to conducting research, writing, creating art, or engaging in another profession, we become more alive to what touches us and how our work and presence can touch others. (Saumaa 2020: 237)

Making claims

What does it mean to *claim* something?

A “claim is something which someone says which they cannot prove and which may be false” (noauthor nodate). To claim something is also to “assert and demand recognition” or possession of something. And when we say someone claims something, we suggest doubt (noauthor nodate).

What a claim is not is an argument.

Claims backed by reasons that are supported by evidence are called arguments. (Nordquist 2020 n.pag.)

I have used the word *claim* because while reading JDSP over the years I thought I was seeing a tendency or pattern – a pattern of unsubstantiated assertions about the value and currency of somatic practices: as if somatics has unlimited value, scope, and power to produce positive change.

In doing this work I do not seek to shame our field or tear it down. If anything, I see myself as a believer in the transformative powers of somatic practices: I have experienced their benefits, and continue to practice a version of authentic movement as an anchor to my understanding of movement, sensation and consciousness. Rather, I want to understand the epistemic values and costs of somatic practices as represented by the materials published in JDSP. And I hope I do this in a way that is constructive, generative and provocative.

An unfinished catalogue of claims

Late last year, I started something that I have not yet finished. I started cataloguing every claim made on behalf of somatic practices in the journal.

I haven't yet finished this cataloguing effort because I ran out of time. In fact, I didn't get close. Up to Volume 14.2 in 2022, 272 articles have been published in JDSP. To this date I have only worked through 85 of these 272, which is just shy of a third.

A note on methods

I have six observations to share today. These observations emerged from this analysis of the 85 articles. However, the articles I use to illustrate these observations were all drawn at random from the entire list of 272 JDSP articles. For example, I drew the quote-claims I presented at the beginning from the first four articles randomly selected from the entire JDSP corpus. At no stage did I randomly select an article and then return it to the pile because it didn't suit my needs or desires. This reveals my confidence about how common these observations are in the JDSP corpus.

To the best of my ability, all authors have been removed from the examples I present today. I am not interested in somehow shaming the work of people whose work has been published in JDSP. I read extraordinary scholarship and practice that moved and challenged me, but that does not mean the work is somehow flawless.

Finally, the quotes you'll see are plucked from the context in which they were written. This is unfair on my part and is a significant weakness in this presentation of my analysis. That is, it's relatively easy to cherry-pick aspects of any research article that reveal some kind of flaw or problem (just as it is easy to find aspects that confirm our thinking).

Here goes.

Six observations

1. Abstractions

Most of the various practices presented in JDSP are described in ways that would be difficult to recognise for those not already in the know. Their descriptions are often very abstract.

Here's an example pulled from randomly selected article 81 of 272, and it's about building an artist book as a form of tactile writing:

[the artist book] was an attempt to embody – through 'written' archiving – the intersensorial metatext of a performance that was pregnant with tactile intention (Bonenfant 2013: 122).

Note the abstractions. What is an intersensorial metatext? And how might it be embodied? What is a tactile intention and how does it get pregnant?

Perhaps though the poetics of abstract language are a feature and not a bug? That part of our work is to attempt to pay testimony to the ineffable.

My sense is that we must continue to develop the poetics of the field and understand how both poetic and scholarly abstractions might strengthen or embolden our understandings. Yet I also worry that with abstractions come dangers. Who and what might we be exploiting through deploying abstractions, even if the exploitation is of an epistemic space?

2. Mechanisms are as rare as hens' teeth

I catalogued whether articles contained any description of the mechanism for the beneficial claims made on behalf of each somatic practice. That is, did the articles describe *how* the benefits happen? Few articles in JDSP seem to do this: about one in five of the 85 I analysed. In most cases, the practice is implicitly also the mechanism: somatic practice X can lead to effect Y due to the somatic practice process X.

When articles do contain mechanisms it's mostly difficult to ascertain if the mechanisms have anything to do with the somatic practice linked to the claim.

Here's randomly selected article 246 from the 272 from which I have drawn an example. In it, I labelled the somatic practice as *Phylogenetic mask work* which I

appreciate is not your run-of-the-mill somatic practice. The author claims that this mask work:

can help us to overcome a human/nature alienation and instead create connection (Wright 2021: 203).

The author indicates that it is the animal and nature modes of sensing that are *how* the mask work helps us to overcome human/nature alienation.

I have lots of questions here, not least how it is that we would know if this mechanism was doing its work, or (more usefully) how would we know if it were not?

Why does this matter? The question '*How* does this practice do this?' is monumental. Without this question our claims are flimsy. They remain simply claims. Perhaps though the lack of 'mechanisms' is not surprising. These are (by and large) not the kinds of methods we adopt in our work.

As an aside, in the 85 articles I analysed in detail I read no claims that indicated some negative effect or outcome because of a somatic practice. I remember one incident during an Awareness Through Movement class when a first time student had a destructive experience based on the assumptions the teacher was making about sight and sightedness. Where are those more inconvenient anecdotes in our journal?

3. Patchwork quilt

I observed that the articles in the journal are mostly individual cells of information that present their own ideas independently of other practices and debates in the field (including the journal itself). It is as if we are – through the journal – creating the start of a patchwork quilt in which the various (and different) pieces are waiting to be stitched together.

In this waiting to be stitched together I suspect there is enormous potential to build the scholarly process of sewing these patches together. To draw lines and links between ideas, claims, practices and experiences. To begin stronger and more enduring dialogues and debates within the field.

4. Descriptions of practice

The articles that most commonly do NOT make claims are those that are simple descriptions or presentations of practice. It would seem that one vital part of the Journal's role is as a place to share current practices. I'll note though – and this is a particular bugbear of mine (see Ellis forthcoming) – that rarely are these descriptions of practice drawn into dialogue with other similar or overlapping practices. They are more or less isolated bubbles of practice which likewise contribute to the patchwork effect I have just discussed.

5. Citations and arguing from authority

When I began this work I assumed that the claims made for somatics would veer towards being claims (or appeals) to authority. The fallacy of *appeal to authority* is when “a claim is supported by reference to an authority instead of offering reasons to support it” (Novaes 2021 n.pag.) These are akin to what Isabelle Ginot – in her landmark critique of somatic practices in 2010 – described as endogenous somatics discourses (Ginot 2010).

But I was surprised. Of the 85 articles I analysed, about two-thirds made what I called primary claims. That is, a claim that makes no reference to research or scholarship by other people or is based on the practices described in the article.

Yet perhaps in hindsight this is not so surprising. These primary claims align with the patchwork I have just described. They are primary claims that are placed into the aether of somatics practices discourses, and rarely, if ever, support, interrupt, change or unsettle the practices (and their epistemic underpinnings) already presented in the journal.

The citation patterns in JDSP tell us a bit more about the nature of these primary claims. The 10 most cited articles in JDSP as listed by Intellect start high then drop off. These numbers of citations are as follows and, tellingly, they are all from articles published between 2009 and 2015:

- 434 (Eddy 2009)
- 73 (Caldwell et al. 2013)
- 71 (Fortin et al. 2009)
- 51 (Greenhead and Habron 2015)
- 49 (Williamson 2010)
- 48 (Williamson 2009)
- 42 (Batson et al. 2012)
- 25 (Ravn 2010)
- 21 (Smith 2014)
- 15 (Little 2014)

The Scopus database has an incomplete dataset of JDSP that misses the first five years of the journal (I don't know why). But from 2014-2022 Scopus contains 197 JDSP articles, and of these, 13 have been cited twice, 45 have been cited once, and 105 have been cited 0 times. That means more than half of the articles published in JDSP between 2014-2022 have never been cited in other research.

These citation data are not peculiar to somatic practices scholarship, and are shared across dance and performance scholarship in general. Scopus publishes what it calls a CiteScore, which is the number of citations a journal has divided by the number of articles. JDSP's CiteScore between 2019 and 2022 is currently 0.3 (that's 19 citations from 76 articles). Choreographic Practices has a CiteScore for the

same period of 0.4. Performance Research 0.3 and Dance Research 0.2. There also seems to be a downward trend in citations from 10 years ago for all these journals.

In the visual and performing arts the highest CiteScore is for Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts at 8.3 (or 1305 citations from 157 articles). Across all disciplines, Scopus's highest rated journal is Ca-A Cancer Journal for Clinicians at 642.9 (69429 citations from 108 documents).

To my mind these numbers in dance and performance indicate that we are not engaging in debates within the field. If there were such debates these numbers would be higher, and I think the field would be richer for it.¹

The field would be richer because when we make an academic claim (a claim you make in an argument) it is "considered debatable or up for inquiry" (Nordquist 2020 n.pag). Through debate we make dissent possible, and a research field is only as strong as what it allows to be questioned.

Without these debates we compromise our "epistemic credibility" (Ellerton 2017 n.pag.). I would worry that we end up in some kind of vicious circle of epistemological impoverishment in which there are no limits to the claims made on behalf of somatic practices, which means there are no grounds to debate such claims, which means there are no limits to the claims, etc.



¹ See also Sam Dresser for just how rarely arts and humanities scholarship is cited (16%) vs science: <https://aeon.co/essays/science-is-not-the-only-form-of-knowledge-but-it-is-the-best>

6. Doing the can-can

This last observation is about the word *can*. Here's a moment from another article drawn randomly from all 272 articles.

focusing on the micro-political body through somatic education can help women exercise agency within the matrix of social inequalities they live in. (Fortin 2015, in Fortin and Hardy 2018: 271)

This *can* here is implicated in a claim about a benefit of somatic practices: somatic practice X CAN lead to effect Y. Once you start seeing the word *can* used like this in JDSP, you see it everywhere.

Let's take another look at the claims I presented at the beginning. Remember, these were from the first four articles I drew at random from all 272 articles in JDSP:

Embodied perspectives **can** enrich traditional theories and approaches (Meier et al 2012, in Petsilas et al. 2019: 182)

these [somatic] practices **can** refine bodily perceptions, which **can** contribute to improvement of technique, aid the development of expressive capacities and prevention of injuries. (Fortin et al. 2009: 50)

[Eye contact in Authentic movement] **can** communicate so many feelings as well as compassion or empathy; it enables a direct meeting from the depths of the souls, without words. (Halstrup 2015: 290)

By adopting a somatic approach to conducting research, writing, creating art, or engaging in another profession, we become more alive to what touches us and how our work and presence **can** touch others. (Saumaa 2020: 237)

Why does this *can* matter? Yes, somatic practice X can produce effect Y, but under what conditions? And when does it NOT produce such an effect? The *can* inadvertently serves as a way to make argument or refutation nigh impossible. Perhaps though our use of the word comes from a sense of epistemic humility; of not wanting to make strong assertions.

Just to note that this last *can* in Saumaa (2020) is different. It is less like a hedged claim. And what is striking about it is that, without the slipperiness of the word *can* as part of the direct claim, it becomes a bolder assertion highlighted by the phrase "we become". Perhaps such boldness opens and creates more space for debate.

Four brief limitations to finish

1. Feeling uncertain and the cost of being right or wrong

How certain do I feel that these various observations show systemic problems in somatics? Clearly my evidence is partial, and not nearly as rigorous as I would have liked it to be. I also think I set about looking for these kinds of issues. I am more

contrary than I'd like to imagine myself to be, and I did not start out with neutral eyes. But even given those caveats, this work I have presented is also not nothing.

I think a version of Pascal's wager is useful here (noauthor 2020 n.pag.). That is, the cost of my being right far exceeds the cost of my being wrong. If I am wrong but we still enter the debates, continue to challenge the claims we make etc, then I think somatics scholarship and epistemology is strengthened. But if I am right and we do nothing then the potential academic cost to our discipline is high.

2. A specific lens

I have used a specific empirical and rational lens here. It is a lens that is limited and – like any lens – it affords particular ways of seeing the world. I do not wish to succumb to the tyranny of the rational.

3. Systems of language and understanding

Perhaps it is that the way language is conventionally used in scholarly research is not yet ready for the work we do in somatics. That the work and value of somatics lie outside conventional language or systems of understanding. That somatics is beyond that particular world view. But if this is the case ... what do we do? What do we write? What are we responsible for and to whom are we responsible?

The technologist L.M. Sacasas wrote with regard to language that there are two extremes. The first is to “exclude the possibility that language can adequately express something truthful about the world” (Sacasas 2023 n.pag); and the second is to “admit only the truths language can convey” (Sacasas 2023 n.pag.).

4. Estimating peculiarity

A key limitation of this work is that except in the area of citations I did not look at other disciplines or fields; even adjacent ones like dance studies in a journal like *Choreographic Practices*. For instance, how do authors in *Choreographic Practices* report their experiences? Is there something peculiar or unique about somatics practices as presented and represented on the pages of *JDSP*? My analysis poorly if at all addresses this question of peculiarity.

I'll finish with the designer/editor/writer Mandy Brown.

One of the questions I always ask of stories is how they *work*. Who do they serve? Who benefits? Who, if anyone, is burdened or harmed by them? Who is uplifted? What modes or methods or structures do they employ? Stories—and metaphors, which are often just stories in miniature—are never neutral actors. They always seek some change, whether through resistance or encouragement or both (Brown 2023 n.pag.).

Brown's questions can and should be asked of me here this morning as much as I think we ought to ask them of our field. Who does the scholarship serve? Who benefits? Who is harmed? And how or by what methods is this work done?

It is important that I thank and acknowledge my colleagues at C-DaRE, many of whom do vital work to make JDSP happen. I thank Teoma Naccarato, Sarah Whatley and Hetty Blades for their support for this work. Thanks also to Anna Pakes and Erin Brannigan for the long and short conversations that often tested my thinking. And, as ever, to the people I have cited here without their permission (including those I have kept anonymous and drawn at random), particularly in the context of what is a critique. Citation is a remarkably simple system yet what power to notice and to connect, and to be moved and humbled by the work of others.

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