



A qualitative exploration of a selected sample of South African women's experiences of belly dancing

M Basson



orcid.org 0000-0002-2484-4668

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Supervisor:

Prof HW Nell

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Student number: 27998460

REMARKS

The reader's attention is brought to the following:

- This mini-dissertation has been compiled and written in the approved North-West University (NWU) article format. It consists of an introductory chapter, one research article which articulates the main findings of the study, as well as a final chapter outlining the conclusions, limitations, and recommendations pertaining to the study.

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SUMMARY

Topic: A qualitative exploration of a selected sample of South African women's experiences of belly dancing

Keywords: Belly dance experience, Belly dance influence, Belly dancing, Medical Sociology, Social constructivism, Sociology, South Africa, Symbolic Interactionism, Women's experiences.

This mini-dissertation reports on a study that aimed to explore a selected sample of South African women's experiences of belly dancing. A qualitative, exploratory research design was used. The study is contextualised in sociology through the theoretical lens of Symbolic Interactionism. The sample consisted of 15 belly dancers purposively selected from the belly dance community within South Africa. The ages of the participants, who are from several different South African provinces, ranged from 30 to 59. The data were collected through telephonic semi-structured interviews during July and August 2017, and subsequently analysed by means of thematic analysis.

The findings were that the experience of belly dance occurs through four stages and that each stage has within it various realms. These stages with their accompanying realms are described as follows:

- Preparatory stage – personal realm
- Observer stage – personal realm
- Student-practitioner stage – personal, public and communal realm
- Teacher/ performer/ practitioner stage – personal, public and communal realm

The first stage, the preparatory stage is characterised by the shared preparatory non-belly dance past experiences of the participants, which significantly contributed to their susceptibility to future participation in belly dance. These preparatory past experiences were diverse in nature and had major impacts on the participants.

The second stage, that of the observer, took place during the participants' initial exposure to belly dancing and consequent Symbolic Interaction between the belly dancer and the observer as well as the exposure to the ambiance of the dance stage. It is during this process that a highly positive meaning is constructed by the participant around the symbol of belly dance. The decision to participate in belly dance was mostly

inspired through the initial exposure to the art form, either via the media, or a live performance. This initial exposure was experienced as a strong emotional experience which, along with the preparatory past experiences, were pivotal in their decision to pursue belly dance.

The third stage, that of the student practitioner, is characterised by experiences in the personal realm, public realm as well as the communal realm. It was mostly described as experiences of belly dancing in terms of enhanced well-being on not only a psychological, but also a physical level. It also included the experience of the sexual nature of belly dance, the experiences of reality versus fantasy as belly dance practitioners as well as the sisterhood within the belly dance community.

Psychological well-being was mostly reported in terms of the enhanced confidence that the participants experienced as belly dance practitioners as well as an increase in self-love. The enhanced physical well-being experienced by the participants was reported as relating to matters pertaining to the improvement in mobility and flexibility as well as weight loss. Urinary incontinence resulting from the birthing process was also reported as a physical aspect which improved as a result of the participants engaging in belly dance.

A fundamental dichotomy that emerged in the participants' experience of belly dancing was their implicit acknowledgement of the sexual and sensual elements of belly dance on the one hand, and their insistence that belly dancing is not a sexual dance on the other. It was hypothesised that the comparatively conservative Afrikaner culture which tends to eschew any form of overt or public sexual expression by women and the innate desire of women to express their sexuality has caused an incongruence in the symbolic constructions of the participants in relation to the sexual aspects of belly dancing. This appears to have resulted in participants forming an alter-ego when they performed on stage or in public in an effort to deal with the incongruence. The participants reported that this formation of an alter-ego allowed them to be anything they wanted to be on the stage without feeling personally conflicted about engaging in such an overtly sensual dance.

Despite the formation of an alter ego as a means to cope with the expression of their sexuality, the participants reported that there was still an element of controversy where

the public was concerned. Specifically, most participants were of the opinion that the general public held different constructions of belly dancing than that of the practitioners, and hence the practitioners experienced what they perceived to be negative and uncalled for treatment from certain audiences. This compelled many of the participants to engage in educating the public through various means of communication (through media, interviews and articles) to reconstruct the audiences symbolic meaning of belly dance.

Within the communal realm the participants reported experiencing a sense of sisterhood and attended feelings of belonging within the context of belly dancing. However, negative experiences were also common within this group context and were reported to be attributed to factors such as competition, the lack of belly dancing regulation and standards in teaching within South Africa.

The fourth stage, that of the teacher/performer/practitioner, which included the experiences of the participants within the communal and public realm, was characterised by experiences of the participants as belly dance teachers and/or professional performers. Many of the participants stated that since becoming practitioners of belly dance, they have opened their own studios and now teach belly dancing to students of their own. This implies that belly dancing is a vocational avenue with an economic value for some South African women.

The findings have significant value to the field of (medical) sociology and specifically to expanded understanding of the social determinants of health. The latter term conveys the notion that social practices and conditions, class position, economics, politics as well as religious factors exert a significant effect on the health of individuals and social groups. Social determinants were in the distant past considered secondary influences on health. This view has changed substantially. Social determinants not only cause health problems but can also advance the prospects for coping with or preventing disease and maintaining health (Cockerham, 2011:4). The findings clearly show that women in South Africa who belly dance, experience and interpret belly dancing, not only as a social practice, but also construct the symbol of belly dance as one of enhancing their well-being, fitness and even sexual expression as women within the South African context.

The mini-dissertation is concluded with a chapter that outlines the conclusions and limitations related to the study, as well as recommendations for future research and practical application of the findings.

Table of abbreviations

ACAPS	Anglia catholic protection services
ATS	American Tribal Style
BaSSREC	Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
MBDSA	Miss Belly Dance South Africa
NWU	North West University
SADTA	South African Dance Teachers Association
SADTA-BDD	South African Dance Teachers Association – Belly dance division
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority

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CHAPTER ONE

1. Introduction, problem statement, and objectives

This chapter serves the purpose of familiarising the reader with the study on which the mini-dissertation is based. The main aim of the study is to qualitatively explore a selected sample of South African women's experiences of belly dancing, and also to utilise the Symbolic Interaction theory as a theoretical framework for elucidating the findings. This chapter will introduce and outline the various significant steps of the research study as well as the literature relevant to the research topic. This will be followed by an overview of the research questions and related research aims.

Thereafter an outline of the theoretical framework and essential sociological theory pertaining to the study will be discussed and detailed. The research methodology applicable to the study is described next, and comprises an outline of the research design, a description of the sample and sampling procedures, data collection methods, research procedures and data analysis methods applicable to the study. The trustworthiness and quality assurance of the study will be described as well as the ethical considerations pertinent to the study. This chapter is concluded with a section describing the chapter division of this mini-dissertation.

1.1. Introduction

Dancing is a uniquely created phenomenon characterised by a dynamic form. Up until its unique creation, no dance can exist and therefore cannot be experienced until it exists. Each completed dance is a sensation of an interrelated and assiduous form (Sheets, 1966:5). What is not entirely clear from existing research is what this experience really is and what it means to each woman who is dancing. Furthermore, most of the literature available on the topic predominantly focuses on experiences of dancers in countries other than South Africa. South Africa is unique in that it is multicultural and diverse, with its own rich heritage of dance that is entwined with the many cultures that exist in this country.

The manner in which dance in general, and belly dance in particular operate as means to the construction of the self is an issue on which a sociological perspective can shed significant light. In particular, when viewed in the light of Symbolic Interactionism, the social practice of belly dance could be better understood in light of its various contexts, symbols, and negotiated order, and thus contribute to the understanding of belly

dancing as an avenue towards knowledge of the self (Gibson, 2010:12). Dancing (including belly dancing) has become a niche in art circles, especially in the UK, gaining popularity and becoming the biggest school activity for girls in the UK, increasing as a subject choice from 7000 to 19000 students between 2001 and 2007 (Johnson, 2010). In South Africa, the South African Education Department added dance studies as a subject to the grade 10-12 curricula in 2003. The specific intention was that learners participate in a wide variety of dance experiences (Department of Education, 2003:10). Unfortunately, there is very little research in South Africa as to what these experiences are and how they are constructed by women of different ages and cultures in South Africa. It was the aim of the present study to address this gap.

1.1.1 What is belly dancing?

Belly dancing is a genre of dancing which comprises of a very intricate balance of control and isolation between body parts as well as a percussive nature of the hips. The clothing is characterised by layers of colourful, flowing skirts with intricate beadwork on the belt and bra (Papas, s.a.). The layers on the skirts and the intricate beading are emphasised in the rhythmic percussions of the hips. According to Shay and Sellers-Young (2003:13-37) these movements are often subject to confusion and assumed to be sexual on the basis of the feminine and sensual vocabulary of the dance movements. One of the main tenets of the Symbolic Interactionist theory is that humans act towards things on the foundation of the meaning these things have for them (Blumer, 1969:2). Within the Western world where the media symbolically portrays Arabic women (belly dancers) as being sultry, exotic women (Harper, 2013:49), many Westerners have subsequently attached a sexual meaning to belly dancing movements which make up the dance. However, this is in direct contrast to the meaning Bedouins give to belly dance movements such as those used during a birthing process. They form a circle around the birthing mother and chant and sing while encouraging the mother-to-be to copy the movements they make. These movements consist of circular motions (of the pelvis) and undulations (of the torso). This not only helps to get the foetus in place, but also eases the pain associated with childbirth (Ibrahim, 2016:2). This is echoed in descriptions of belly dancing long before the religions of Islam and Christianity where it was thought to have originated in the Ancient Middle East as a ceremonial preparation for childbirth (Cooper, 2004:8). This was at a time when many societies were matriarchal, and belly dancing was staged by women for women. Viewed from a

Symbolic Interactionist perspective, it could be argued that the meaning (of belly dancing) arose out of the interaction (between the women), and was subsequently modified through an interpretive process each time they interacted (Blumer, 1969:2). It was here that the dance, through the socialisation process, became associated with childbirth by preparing young girls for labour (Aleenah, 2016). This is articulated in the undulations and abdominal contractions which are synonymous with belly dancing. It was then also part of the delivery ritual (Papas, s.a.).

Belly dancing is also seen as a spiritual activity by many belly dancers (Kraus, 2009:51) comprising of an individual phenomenon, a personal sacred relationship with a higher reverence, and a journey of discovery to find the broader meaning of life (Christopher, s.a:1). It is a dynamic process which continuously negotiates the dancer's understanding and experience of the sacred (Kraus, 2009:52). This follows on the association with religious rituals associated with goddess worship. Many belly dancers experience this dance form as meditative, much as prayer is, which helps the women to set themselves in a spiritual frame of mind (Ransford, 2008). The belly dance genre underwent a substantive revival during the 1970s; brought about in part by feminist movements which advocated feminism and sexual liberation. In stark contrast to constructions of belly dancing as a spiritual activity associated with religious rituals and goddess worship as described in Kraus (2009:51), the image of an exposed torso such as what is seen in belly dancing became a symbolic expression for the feminist movements (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003:13-37).

By contrast, in many contemporary contexts, belly dancing is engaged in as an exercise routine and a form of entertainment. The style as it is commonly presented today has been usurped by Westerners and modernised to encapsulate several Western ideals (Woods, 2014.). This includes the very provocative costumes and cabaret style movements which are seen throughout Western styled belly dancing today. The trend in the U.S. indicates that women are becoming more active in participating in the ancient art of belly dancing and also find it a means of celebrating women's femininity (Papap, s.a.). Studies conducted in Adelaide (Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark, 2014:197-207) have indicated that women who partake in belly dancing have less desire to be thin or remain thin as is common among ballet dancers. However, belly dancing has also been listed

as a popular exercise mechanism which can be seen as a form of weight control (Woods, s.a.).

From the above, it is evident that belly dancing is a multi-faceted phenomenon in which a large variety of different meanings have been constructed. The layered richness of this ancient art tradition, with its collective appeal might well be attributed to its influences gained and shared from different cultures, sources and dance styles (Aleenah, 2016). It also appears from the above that in each culture where it is practiced, unique meanings are constructed in relation to this dance form which is so symbolically rich in gestures, movements, props, and music. As a consequence, the experiences of belly dancers are likely to vary in different contexts based on these differing meanings that have been constructed around belly dancing. As will be discussed in greater detail in a later section, the experiences of women who belly dance have thus far (as far as could be ascertained) never been explored, a gap which this study intends to contribute to addressing.

1.1.2. The sociography of belly dance

The precise origins of belly dancing are not really known and are surrounded by controversy and debate. It is suggested that it is descended from religious fertility rituals performed by temple priestesses (Cooper, 2004:7). This is supported by the findings of temple etchings depicting dancers, dating back to as early as 1000 B.C. which were found in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece. However, belly dancing is also argued to have originated in India over 5000 years ago, spreading throughout the Middle East through the Gypsy Roma tribes. Belly dance movements merged with other dance styles and was perpetuated in what is now termed modern Flamenco, with movements which are very similar to many of those commonly encountered in popular belly dancing practiced today (Aleenah, 2016).

The term belly dance is also thought to be derived from the French phrase *dance du ventre* translated as dance of the stomach. It is also commonly referred to as “*oriental dance*”, which seems to embody both the Middle Eastern and Near Eastern styles. Another name associated with belly dancing is “*raqs sharqi*”, which is an Arabic term for “dance of the East”. Although the term is primarily associated with the description of

Egyptian cabaret styled dancing, it has gained a much broader use in America (Cooper, 2004:7).

1.1.3 The culture of dancing

Human cultural behaviour is very diverse and has many distinctive features. These features are typically known as cultural universals, and are found in all societies (Giddens, 1996:40). Culture is described as a way of life for people, which includes human created strategies for adjusting to that environment. Communication is an important strategy, especially when communicating with others and building social networks (Ferrante, 2008:60). No known culture exists without a grammatically complex language. This allows for interaction with others as well as perpetuating and creating culture (Ferrante, 2008:60). Dancing is a form of non-verbal communication and is culturally adjusted to suit the requirements of the society that it is practiced in. Belly dancing is historically known to be an important part of Arabic culture. This is emphasised through *RaksBeledi*, or “folk dance”, as it is known in the Arabic language. *RaksBeledi* is one of the oldest social dances of the Middle East and North African people. Historically danced by both sexes of all ages, it is enjoyed and cherished at festive occasions (Hooi, 2015). Even today, in Egypt, some women use belly dancing as a means of earning an income where they perform at rituals such as weddings (Hooi, 2015). Culturally in Arabia, belly dancing has for generations been used as a ritual dance during ceremonies of life and community celebration. Weddings always have a professional belly dancer and members of both the families will enjoy dancing together (Sellers-Young, 2013:6).

Traditionally, men and women of Islamic societies did not socialise together. Women led segregated lives living in a separate section of the house called a *harem*. This term carries the implication of forbidden space, which was depicted by the fact that men who were not immediate members of the family were forbidden to enter the harem. It was in this harem where the women socialised with female family members and friends and where belly dancing was practiced and used as a form of entertainment (Aleenah, 2016). However, this contradicts what the media portrays as sexual roles and associations with stripping and striptease. In particular, Hollywood is responsible for the sexual connotations by portraying the Arab woman as scantily clad, veiled and sexually available (Nittle, 2016).

In contrast to such sexually slanted perceptions, the Trance dance or *Zaar* as it is commonly known is associated with divine healing on a spiritual level, and is characterised by turns, swirls and head turns. Many of the tribes still celebrate the coming of a young girl into womanhood by having her dance her first dance as a woman when she starts menstruating. At such gatherings, men are not present (Ibrahim, 2016:2).

1.2. Problem statement

From the *femme fatale* expectation to the exotic perceptions associated with belly dancing, right through to the spiritual essence of being, which have all been linked to the ancient art, belly dancing is multifaceted and may have a significant bearing on various aspects of well-being. Although recognised as an exercise form, not all women who practice belly dancing do so with the intention to lose weight. This begs the question as to why participate in belly dancing? Culture and religion will influence the reasons that belly dancing is practiced as well as how it will be practiced and ultimately presented. Yet, despite the many facets and reasons for its practice, each belly dancer will have a unique experience associated with this dance as well as what this experience means to her. Dancing (including belly dancing) is fast gaining popularity and becoming a niche in art circles in the UK (Johnson, 2010). It has also become the biggest school activity for girls in the UK. Between 2001 and 2007 dance as a subject choice in the UK increased from 7000 to 19000 students (Johnson, 2010). In South Africa, dance studies were added as a subject to the grade 10-12 curricula in 2003 by the Education Department. This was with the specific intention that learners participate in a wide variety of dance experiences (Department of Education, 2003:10).

Unfortunately, there is very little research in South Africa as to what these experiences are and how they are constructed by women of different ages and cultures in South Africa.

A thorough understanding of these experiences of women who belly dance, derived from a qualitative exploration, and framed by a Symbolic Interactionist perspective in which such experiences would be regarded as socio-culturally constructed (Blumer, 1969:93), would potentially be of significant value to therapists, dance teachers, counsellors and families of women who belly dance. By generating a contextually situated description and explanation of the value placed by some South African women

on the practice and experience of belly dancing and understanding how this dance form is symbolically constructed by these women, and how it directs and moulds their action as well as their constructions of self (Blumer, 1969:93), a number of practically applicable insights and understandings might ensue. For example, South African belly dance instructors (who are duly trained and qualified) are required to have a thorough understanding of the mechanics of belly dancing movements as well as how to transfer this to their students. They may however, not fully understand the symbolic meanings attached to the experiences of belly dancing as reported by South African belly dancers and the findings of this study might sensitise them to address possible stereotypes, and to be aware of the ways in which the dance form could also be of benefit to these women in terms of supporting the construction of a more preferred self. For counsellors and therapists, there could be value in understanding how belly dancing could support the latter process by providing them with an alternative therapeutic avenue to recommend to female clients suffering from concerns related to their own sense of femininity.

1.3. Research questions

Based on the above, the following research questions were formulated.

1.3.1. Main research question

How does a selected sample of South African women construct their experiences of belly dancing?

1.3.2. Secondary research questions

- What brought these women to the choice of belly dancing?
- What meanings do these women attach to belly dancing?
- What influence do these constructed meanings have on these women?

1.4. Research objectives

The following main and secondary research objectives were set for this study:

1.4.1. Main research objective

To explore the manner in which a selected sample of South African women construct their experiences of belly dancing.

1.4.2. Secondary research objectives

- To explore what brought them to the choice of belly dancing.
- To explore what meanings these women attach to belly dancing.
- To explore what influence these constructed meanings have on these women.

1.5. Ontological, Epistemological, and Theoretical Framework of the Study

This section of chapter one is dedicated to matters relating to the ontological, epistemological and theoretical perspectives that are applicable to the study.

1.5.1 Ontological and epistemological assumptions guiding the study

Ontology refers to the study of what is reality and truth, whereas epistemology refers to the study of the nature of knowledge. Ontology directs what should be focused on in the research and epistemology the kind of knowledge which is sought in the research (Martignani, 2016:523).

Women's experiences of belly dancing (their reality of the experience) are subjective and therefore best suited to be approached through the lens of a constructionist ontology. According to this view, knowledge is internally constructed through the individual experience (Sarantakos, 2013:37-38). This viewpoint maintains that individuals seek to understand the world in which they live by constructing subjective meanings in relation to their experiences associated with objects and actions that thus become symbols imbued with constructed meaning (Blumer, 1969:93). These meanings are formed through historical and cultural norms that are operational in the individual's lives. As humans engage with the world they are interpreting, they construct meanings of these engagements, which are based on their historical and social perspectives (Creswell, 2014:37-38). Furthermore, constructionists maintain that all reality is socially constructed and interpreted through the inter-subjective construction of social reality (Martignani, 2016:517). Within this viewpoint, it is also maintained that extemporaneous

ideas occur between people of different cultures and countries (Segre, 2016:93-94) leading to different constructions of reality.

Experience is made up of various types of structures which range from memory, emotion, body awareness or social activity which includes language (Smith, 2013). Language is associated with communication, and according to Anderson & Baym (*cited* in Keaton & Bodie, 2011:192-196), shifts the experience from the biological to the domain of action – which includes non-verbal cues. Belly dancing can be compared to a non-verbal language, and as such will have an abstract meaning in relation to how it structures experience. Framing this experience will be the person's cultural and social structures, religious systems, values, and belief systems (Creswell, 2014:37). Belly dancing may trigger memories of an enjoyable overseas trip that left a veil of mystery around the ancient art form. The fluid nature of the movement may elicit emotion or even bodily awareness within the social activity of belly dancing. Each woman will have a unique experience of belly dancing based on her social construction of reality, and exploring what that experience ultimately means to her is the goal of this study.

An individual's experience of the world is centred on a system of meaningful objects and relations. These experiences are real to the person who is going through them and are not experienced as being just inside the head. Therefore, limiting our perception to what is experienced through our senses will exclude the socially constructed meaning structures perceived and experienced by the dancers (Creswell, 2014:37-38). The social constructionist approach was therefore well suited to this research as it emphasises the experiential and regards it as a central focus where the meaning of belly dancing is unique to each belly dancer as she experiences each dance through her social construction of reality.

According to Hansson (2013:384), society is the basic unit of knowledge organisation. This is because social organisation generates amongst other art forms (dance), which in turn generates information affiliated with the various institutions that support and maintain the social structure of dance, which generates different communicative situations, which generates knowledge systems. In turn, seeking an understanding of these experiences and the value that each woman attaches to it would be best served by an interpretive epistemology, and in particular, a social constructionist epistemology,

which holds that reality, is socially constructed and not objectively determined (Sarantakos, 2013:37-40; Blumer, 1969:2).

1.5.2 Theoretical framework

1.5.1.3 Symbolic Interactionism

The commitment to discovery is one of the most important assets Symbolic Interaction has to offer applied research. Interactionism encourages researchers to approach research in a manner that is open to the discovery of aspects of everyday life, which have previously either been ignored or just not observed (Kotarba, 2014:418). This study sought to explore women's experience of belly dance in a South African context, which has not previously been explored or documented, in exactly this spirit.

George Herbert Mead, credited for his probing analysis of social interaction (Mead, 1934:xiv-xv), identified two levels of social interaction in human society, namely gestures and significant symbols. He defined gestures as non-Symbolic Interaction that takes place when one responds directly to the action of another without interpreting that action. During social interaction human beings make a lot of gestures as they respond immediately and unreflectively to each other's bodily movements, expressions, and tones of voice. However, their typical style of interaction is on the symbolic level where they seek to understand the meaning of each other's action (Mead, 1934:xvii). A gesture therefore, is any part or aspect of an ongoing action that signifies the larger act of which it is a part (Blumer, 1969:9). Social interaction therefore involves two persons and includes a basic mechanism of a gesture. The meaning of gestures can be consciously communicated and this leads to the development of significant symbols. Significant symbols not only make thinking possible, but also Symbolic Interaction (Ritzer, 2010:390). This is clearly illustrated in the manner in which women in Arabia socialise in the practice of belly dancing as a ritual dance and as part of ceremonies of life (Sellers-Young, 2013:6). However, in the U.S. women are socialised in the practice of belly dancing as a means of celebrating women's femininity (Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark, 2014:197-207; Papas, s.a.). Each culture has developed their own symbolic meaning of belly dancing gestures through their social interaction in relation to belly dancing as a form of non-verbal communication and the culturally embedded norms, values and beliefs extant in their socio-cultural contexts.

Symbolic Interactionism is further defined within the intellectual roots of pragmatism which maintains that reality is constructed through people's actions which result from their definitions and interpretations of their daily interactions with other people (Tracy, 2013:51). Through the process of socialisation, which includes non-verbal communication in the form of dancing and language (such as lyrics to the belly dance songs), meanings are ascribed to phenomena called symbols. Based on their knowledge of the world obtained through the various forms of symbolically mediated communication, humans attach a meaning to symbols based on what is useful to them. People are likely to change what no longer works for them through continuous definition and redefinition of the meaning of the symbols – this includes the meaning and interpretation of the symbolism attached to the value of belly dance (Ritzer, 2010: 351; Wiley, 2014:303). This can be explained using an example of two people conversing. During an interactive interplay between two people, a constant uncertainty in the conversation will be present. The parties will be defining and redefining each other's comments as they converse, thereby constantly creating new meanings based on what they perceive as valuable for them during the interaction. Applied to belly dancing, it could be argued that this process of Symbolic Interaction would also be evident in the verbal interactions between belly dance students and teachers as well as in the non-verbal interactions comprising of belly dance movements and the audience's reaction which takes place between the dancer and her audience. A dancer will define her dancing through her interaction with her teacher as well as her audience's responses and in return redefine her dancing to what she feels elicits the best reaction and response from her teacher and audience.

The Symbolic Interactionist theory further maintains that social order and stability is created as a result of symbolically based social interaction between people. The meanings that people attach to these interactions are not inherent but grounded in social relationships and mediated through a process of symbolic meaning making (Tracy, 2013:51-52). This includes the construction of the self and the significance that the self acquires from their specific society. How these meanings are assigned and attached through interaction is relevant in understanding how people define their reality of the world around them, which in this case applies to the symbolic meaning and interpretation attached to the experience of belly dancing by the selected sample of South African women. Interaction amongst people is a continuous process that not only

relies on verbal communication, but also on non-verbal communication as well. Consequently, this is the case with belly dancing, which is replete with symbolically fertile gestures and facial expressions. It is during this continuous dialogue that social meanings are created and changed (Kaminskas & Dorulis, 2007:113). This process could be illustrated by the example of Bedouin society who practice belly dance movements similar to natural movements used during a birthing process. While forming a circle around the birthing mother and chanting and singing, they encourage the mother-to-be to emulate the movements they make through various gestures. These movements help to get the foetus in place and also ease the pain of labour (Ibrahim, 2016:2). As a consequence, in Bedouin culture, belly dance is therefore symbolically associated with the birthing process through the gestures of the supporting group towards the woman in labour.

Art has the power to generate contemplation, allure, and meditative study. Dance (belly dance) as an art, has the capacity to move humans between the polarities of elation through to depression. Although reactions, experiences, and meanings made are uniquely felt by each individual, and differ between artistic mediums, it has the prospective to entice us away from our everyday lives and into a world of transcendence and transformation (Bordelon, 2013:33). The understanding of social experience cannot be achieved without understanding the experiencer's social world. Acting and roles form part of this social world and how we interpret it. A stimulus (such as exposure to belly dance) does not elicit an automatic response from the human actor. Rather, the stimulus becomes an opportunity to act (Blumer, 1969:4-5). Considering Orientalism (a term conceived by Edward Said) and how this term has been internalised through socialisation in the West to create a symbol of female Arabians as sultry, exotic women (belly dancers) eager to use their exoticism to tempt Western men (Harper, 2013:49), it becomes apparent why some feminists would choose to act to the stimulus of belly dance in a revolutionary manner to advocate sexual liberation (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003:13-37).

As is the case with all theoretical perspectives, symbolic interactionism is not without critique. Once such criticism refers to the lack of proper attention afforded to the macro level of social interpretation (Crossman, 2018:1). By contrast, symbolic interactionists generally concern themselves with a more micro level view of social phenomena. As

such, there are limitations in relation to the interpretations and conclusions that would be derived via the application of this theory to the topic of women's experience of belly dancing. However, symbolic interactionism has been selected as theoretical perspective as it is highly compatible with the interpretivist epistemology and qualitative methodological approach that underlies the study. In qualitative research in general, as in symbolic interactionism, the emphasis is on contextualised and localised understanding of phenomena, and not on facets such as empirically investigating macro level social patterns or regularities (Tracy, 2013). Another fundamental criticism of symbolic interactionism is the lack of precision for testing due to the subjective nature of the theory (Coakley & Donnelly, 2009:29). However, from a constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, this critique would be challenged by the underlying assumption that reality, by nature, *is* subjective and constructed (Sarantakos, 2013). From within this ontological and epistemological stance it is thus assumed that the nature of women's experience of belly dancing would be subjective and constructed, and symbolic interactionism, as a theoretical perspective, is well-suited to elucidate the findings emerging from the study within such an ontological and epistemological context.

However, within the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism, the reality of how a selected sample of women in South Africa experience belly dancing would be sought in the interaction of the different role players within the belly dance community in South Africa. The focus would be on how the subjective experience of the women who belly dance in South Africa is constructed in interaction with each other, their instructors and their audiences, and furthermore on how these constructions influence them.

1.6 Methodology

1.6.1. Phase 1: Literature review

During the first phase of the study, a comprehensive literature review was undertaken with the objective of gathering important contextual information relevant to the study. Effort and conscientiousness in preparing a literature review is a fundamental constituent of any scientific study. It not only provides an academic background to the investigation at hand, but also justifies how the current research fits in with the existing body of knowledge (Wanjohi, 2012:1). The literature reviewed was gathered using internet databases such as JSTOR, EBSCOHOST, Google scholar and SABINET, and

was comprised of peer reviewed scholarly articles, theses, dissertations, books and other relevant sources. Keywords applicable to the search included various permutations of belly dance, woman's experiences, culture, dance, age, and South Africa.

1.6.2. Phase 2: Empirical study

The following section of this chapter details an overview of the empirical phase of the study. Matters such as the research design, participant selection, data collection, research procedures, and data analysis strategies relevant to the study are outlined.

1.6.2.1 Research design

The systematic collection and analysis of empirical evidence is how all social researchers comprehend and describe social life (Tracy, 2013:4). Social research has the primary aim of generating new knowledge and through this new knowledge, new conclusions about the vast magnitude of social phenomena can be made. There are two main research methodologies that are commonly adopted in order to achieve this aim of generating new knowledge, which encompass a positivist quantitative approach, and a non-positivist, qualitative approach. Depending on the goals of the social research a specific methodology will be employed. For the purpose of this study a qualitative methodology was followed, which was best suited to exploring the subjective nature of women's experiences of belly dancing in South Africa in the context of a social constructivist epistemology (Miles & Huberman, 1994:1).

Qualitative research is generally used when we are seeking to understand the "*why*" and "*how*" of social phenomena affecting populations. Qualitative research is by nature exploratory and as such explores information obtained from both individuals and groups as opposed to creating lists of numeric data (ACAPS, 2012). Qualitative data are non-reducible texts which require interpretation of the data to distinguish patterns and insights. It can therefore be used as a means to see a social phenomenon in new ways. By surfacing new insights, qualitative research allows for the introduction of theory in completely new directions and broadens the researcher's epistemological frame, yielding completely original ideas (Anon, 2018:1189-1190). This approach was therefore deemed particularly relevant in the context of this study, which sought to understand why women in South Africa partake in belly dancing and how they experience this.

1.6.2.1.1 Context of belly dancing in South Africa

Belly dancing in South Africa is predominantly practiced by women, of various ages and cultures. Over the past 10 years the emergence of male belly dancers has been observed by the researcher, who is also a belly dance instructor, although mostly in the tribal genre. The male dancers also seem to have taken to the drumming or *darbuka* within the belly dance community in South Africa. The most well-known association of belly dancers in South Africa is the South African Dance Teachers Association – Belly Dance division (SADTA, 2013:1). This association certifies teachers according to their syllabus and standards. It is not compulsory to belong to this association and its teachers' certifications are neither recognised by SAQA nor by any international dance associations. Coupled with this association is the independent association which oversees the annual Miss Belly Dance South Africa competitions (Goddess divine productions, 2018) as well as invites international belly dance superstars to South Africa for workshops and performances. This association does not certify teachers, but does crown an annual belly dance queen representing the belly dancers of South Africa.

There are belly dance studios in all nine official provinces of South Africa (SADTA, 2013:1). Many studios overlap in territory. Not all studios are run by SADTA certified teachers. Many studios are run by internationally certified belly dance teachers and many are run by persons who have no formal training or certification.

Belly dancing has become a regular source of entertainment at various restaurant themed evenings (AlaTurka, 2018) as well as a popular choice for corporate year end functions and themed parties. This has created a platform for competition between the studios and the related genres within the art of belly dance in South Africa.

1.6.2.2 Participants

Sampling in qualitative research is a complex issue and essentially an investigative process. Fundamental to qualitative sampling is the principle of appropriateness, requiring non-probability, purposeful sampling. This implies that the informant must have knowledge of the topic and effective communication skills in order to convey this knowledge to the researcher (Sarantakos, 2013:178; Tracy, 2013:134; Creswell, 2014:239).

Purposive sampling was employed in the present study, and is a technique that researchers use to select participants for their research project who, according to the researcher, will be relevant to the project (Creswell. 2014:239). Ultimately in qualitative research the sample has a significant effect on the quality of the research.

Shortcomings in the sample group make interpretations of the findings challenging (Miles & Huberman, 1994:27). It was therefore deemed important to select participants who were specifically knowledgeable about the research topic, and as such, the sample group was selected from the known community of belly dancers in South Africa.

The following criteria were set out for the selection of participants:

➤ Inclusion criteria:

- Participants had to be dancing with a recognised belly dance studio in South Africa.
- Participants had to be South African women who are 18 years and older.

➤ Inclusion criteria:

- Participation in belly dancing had to be voluntary and not as part of a cultural or religious necessity.

Purposive sampling was supplemented by quota sampling, which, according to Sarantakos (2013:178), is a procedure that the researcher employs in order to obtain given numbers of participants from various subgroups of the population of interest. In this study, the researcher aimed to interview four dancers from at least four different South African provinces, and also to obtain participants from various racial as well as age groups (above the age of 18) in order to obtain a sample that would be characterised by greater multi-vocality (Tracy, 2013). However, based on a number of factors that are discussed in later sections, these aims were not achieved to the hoped-for extent due to lack of response from potential participants who met the inclusion criteria.

The final participant group consisted of fifteen dancers drawn from various regions across South Africa, and their characteristics are set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of participants¹

Participant	Age	Race	Other	Age started belly dance
1	36	White	Amateur dancer/student teacher	33
2	37	White	Amateur dancer	24
3	45	White	Certified belly dance teacher	34
4	47	White	Amateur dancer	42
5	40	White	Certified belly dance teacher	29
6	46	mixed race	Dance teacher	36
7	57	White	Certified belly dance teacher	45
8	36	White	Amateur dancer/ student teacher	33
9	40	White	Certified belly dance teacher	29
10	36	White	Amateur dancer	33
11	30	White	Former dance teacher/now professional dancer	18
12			Number allocated - participant withdrew from interviews due to sudden death of her mother	
13	54	White	Certified belly dance teacher	33
14	59	White	Amateur dancer	50
15	34	White	Amateur dancer	30
16	37	White	Amateur dancer	32

¹Many of the participants are well-known belly dance instructors, and as such, providing specific individual information about each participant's age, race, Province and dancing/instructor qualifications would very likely serve to render them easily identifiable to any informed reader. Given that some of these participants revealed highly sensitive information pertaining to matters such as sexual abuse during the interviews, and in light of the pledge of confidentiality that was made to the participants, an ethically driven decision was made to not report each participant's characteristics individually, but to outline the participant context in a more aggregate (and therefore anonymous) manner.

Sixteen participants who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria responded to the invitation. One participant later withdrew after the untimely death of her mother. Five provinces were represented - Gauteng (4), North-West (5), Eastern Cape (4), Western Cape (1), and KZN (1). Participants' ages ranged from 30 to 59.

Of the fifteen participants, one was of mixed race. No black or Indian participants responded to the invitation. The participants spoke either English or Afrikaans (or both), and were allowed to participate in the interviews in their language of choice.

Two of the participants hold international belly dancing qualifications. One participant is a SADTA (South African Dance Teachers Association) licentiate holder and one participant is studying towards her SADTA Fellowship. Another participant has achieved her grade one SADTA belly dancing certificate. There were six teachers and six students. Of the teachers two were self-taught. Most of the participants have been dancing in excess of ten years. All but one of the teachers still teaches, the exception being a teacher who is now a professional performer and as such, is no longer teaching a class. All the participants dance on stage at various belly dancing events and shows. Five of the participants perform professionally for compensation.

1.6.2.3. Data collection

Interviews are the most commonly used method of data collection in qualitative research. They are used for the exploration of views and experiences as well as beliefs and motivations of the individuals who partake in the research (Tracy, 2013:132). Given that the present study is centred on the exploration of personal views and experiences of belly dancers, interviews were deemed to be a highly applicable data gathering method.

Interviewing as a data collection method includes the verbal questioning of the participant. For the purpose of this research a semi-structured interview format was employed. Given that participants from various South African provinces took part in the study, a telephonic format was used to conduct the interviews. This was specifically decided on as many belly dancers have full time employment during the day as well as contend with busy schedules revolving around performances and classes at night and over weekends. In an effort to not inconvenience any participants, the most effective

manner to gather the data was therefore deemed to be telephonic interviews where the time and space for the interview was comfortable and agreeable to all parties. It was also the most cost- effective manner to interview participants from locations outside that of where the researcher resides. However, despite these positive aspects of telephonic interviews, the limitations were also considered. One such limitation was the need to keep questions simple and uncomplicated (Anon, 2016) so as to ensure that the participants understood the questions asked. This limitation was mitigated in that the participants were specifically chosen because they were belly dancers and had relevant knowledge of the topic ensuring that questions asked would likely be understood. Another limitation considered was the inability of the researcher to view the body language of the participant as she was answering the questions (Anon, 2016). This limited the researcher's ability to timeously pick up on nonverbal cues pertaining to questions which needed to be elaborated on or avoided. However, the researcher was mindful to continuously remind participants that they need not answer the questions if they felt uncomfortable. A third limitation considered pertained to the widespread aversion to telemarketers resulting in the participants refusing to participate in the interviews (Anon, 2016). The researcher relied on prior informed consent as a means to assure participants of the reason they were being interviewed and to assure them that they would not be subjected to telemarketing of any kind. As such, participants all agreed to, and expected the researcher's call at a mutually agreed time that was convenient for the participant, which thus circumvented this potential limitation. All participants were interviewed individually.

Semi-structured interviews strike a unique balance between the formal structured interview, in which specific pre-determined questions are asked, and the more open manner of interview that is found in unstructured interviews, where the questions are formulated from the answers given by the participants (Sarantakos, 2013:278). The flexibility of the open ended-questions allowed for a deeper meaning and insight into the research topic (Newton, 2010). Semi-structured interviews are typically conducted in a conversational, person-to-person format. They are highly dependent on the effective communication skills of the interviewer or researcher. As such, it is important that the researcher clearly structures and articulates questions in a manner that the participants are able to understand and respond to. In instances where the participants seem to hesitate, strategically placed probes, pauses and prompts were used to make it easier

for the participant to respond (Kennedy, 2006). Consequently, all these guidelines formed the basis for developing the interview guide and conducting the interviews in the present study. Specific open-ended questions were posed to the participants, which initiated the interview process. Subsequent probing questions were used to prompt participants to elaborate on their responses.

Probes, which in this study took the form of clarification questions, were used by the researcher to seek more depth as to what the participants were saying. These questions contained phrases such as “what do you mean by...?” The probes were also used by the researcher to explore themes the participants brought up, in which the researcher asked questions such as “tell me more about...” (Creswell, 2014:244).

The following questions were used to guide the semi-structured interviews:

1. What prompted you to start belly dancing?
2. What was your first experience of belly dancing?
3. What kinds of benefits do you experience as a practitioner of belly dancing?
(Probe: socially, physically or mentally)
4. How would you describe your experience of belly dancing?
5. Which aspects of belly dancing do you find most/least enjoyable? (Probe: music, movements, props, expression in music, freedom of expression, femininity).
6. How has belly dancing influenced your life?
7. Have you ever had any negative experiences in relation to belly dancing? (Probe: experienced any internal or interpersonal conflict). If so, would you mind telling me what happened?

All the interviews were digitally audio-recorded on a Samsung S4 Smartphone equipped with a play-store call recorder function for transcription purposes, and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Although the quota of participants that was initially proposed was set at a higher number, theoretical saturation was reached after ten interviews. However, to ensure that this was indeed the case, five additional interviews were conducted. Theoretical saturation, as a phase of qualitative data analysis, occurs when the researcher has continued sampling and analysing data until no new data appear (Morse, 2004:1123).

1.6.2.4. Research procedure

Once the research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Optentia Research Focus area's research committee, ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) of the North West University (ethics number: NWU – HS- 2017-0103). Following this, the services of a participant recruiter were employed. A general notice indicating the purpose of the research was sent to the SADTA belly dance division and the organisers of *Miss Belly Dance South Africa* for permission to use their extensive data bases in order to access the belly dance community in South Africa. Once permission was obtained from both sources, a general invitation was sent out for them to distribute. The invitation detailed the purpose of the research and also described the criteria for inclusion and exclusion. The general invitation included a list of potential questions as well as the details of how the interviews would take place. The invitation requested willing participants to respond with their name and contact details.

Sixteen individuals responded. All of them fulfilled the inclusion criteria determined for the current research. The participants were contacted and notified of their selection, and the particulars of the study were explained to them as a prelude to obtaining their written consent to participate in the study. Once this was received, a convenient time and date was arranged with the participants, so that the telephonic interviews could be conducted.

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted during July and August 2017. Three participants opted to answer the questions in writing. The duration of the interviews was between forty and fifty minutes. All the participants indicated they would avail themselves for follow up interviews if so required. All of the telephonic semi-structured interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Once the interviews had been concluded, the researcher personally sent a thank you note to each of the participants. They were then informed that the research findings would be made available to them once the researcher was ready to publish the findings.

1.6.2.5. Data analysis

Qualitative research methods do not seek to merely analyse data in relation to its various parts, but rather to investigate the contents of the phenomenon (women's experience of belly dancing in South Africa) while retaining the context of the topic. It is a systematic procedure of transforming data (transcribed interviews) into findings (Tracy, 2013:3), which in this case centre on exploring what the experiences are of belly dancers in South Africa.

An iterative model of analysis was used for this study as it included analysis during data collection as determined by the outcome of the research process. During this process the researcher refined, confirmed and tested the validity of the conclusions drawn thus far in an effort to establish consistency to small-scale generalisations (see Tracy, 2013:184).

Analytic methods in qualitative research are numerous and include thematic analysis (analytic) which develops ideas through induction and grounded analysis which seeks to identify indicators of a concept or phenomenon (Sarantakos, 2013:371). Qualitative data are non-reducible text which requires interpretation of the data to discern patterns and insights. Qualitative research can thus be used as a means to see social phenomena in new ways. It surfaces new insights that often introduce theory in completely new directions (Anon, 2018:1189-1195). For the present study, the method selected for data analysis was inductive thematic analysis. Whilst the initial analysis and identification of themes in the data were executed in a primarily inductive manner, the emergent findings were subsequently interpreted through the lens of the Symbolic Interactionist theory.

1.6.2.5.1. Inductive thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a method which focuses on identifying themes and patterns within data. Thematic analysis in its essentialist form reports experiences and meanings of realities of the participants (Tracy, 2013:183-187). This was the primary focus of this study in order to clearly understand what the experiences of belly dancers in South Africa are.

Once the data was collected it was transcribed, and then subjected to open coding. This process assigns descriptive labels to segments of text that capture the perceived essence of the data. This is primary-cycle coding and occurred more than once during the initial stages of coding (Tracy, 2013:189). Placing the primary codes into first level codes then followed (Tracy, 2013:189). Constant comparison of data took place throughout the analysis process. This allowed for the analysis of the data applicable to each code to be modified as needed and as new codes emerged (Tracy, 2013:190). The codes were then grouped into possible categories. These were further grouped into themes. During this process the researcher opted to adopt an inductive approach, and as such, coding, categorising and the construction of themes were data, rather than theory driven. A code book was developed out of the analysis process to clearly detail the inclusion and exclusion criteria of each code and assure a consistent approach to coding. Once the themes were identified, the Symbolic Interactionist theory was used as framework for sociological contextualisation of the findings.

1.6.2.6. *Quality assurance*

The rigour and quality of a research report depends in large measure on the quality of authenticity of the data as well as the quality of the analysis (Sargeant, 2012:1-3). The steps taken to ensure that this study achieved acceptable levels of credibility, transferability and triangulation, are outlined below.

1.6.2.6.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of the research findings. The question that needs to be answered is “does the researcher’s conclusions find favourable support in the research findings?” (Marsden, 2013). According to Tracy (2013:235-236), credibility refers to dependability and trustworthiness expressing a reality that is plausible which can be achieved through tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge requires the researcher to dig below the surface in an effort to understand the core values of the group. For the purpose of this study, credibility is achieved by virtue of the deliberate purposive selection of participants who are belly dancers and therefore gave relevant information, which was analysed with the intention of revealing women’s experience of belly dance within the South African context.

1.6.2.6.2 Transferability

Transferability denotes the extent to which the results of qualitative research can be applied or transferred to other settings (Tracy, 2013:229). Although transferability involves a leap of faith, due to the predictive nature of future behaviour, it is possible to transfer the findings of a small group onto another group (Tracy, 2013:229). As such, the findings of this study may well be applicable to other belly dancers in South Africa whose contexts are similar to those of the participants. To support the achievement of the aim of transferability, in the present study attention was focused on providing a comprehensive discussion of the context of belly dancing and providing sufficient information about the participants to enable readers to make a determination as to whether or not the findings of this study would be transferable to contexts that are of interest to them.

1.6.2.6.3 Confirmability

Confirmability pertains to the extent to which findings of a study are indeed fashioned by the participants and not motivated by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:1; Anney, 2014:279). During the process of data gathering in this study, the researcher continuously checked with the participant as to whether or not the researcher accurately interpreted what the participant was saying. Confirmability was further supported through the electronic recording of the participant's responses which were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly referred back to during the analytical process.

1.7. Ethical considerations

Ethics in research such as social research are not uniform. Researchers generally accept that there are ethical principles; however it is not necessarily applied unanimously. There are three major approaches to ethical practice which can be summarised as follows:

- Full adherence to ethics – acceptance of ethical standards in full.
- Relative adherence to ethics – adherence to most ethical principles although the argument is that it is impossible to adhere to all.
- Questioning of ethics – that is the full resentment of ethics (Sarantakos, 2013:21-22).

This study followed the full adherence to ethical practice approach.

First, ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) of the North West University (see Appendix A). Once permission was obtained, a request was sent out to SADTA and MBDSA for permission to use their database of known and recognised belly dancers as well as belly dance studios in South Africa to recruit participants. Once permission was granted by the relevant associations, an independent recruiter was appointed to send out the invitations for participants to partake in the research. The independent recruiter then sent out the invitation to the associations which was in turn forwarded to all the contacts on the databases. As identified in Sarantakos (2013:17) proper identification of the research aims and the researcher are important ethical requirements. The invitation clearly indicated who the researcher was, the purpose of the study as well as the intended use of the data obtained. Included in the information released to the participants, was a sample list of questions, along with possible stresses that the participants may experience during the interviews. This formed part of the necessary clear information required to be given to the participants (Tracy, 2013:245). Following an ethical process of recruitment which was managed by the independent recruiter, the informed and written consent of all responding participants who opted to participate in the study was obtained (see Appendix B).

The participant recruiter then negotiated suitable dates and times that were convenient for the interviews to take place. According to Tracy (2013:243) maintaining confidentiality is very important, and as such, each participant taking part in the semi-structured interviews was informed that their responses would remain confidential and would only be known to the researcher and her supervisor. It was made very clear that only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the personal identification details of the participants and that such would be kept confidential by means of safekeeping on a password protected laptop.

Although telephonic interviewing may not seem all that different from face-to-face interviewing, certain aspects are required in order to adhere to ethical standards (Tracy, 2013:245). Care was taken not to inconvenience the participants and also not to take up

more than the agreed upon time. The researcher allowed for breaks where needed and also agreed to phone back at a later stage where the participants requested it.

The researcher sought to ensure that the ethical standard for welfare and consideration of the participants was fully adhered to (Tracy, 2013:245). In order to ensure this, all the participants who were interviewed were informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any point in time. They were also informed that if any of the posed questions were uncomfortable or embarrassing, they could decline to answer or withdraw without any repercussions.

No participant was subjected to coercion or forced to partake in the study (Tracy, 2013:243). This was particularly important where the participants are members of rival studios. The researcher sought to accommodate the participants accordingly by treating them all with respect and dignity.

No participant was subjected to any undue physical or mental stress (Tracy, 2013:243). The belly dancers, who were selected as participants, were all interviewed in the privacy of their home or office over a telephone.

1.8. Outline of the mini-dissertation

The article method was followed in the writing of the mini-dissertation. The layout of this work is outlined below:

Chapter 1: Introduction, problem statement, and objectives

Chapter 2: Article: A qualitative exploration of a selected sample of South African women's experiences of belly dancing

Chapter 3: Conclusions, limitations, and recommendations

1.9 Chapter Summary

The objective of this introductory chapter was to provide contextualisation and a methodological outline of the study on which the mini-dissertation is based. The chapter started with an overview of the existing literature on belly dancing, its origins and its associations as may be relevant to women's experiences of belly dancing in South Africa. After outlining the aims of the study, the theoretical framework which guided this

study was described. This was followed by a comprehensive discussion of the methodology that was followed in the present study in relation to sampling, data gathering, and data analysis. The relevant ethical considerations pertinent to the study were also discussed.

In the following chapter, the findings arising from the study are presented in the form of a research article (which is in accordance with the article format as specified by the NWU). The final chapter provides a detailed summary of the implications, limitations, and recommendations that are relevant to the study.

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CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A qualitative exploration of a selected sample of South African women's experiences of belly dancing

ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study that aimed to qualitatively explore a sample of South African women's experiences of belly dancing, and subsequently utilised the Symbolic Interactionist theory as framework to elucidate the findings. Fifteen participants from various parts of the country, who met the purposive sampling criteria set for the study, responded to the invitation to partake in the research. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and were subsequently analysed by thematic analysis.

The analysed data revealed that the participants experienced belly dancing across a continuum. Four stages were identified within this continuum. Stage one included the preparatory stage which was characterised by certain preparatory past experiences which rendered the participants susceptible to belly dancing. The second stage experienced by the participants was the observer stage. It was in this stage that the participants were exposed to belly dancing in a manner that they described as the pivotal moment when they realised they were going to pursue belly dancing. The third stage can be identified as the student practitioner stage of belly dancing. Within this stage the participants experienced belly dance from within personal, communal, and public realms. It is within this stage that the dichotomy between sexuality and sensuality is experienced. Some participants were comfortable with the expression of their sexuality via belly dancing, whilst many other participants adopted an 'alter ego' in an attempt to ease their dissonance between the indoctrinations of the Afrikaner culture pertaining to sexual expressions as well as their inner sexual desires which they try to suppress (Van Niekerk, 1999:144-145). Within the communal realm, the participants also reported on their experiences of having a sense of belonging to a sisterhood. However, participation and exposure to competitions (within the public realm) marred this experience as it was reported to bring about rivalry between dancers and dance schools.

The fourth stage can be described as the teacher/performer/practitioner stage which is predominantly experienced within a public and communal realm.

Overall, the findings suggest that the participants' experience of belly dancing is multifaceted and holistic. It affects dancers on a physical, social, emotional and spiritual level in a way that generally enhanced their well-being.

Keywords: *Belly dance experience, Belly dance influence, Belly dancing, Medical Sociology, Social constructivism, Sociology, South Africa, Symbolic Interactionism, Women's experiences.*

2. INTRODUCTION

How does a selected sample of South African women experience belly dancing? What prompted the women to start belly dancing? How does belly dancing make them feel and what influence does belly dancing have on them? What benefits does belly dancing hold for the women who partake in it within the South African context? How could these findings be elucidated and sociologically contextualised by means of the Symbolic Interactionist theory? The present article aims to address these questions.

A comprehensive literature review related to women's experiences of belly dancing in South Africa has revealed an evident lack of scientific research on the topic. Although there are some studies on various aspects of belly dancing (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003; Aleenah, 2016; Harper, 2013), no literature seems to address and fully explore the construction of women's experience of belly dance within the South African context. The present study is therefore expressly concerned with addressing this void by undertaking a qualitative exploration on women's experiences of belly dancing in South Africa.

2.1 Sociological relevance of the study

The study of dance as a performance art and leisure pursuit has only recently received scholarly attention. This is problematic as it is a cultural product with a rightful place in cultural tradition and also a crucial aspect of sexuality (Austin, 2016:280).

Notwithstanding the recognition afforded to dancing as a crucial aspect of leisure activity, entertainment and sexuality, deliberations of dance in cultural settings have not been consistent. The neglect of dance in sociology and the suppressed interest in cultural studies are echoed in feminist studies. This may be attributed to the historical

view that dance is not a dominant art such as music and therefore “kept in the dark”. (Thomas, 1995:4; Arican, 2012:210; Austin, 2016:280).

Sociology, as a science, studies human relationships – with particular relevance to the formulation and perpetuation of these relationships. Human society is made up of individuals who all interact with each other within their specific societies (Dillon, 2014:12). The practice of belly dance occurs within a society of belly dancers who not only interact with one another in a group context, but also with the public. Sociology is also concerned with explaining the dynamics of human systems and organisations as well as the ways in which they form and evolve over time (Dillon, 2014:11-12). Belly dance comprises of a system of dance vocabulary that is founded not only in religious rituals (Cooper, 2004:7), but also culture. Over time the rituals and cultures found their way into mainstream Western entertainment and other styles of dancing (Aleenah, 2016), which has effectively perpetuated the practice of belly dancing movements in societies who attach different symbolic meanings to it. The differences in symbolic meanings are evident in the vast dichotomies that exist within the constructions of belly dance, ranging from the Western image of *femme fatale* (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003:14; Harper, 2013:49) to the Oriental image of a birthing ritual dance (Ibrahim, 2016:2). Understanding the symbolic value of belly dance within the South African culture and context would be of value in enhancing understanding of how some South African women experience, and are influenced by this dance form.

2.2 Belly dance

Dancing is an activity that is fashioned in a variety of different social contexts, both within cultures and subcultures. Not only has it been identified with fitness, but also as a particular aesthetic component of everyday life - as is evident in the longest running British television series “*Strictly Come Dancing*”. All social dance forms have their expression in a variety of cultural symbolism and bodily aesthetics, from dancing in the street to a formal wedding dance, as well as dancing solo or with a partner or group (Thomas, 1995:2). A large variety of dance forms and styles has evolved (and continue to evolve) in different cultural, national, and religious contexts, each with its own distinctive stylistic, aesthetic and socio-cultural dimensions. One such dance form, belly dancing, which has fairly ancient roots, has recently seen a drastic upsurge in popularity (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003:13-37).

Belly dancing is characterised by movements which are expressed through undulations, circles and percussive isolations (Ibrahim, 2016:1). The movements can be articulated as sensual snake-like movements or in a fast, drum accompanied pace which is expressed through sharp percussive isolations of the hips and chest. These movements, along with factors such as a bare midriff appear to lie at the root of constructions of the dance as being sexual in nature (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003:13-37).

There is a variety of styles within the belly dance genre which is practiced throughout the world. However, there is no set standard for these styles and each is interpreted according to the dancer and dance teacher. More often than not, the interpretation is expressed within the nuance of the dance style from the country that the dancer represents (Sellers-Young, 2013:8). The folkloric style is mostly practiced in the Middle East as part of their cultural dance. American Tribal Style (ATS) is a more recent style to emerge from the belly dance genre and is practiced either as a group or with a yoga foundation such as danced by Rachel Brice. The more spirited styles such as romantic and modern belly dance are usually a fusion of belly dance and Latin or Ballet dance styles with a strong emphasis on musical interpretation (Jamal, s.a.).

2.3 Traditions and ritualistic uses of belly dancing in the Middle East

The ancient art of belly dancing has its roots firmly ingrained in religious rituals. These were predominantly focused on goddess worship and fertility rites. Ancient artefacts often depict women as being softly rounded with large hips and breasts. This strongly supports anthropological theories which proclaim the high status of women in the archaic divinity structure because of their ability to give birth (Astaria, s.a:1). As far back as early paganism, matriarchal deities were worshipped and eulogised for the magic that was presumed to be inherent in the ability of women to create life. Within the Bemba culture of Zambia, the worldview of women's sexuality is that of a divine spark embedded within a woman's body. This divine spark can be activated through music and dance and also bring the dancer into direct connection with the guardians of sexuality. The learning of this dance and ritual rite of passage is passed down from woman to woman (Kaunda & Kaunda, 2016:162-163). Many of the modern belly dancing movements is ritualistic representations of fertility dances, symbolising

recreations of giving birth. These include deliberate contractions, sharp hip movements as well as undulations, all encapsulating the connection to the way that the female body responds during labour and childbirth (Cooper, 2004:7-8).

As a dance form belly dance moves across ethnic boundaries and partakes in discourses between the forces of globalisation and a resistance to alterations of existing power structures. Specifically with reference to masculinity and femininity and related gender roles (Sellers-Young, 2013:1-2). Even in Egypt, which is considered the origin of this dance form, belly dancing is variously practiced from cabaret styled dance to Mahmoud Reda's sanitised version of the dance form. In an effort to avoid the assumptions of prostitution and associations with immorality, Mahmoud Reda aspired to sanitise the dance during the 1950s by eliminating reference and expression of the overtly sexual sharp movements, and thus became the forerunner of modern presentation of folk dance in the Arab world (Shay, 2014:231). The Egyptian government and the Egyptian elite tend to associate belly dancing with prostitution and immoral practices (Schwartzstein, 2013:1). Various attempts have been initiated to change the perceptions such as the cabaret styled belly dance which was an inspired effort by Masabni. This was seen as the modernisation of belly dancing by adding ballet styled arms and movements to the dance which was traditionally characterised by lower hip vibrations. This became known as *raqs sharqi* and was performed in night clubs (Anon, 2017:1).

The metamorphosis of these movements and how they found their way into mainstream public entertainment is widely attributed to the Romany gypsies, who through their nomadic journey, transferred their culture to the communities where they passed through (Aleenah, 2016:1). This included their dancing, which they used to entertain the communities that they encountered as a means to support themselves on their nomadic journeys (Cooper, 2004:8).

2.4 Belly dancing internationally and the eroticization of belly dance

By the 1970s belly dancing experienced a great revival, as this was a time when women's liberation was campaigning for greater freedom for women as well as for more sexual freedom (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003:13-37). Belly dancing exemplified these very goals in that it encouraged self-expression and also freed women from their

imposed restraint of their physical movement. In this context, dancing was viewed as liberating to women and belly dancing allowed the once introverted body language to take centre stage through the shaking of the hips and expression in performance (Deagon, 1999:8-13).

Black women in America are fast becoming attracted to belly dancing, a dance most commonly associated with Middle Eastern women. Some have argued that this trend symbolises a rhythmic return to the roots of belly dancing, which belongs to Africa (Brown, 2012:1).

Around the world, women are in the process of identity construction, reflecting a passionate desire to frame their identity and also their related subjective experience, broadening the boundaries of gender roles in their communities (Haynes-Clark, 2010:2-3). Belly dancing becomes the place where the practitioners can become what they never were – a creative self-construction. Considering the international dispersion of belly dancing, the drum is symbolic of ritual invocation and allows the stage to become a space open to the imagination (Kraus, 2009:72). Female dancers of all ages and body types invoke the dance as an erotic expression of the self, through movement embodied in the spirals, circles and shimmies emulating the external expression of an internal desire.

Communities across the globe have developed a technical vocabulary which shares general characteristics such as hip articulations pertaining to hip lifts and hip drops, undulations and shimmies. Each group negotiates its performance within the global discourse of images which it provokes in a portrayal of the performative self. This allows them the opportunity to become what they never were but wish they could be (Sellers-Young, 2013:4), thus constructing a more preferred self.

A particularly prominent trend in the context of modern belly dance is the increasing eroticisation of the genre. The term erotic is derived from the definition of the Greek word 'eros', which embodies the personification of love. This brings the definition of eroticism more closely aligned to being sensual, in reference to the total experience of the earthly body (Sellers-Young, 2013:8-9). Some claim that as a woman discovers the inner layers of her being through belly dancing, the eroticism is released through the

self and this enables her to direct this newly procured energy throughout the body (Haynes-Clark, 2010:75). This experience of being erotic is by no means limited to belly dancing alone, but is acknowledged by the mind/body construction that is part of many deeply felt experiences. The movements of belly dancing are thus a means for many women to become psycho-physically aware of this connection (Sellers-Young, 2013:8-9).

2.5 Global experiences of belly dancing

According to Dahlena and Meilach (*cited* in Keft-Kennedy, 2013:83) belly dancing is considered a “*marvellous physical and emotional experience*”. It allows for the dancer to transcend the everyday mundane routines and catapults the mind into dreaming of faraway places. Ultimately in this view, it allows for the dancer to acquaint herself with her body in an effort to achieve a new sense of freedom. This is well illustrated in the trend in the U.S. indicating that women are participating in belly dancing as a means of celebrating women's femininity (Papas, s.a.), as well as through the studies conducted in Adelaide (Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark, 2014:197-207) indicating that women who partake in belly dancing are less inclined to desire the thinness associated with ballet dancers.

In Australasia, more and more women are being introduced to belly dancing through social events and interactions as well as through the media such as film or television. Whilst the media commonly tends to eroticise belly dancing (Benjamin, 2008:2), the women in New Zealand and Australia do not readily identify with this imagined erotic image of belly dancing. Instead, they are reframing their dance practice, attaining profound embodied experiences that they often describe as transcendent in nature (Cowper & Michelle, 2013:93-94). Not only is this experience of belly dancing inspirational, it is reported to influence the dancers beyond their immediate context of belly dance performance. They actively create alternative and deeply personal meanings of this feminine dance form. The dancers further report that belly dancing allows them to reconstruct their understanding of themselves, including their bodies and their role as women. This experience does not end there but seems to elicit a shift in perspective as a result of belly dancing, and this reportedly allows them to formulate new strategies pertaining to their personal interactions within the broader public context. Their experience of belly dancing is not only meaningful; it is simultaneously

inspirational and transcendent in that they perceive to connect to a “divine” or “universal” element (Cowper & Michelle, 2013:93-94; Kraus, 2013:303-304).

Research undertaken in Australia reports that there is a fluid progression between the creation of the belly dancer as the object of the audience’s observation and the belly dancer as the subject of a performance (Cowper & Michelle, 2013:98-100). This unique position is reported to suggest that there is an emerging personal domain of belly dancing characterised by individual meanings and understandings. Not only are the belly dancers able to distinguish between their own self and their dance persona, they are momentarily (for the space of time that they are performing) released from the prescriptions and restrictions of the foremost sexualised public discourses (Cowper & Michelle, 2013:98-100).

2.6 Influence and benefits associated with dancing and belly dancing

Various studies have concluded that dancing can improve balance, both among the young and the elderly. Other benefits are listed as improved walking speed, reaction time as well as cognitive and fine motor performance. This is said to be true for any kind of dance (Sivvas, Batsiou, *et al.*, 2015:486; Wellness, 2014:1). Another interesting element of dance is the claim that dance may assist people with Parkinson’s disease. This is a disease that attacks the muscles making them rigid, impairs movement and balance. Dancing is also said to reduce depression and boost self-esteem, body image, coping abilities and an overall sense of well-being, with the benefits being long lasting. Dancing has social benefits too, which include social interaction and the opportunity to meet new people (Sivvas, Batsiou, *et al.*, 2015:486; Wellness, 2014:1-2).

American women report that belly dancing has an overall benefit. As an exercise it engages the core muscles which strengthen the back, stomach and muscles of the reproductive system (Yogini, 2012:1). Women report that they enjoy it because of the fitness benefit. Other benefits include weight loss, increased flexibility, and increased feelings of happiness due to the good time they experience in the class. Women also enjoy the sense of community experienced between the women celebrating each other during the dance. An additional benefit is the natural flow of the movements, which make it conducive for older women to enjoy, as it does not jar the body as much as some other types of dances do (Brown, 2012:2-4).

Another benefit reported by American women who engage in belly dance is the improvement in their sex lives as a result of the sensual movements which they experience as making them feel sexier. It also diminishes their inhibitions allowing them to show off their sexiness to their partners (Brown, 2012:4).

2.7 Problem statement and rationale

Ranging from the stereotype of *femme fatale* to the exotic and erotic perceptions associated with belly dancing (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003:14), including but not limited to the spiritual essence of being (Kraus, 2009:51), which have all been linked to the ancient art, belly dancing is multifaceted and the way South African women experience it may have a significant bearing on various aspects of their lives. This may include aspects ranging from spiritual experiences, experiences pertaining to the self and sexuality as well as to experiences of well-being, especially considering that it is also used as a form of exercise (Woods, s.a; Yogini, 2012:1). Culture and religion are known stimuli and reasons that belly dancing is practiced as well as how it will be practiced and ultimately presented. Yet, despite the many facets and reasons for its practice, each belly dancer will have a unique experience associated with this dance as well as what this experience means to her. However, those who share the same socio-cultural contexts may also exhibit similarities and common themes in their construction of belly dancing. South Africa as a new democracy stems from a history of forced segregation and stringent regulation on matters concerning sex and sexuality. Not only was the apartheid regime directed by Christian Nationalism, it was also indoctrinated by Calvinistic morality. It was patriarchal in nature with an extremist authoritarian social order which subjected sexuality to severe censorship and repressive policing (Klausen, 2010:42-43; Posel, 2004:53). Dance is not only a cultural product, but also a crucial aspect of sexuality (Austin, 2016:280). Belly dancing as a dance style was not considered a leisure activity a decent Afrikaner women should pursue because of the sexual connotations attached to the dance style. The exposure of the torso, as is the practice with belly dance through the nature of the costuming as well as the interpretation of the movements as sexual was not acceptable in polite Afrikaner society. Belly dance is practiced by many races and cultures which includes those making up the demography of the new South African population. Since 1994, South Africa has been playing proverbial catch-up with the rest of the world by being exposed to more liberal policies on the display and representation of sex and sexuality (and

racial interaction) (Posel, 2004:53). Unfortunately, there is very little research in South Africa as to what these experiences are and how they are constructed among women of different ages and cultures in South Africa. Most existing research tends to focus on the dance itself and not on the experience of the dancer.

Dancing (including belly dancing) has gained popularity and has become a niche in art circles in the UK (Johnson, 2010). It has also become the biggest school activity for girls in the UK increasing as a subject choice from 7000 to 19000 students between 2001 and 2007 (Johnson, 2010). The South African Education Department added cultural dance studies as a subject to the grade 10-12 curricula in 2003. The specific intention was that learners participate in a wide variety of dance experiences (Department of Education, 2003:10). Unfortunately, there is very little research in South Africa as to what these experiences are and how they are constructed by women of different ages and cultures in South Africa. A better understanding of how belly dance is constructed by South African women may have value in shedding some light on the possible outcomes of initiatives such as these.

A thorough understanding of these experiences of women who belly dance, derived from a qualitative exploration, and framed by a Symbolic Interactionist perspective would potentially be of significant value to therapists, dance teachers, counsellors and families of women who belly dance because such experiences would be regarded as socio-culturally constructed (Blumer, 1969:93). By generating a contextually situated description and explanation of the value placed by some South African women on the practice and experience of belly dancing, and understanding how this dance form is symbolically constructed by these women and how it directs and moulds their action as well as their constructions of self (Blumer, 1969:93), a number of practically applicable insights and understandings might ensue. For Example, although South African belly dance instructors (who are duly trained and qualified) generally have an acute understanding of the mechanics of belly dancing movement as well as the ability to transfer this to their students, they may however not fully understand the symbolic meanings attached to the experiences of belly dancing as reported by South African belly dancers. The findings of this study might sensitise them to address possible stereotypes, and to be aware of the ways in which the dance form could also be of benefit to these women in terms of supporting the construction of a more preferred self.

Understanding how belly dancing could support the latter process by providing counsellors and therapist with an alternative therapeutic avenue to recommend to female clients suffering from concerns related to their own sense of femininity will be of great benefit to the related health professions.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism encourages researchers to approach research in a manner that is open to the discovery of aspects of everyday life, which have previously either been ignored or just not observed (Kotarba, 2014:418), as is the case with this study, which aims to explore the ways in which a selected group of South African women construct their experience of belly dancing, a topic that seems to be as yet relatively unexplored.

George Herbert Mead is credited for his probing analysis of social interaction. Accordingly, Mead identified two levels of social interaction in human society namely “gestures” and “significant symbols” (Kotarba, 2014:420). He defined gestures as non-Symbolic Interaction that takes place when one responds directly to the action of another without interpreting that action. During social interaction, human beings continually emit and receive gestures as they respond immediately and unreflectively to each other’s bodily movements, expressions, and tones of voice. However, their typical style of interaction is on the symbolic level where they seek to understand the meaning of each other’s actions. A gesture therefore, is any part or aspect of an ongoing action that signifies the larger act of which it is a part (Blumer, 1969:9). Social interaction involves two persons and includes a basic mechanism of a gesture. The meaning of gestures can be consciously communicated and this leads to the development of significant symbols. Significant symbols not only make thinking possible, but also Symbolic Interaction (Ritzer, 2010:390).

Defined within the intellectual roots of pragmatism, Symbolic Interactionism maintains that reality is constructed through people’s actions which results from their definitions and interpretations of their daily interactions with other people (Blumer, 1969; Tracy, 2013:51; Kotarba, 2014:417). During an interactive interplay between two people, there

is a constant uncertainty within the conversation present which is attributed to the way the parties are defining and redefining each other's comments as they converse. This creates new meanings based on what they perceive as valuable for them during the interaction (Wiley, 2014:303). This is also evident in the non-verbal communication between the belly dancer and her audience. By constantly defining and redefining the audience's response to her dancing, the dancer will redefine her dancing so that it elicits a preferred reaction and response from her audience.

Another aspect of Symbolic Interactionist theory maintains that social order and stability is created as a result of symbolically based social interaction between people. The meanings that people attach to these interactions are not inherent, but grounded in social relationships and mediated through a process of symbolic meaning making (Tracy, 2013:51-52). This includes the construction of the self and the significance that the self acquires from their specific society. How these meanings are assigned and attached through interaction is relevant in understanding how people define their own reality and that of the world around them, and also how they act in relation to these (Tracy, 2013:51-52). It can be argued that these processes would also be applicable to women taking part in belly dance, as they would be bound to engage in continual processes of interactionally driven symbolic meaning making and interpretation.

Dancing as a form of non-verbal communication, through the process of socialisation, allows for the construction of meanings ascribed to specific symbols. Humans attach meaning to symbols based on their knowledge of the world through the various forms of communication. People are likely to change what no longer works for them through continuous definition and redefinition of the meaning of the symbols – this includes the meaning and interpretation of the symbolism attached to belly dance (Ritzer, 2010: 351; Wiley, 2014:303). This is clearly illustrated in the manner that women in Arabia are socialised in the practice of belly dancing as a ritual dance and as part of ceremonies of life (Sellers-Young, 2013:6). However, in the U.S. women are socialised in the practice of belly dancing as a means of celebrating women's femininity (Tiggemann, Coutts and Clark, 2014:197-207; Papas, s.a.). Within each culture a symbolic meaning of belly dancing has been constructed through the process of social interaction and the knowledge of their world.

During the process of social interaction amongst people, the continuous dialogue relies not only on verbal communication but on non-verbal communication too. It is during this process of continuous dialogue that social meanings are created and changed (Kaminskas & Dorulis, 2007:113). Dancing as a form of non-verbal communication includes gestures and facial expressions which are continuously interpreted and reinterpreted during the interaction between dancer and audience. The understanding of social experience cannot be achieved without understanding the social world. Acting and roles form part of this social world and how we interpret it. A stimulus (such as exposure to belly dance) does not elicit an automatic response from the human actor. Rather, the stimulus becomes an opportunity to act (Blumer, 1969:4-5). For instance, a stimulus such as belly dancing became the opportunity for feminists to advocate sexual liberation in a revolutionary manner (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003:13-37). This action may have been provoked by Orientalism (a term conceived by Edward Said) and how this term has been internalised through socialisation in the West, to create a symbol of female Arabians as sultry, exotic women (belly dancers) eager to use their exoticism to tempt Western men (Harper, 2013:49).

Within the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism, the reality of how a selected sample of women in South Africa experience belly dancing would be sought in the interaction of the different role players within the belly dance community in South Africa. The focus would be on how the subjective experience of the women who belly dance in South Africa is constructed, and on how such constructions influence their behaviour and interactions.

4. METHODOLOGY

Due to the fact that very little research has been done on the topic, the researcher used an exploratory qualitative design to gather data for the study. Exploratory research is best suited to exploring new problems on which little or no research has been done, thereby offering a basis to a better understanding of the problem. It is not intended to offer conclusive solutions, but rather a means to explore the research questions (Dudovskiy, 2016:1).

Qualitative research is mostly used when the researcher is seeking to understand the “*why*” and “*how*” of social phenomena affecting populations. It explores information obtained from both individuals and groups as opposed to creating lists of numerical data (ACAPS, 2012). Given that this study sought to understand why women in South Africa partake in belly dancing and how they experience this form of dance, a qualitative approach was therefore deemed to be the most optimal.

4.1 Participants and sampling

The participants in the present study were obtained by means of a combination of purposive and quota sampling. Purposive sampling is used in qualitative research when the researcher needs to select participants who will be relevant to the research through their knowledge and expertise. There is no specific set process involved in the actual choice of participants. Rather, the process of selection is directed by the judgement of the researcher (Creswell, 2014:239). For the purpose of this study, it was therefore decided to specifically choose participants from the belly dancing community of South Africa who possess both knowledge and expertise on the subject of belly dancing (Sarantakos, 2013:178; Tracy, 2013:134; Creswell, 2014:239). To guide the process of purposive sampling, it was necessary to specify inclusion criteria that outlined the characteristics that the participants were required to have in order to be eligible for inclusion in the study.

In this present study, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were set for the selection of participants:

➤ Inclusion criteria:

- Participants must have been dancing with a recognised belly dance studio in South Africa.
- Participants had to be South African women.
- Participants had to be 18 years and older.

➤ Exclusion criteria:

- Participation in belly dancing had to be voluntary and not as a consequence of cultural or religious necessity. As such, belly dancers who danced exclusively for cultural or religious reasons were excluded.

A participant recruiter was employed with the specific aim of locating participants who fulfilled the criteria and who indicated that they were willing to partake in the present study.

The purposive sampling strategy was supplemented with quota sampling - a procedure that the researcher employs in order to obtain given numbers of participants from various subgroups of the population of interest (Sarantakos, 2013:178). Although it was initially set out to interview four dancers per province who represent the various subgroups of the population of interest, only sixteen participants responded to the invitation and one pulled out due to the untimely death of her mother. The final participant group consequently consisted of fifteen dancers from various regions of South Africa. Not all the provinces were represented, but this was anticipated in the proposal and did not pose a problem for the outcome of the findings. The fifteen participants represented the following provinces: Gauteng (4), North West (5), Eastern Cape (4), Western Cape (1), KZN (1). There were no participants under the age of thirty - most of the participants were well into their thirties and older. Of the fifteen participants, fourteen were white and one was of mixed race. No black or Indian participants responded to the invitation. Five of the participants were bilingual (English and Afrikaans speaking), six were English speaking and four were Afrikaans speaking. A majority of the participants indicated that they had been dancing in excess of ten years. Four of the participants have formal dance teaching qualifications. Two of the participants are certified belly dance licentiate teachers through SADTA (South African Dance Teachers Association). Two of the participants obtained their teachers' certification through international belly dance associations. Two of the participants are self-taught belly dance teachers. All but one of the teachers still teach, the exception being a teacher who is now a professional performer. All of the participants dance on stage at various belly dance events and shows. Five of the participants perform professionally for compensation. These characteristics of the participants are presented in summary form in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Characteristics of participants

Participant	Age	Race	Other
1	36	white	Amateur dancer/student teacher
2	37	white	Amateur dancer
3	45	white	Certified belly dance teacher

4	47	white	Amateur dancer
5	40	white	Certified belly dance teacher
6	46	mixed race	Dance teacher
7	57	white	Certified belly dance teacher
8	36	white	Amateur dancer/ student teacher
9	40	white	Certified belly dance teacher
10	36	white	Amateur dancer
11	30	white	Former dance teacher/now professional dancer
12			Number allocated – participant pulled out of interviews due to sudden death of her mother
13	54	white	Certified belly dance teacher
14	59	white	Amateur dancer
15	34	white	Amateur dancer
16	37	white	Amateur dancer

4.2 Data collection

Interviews are commonly used as a method of data collection in qualitative research, and in this capacity, are primarily used for the exploration of views and experiences as well as beliefs and motivations of the individuals who partake in the research (Creswell, 2014:294; Tracy, 2013:132). Given that the present study sought to explore the experiences of belly dancers in South Africa, this data gathering method was deemed to be very suitable.

Interviewing, when applied as a data collection method, comprises a verbal discussion between the participant and the researcher in the form of questions (by the researcher) and answers (by the participant) (Tracy, 2013:139). For the purpose of this research a semi-structured interview format was used and applied in the form of telephonic individual interviews, with three participants opting to answer the questions in writing.

Semi-structured interviews are uniquely balanced in that they offer a formal structure from which to initiate the interview (with pre-determined questions) and also allow for the further exploration of a given topic by via ad hoc follow-up questions formulated from the answers given by the participants (Tracy, 2013:139).

Semi-structured interviews are highly reliant on the effective communication skills of the interviewer or researcher. In the present study, the researcher clearly fashioned and articulated questions in a manner that was conducive to the participants' ability to understand them and also respond to them. In instances where the participants seemed to hesitate, tactically placed probes, pauses and prompts were used to make it easier for the participants to respond. The tractability of the open ended-questions allowed for a deeper meaning and insight into the research topic to be obtained than would be the case had structured questions been used (Newton, 2010).

Probes, which in this study took the form of clarification questions, were used by the researcher to explore themes the participants brought up and which the researcher felt warranted further exploration. Following the guidelines proposed by Creswell (2014:244), this included the use of questions which contained phrases such as: "what do you mean by...?" and 'Tell me more about...?'

Reflective interrogation processes are vital to the development of research questions, which ultimately direct the study. There is no guarantee that reflective and interrogative questions will elicit good research data. However, haphazardly constructed questions lead to endless problems that filter through the remainder of the study. The questions, which formed part of the present qualitative study, needed to clearly communicate what the researcher wanted to know with reference to the perspectives of the participant in the interview (Agnee, 2009:431- 447). Following these guidelines, the following guiding questions were constructed to guide the semi-structured interviews:

1. What prompted you to start belly dancing?
2. What was your first experience of belly dancing?
3. What kind of benefits (socially, physically or mentally) do you experience as a practitioner of belly dancing?
4. How would you describe your experience of belly dancing?

5. Which aspects of belly dancing do you find most/least enjoyable? (Music, movements, props, expression in music, freedom of expression, femininity).
6. How has belly dancing influenced your life?
7. Have you ever had any negative experiences or experienced any internal or interpersonal conflict in relation to belly dancing? If so, would you mind telling me what happened?

Although the quota of participants who was initially proposed was not reached, theoretical saturation was reached within the first ten interviews. Saturation occurs when the information collected is repeated so frequently that the researcher can anticipate it and which subsequently has no additional interpretive worth (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2009:4). However, to ensure that saturation had indeed been reached, and given that the subsequent five interviews had already been confirmed, an additional five interviews were conducted. Whilst these interviews proved of value in expounding on the themes that emerged from previous interviews, no significant new themes emerged from them.

All the interviews were recorded on a Samsung S4 Smartphone equipped with a play-store call recorder function for transcription purposes, and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

4.3 Data analysis and interpretation

Qualitative research methods do not only pursue analysis of data in relation to its various parts, but also seek to investigate the contents of the phenomenon (women's experience of belly dance in South Africa) while retaining the context of the topic. It is an organised procedure of transforming data (transcribed interviews) into findings (which in this case centre on what the experiences are of a selected group of South African belly dancers) (Tracy, 2013:3).

An iterative model of analysis was used for this present study as it included analysis during data collection as determined by the outcome of the research process (Tracy, 2013:184).

There are several analytic methods in qualitative research such as thematic analysis, which develops ideas through induction, and grounded analysis which seeks to identify indicators of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2014:42). For the present study, the method selected for data analysis was inductive thematic analysis. After the data had been analysed in a largely inductive manner, the sociological theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism was used to elucidate the findings.

4.4 Inductive thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a method which focuses on identifying themes and patterns within data, and in its essentialist form reports experiences and meanings of realities of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006:77-101; Tracy, 2013:183-187). The analysis of the data has allowed the researcher to identify themes pertaining to the construction of experiences of a sample of South African belly dancers.

Following the procedure outlined by Tracy (2013:189-190), once the data was collected it was transcribed and then coded. This process involved assigning descriptive labels to segments of text that captured the perceived essence of the data. This is known as primary-cycle coding and occurred more than once during the initial stages of coding. This was followed by placing the primary codes into first level codes. Constant comparison of data took place throughout the analysis process. This allowed for analysis of data applicable to each code to be modified as needed and as new codes emerged. The codes were then grouped into possible categories. These were further grouped into themes. Being an inductive approach, the themes emerging were spontaneous with no pre-constructed input by the researcher, and the analytic process was data driven, rather than theory driven. A code book was developed out of the analysis process which clearly details the inclusion and exclusion criteria of each code.

4.5 Quality assurance

The precision and quality of a research report greatly depends on the quality of authenticity of the data as well as the quality of the analysis (Sargeant, 2012:1-3). To achieve these aims, a number of strategies were adopted to enhance the credibility, transferability and confirmability of the study, as will be outlined below.

4.5.1 Credibility

In order for the research findings to be credible, they needed to be trustworthy. This can best be explained by applying the question “do the researcher’s conclusions find favourable support in the research findings?” (Marsden, 2013). For the purpose of this study, the credibility was achieved by virtue of the deliberate selection of participants who are belly dancers and therefore gave information relevant to the research topic. The researcher also recorded all the interviews which were transcribed verbatim ensuring that the researcher could return to each interview at any point to review what was said in context and to verify that conclusions that were reached were indeed supported by the actual data.

4.5.2 Transferability

Transferability indicates the extent to which the results of qualitative research can be applied or transferred to other settings (Tracy, 2013:229). For the purpose of this study attention was focused on clearly describing the participant sample as well as outlining the context of belly dancing in South Africa. This will enable other researchers to make an informed decision as to how feasible a transfer of the findings to a similar context would be. The onus lies on the person who intends to transfer the results to assess how relevant the fit of the results of this research will be to the context they are applying it to (Tracy, 2013:229).

4.5.3 Confirmability

Confirmability pertains to the extent to which findings of a study are indeed fashioned by the participants and not motivated by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:1; Anney, 2014:279). During the process of data gathering in this study, the researcher continuously checked with the participants as to whether or not the researcher accurately interpreted what the participants were saying. Confirmability was further supported through the electronic recording of the participants’ responses which were transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, emergent categories and themes were tested against the interview data to verify that they did indeed correspond to what the participants stated.

4.6 Ethical considerations and research procedure

Research ethics in the context of social science are not uniform. Researchers generally accept that there are ethical principles, but is not necessarily applied unanimously.

There are three major approaches to ethical practice which can be summarised as follows:

- Full adherence to ethics – acceptance of ethical standards in full.
- Relative adherence to ethics – adherence to most ethical principles although the argument is that it is impossible to adhere to all.
- Questioning of ethics – that is the full resentment of ethics (Sarantakos, 2013:21-22).

The present study followed the full adherence to ethical practice approach.

Prior to the study, ethical clearance was obtained from the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) of the North West University. Once permission was obtained, a written request was issued to SADTA (South African dance teachers association) and MBDSA (Miss Belly Dance South Africa) for permission to use their database of known and recognised belly dancers and belly dance studios in South Africa. Once written permission was received from the relevant associations, an independent recruiter was appointed who was tasked with sending out the invitations for participants to partake in the research. The independent recruiter then sent out the invitation to the associations which was forwarded to all the contacts on the databases as agreed with the researcher. As identified in Sarantakos (2013:17) proper identification of the research aims and the researcher are important ethical requirements. The invitation clearly indicated who the researcher was, the purpose of the study, as well as what the intended use of the data obtained would be. Included in the information released to the participants, was a sample list of potential questions, along with possible stresses that the participants may experience during the process of the interviews. This formed part of the ethical requirements to give the participants clear information pertaining to all aspects of the study (Tracy, 2013:245). Following an ethical process of recruitment which was managed by the independent recruiter, the informed and written consent of all responding participants was obtained.

The participant recruiter was then tasked with negotiating suitable dates and times with the participants that were convenient for them to engage in the semi-structured telephonic interviews with the researcher. According to Tracy (2013:243) anonymity and confidentiality are very important. Each participant taking part in the semi-structured interviews was informed that their responses would remain confidential and that such would only be known to the researcher and her supervisor. It was also made very clear that only the researcher and her supervisor would have access to the personal identification details of each of the participants and that these would be kept confidential by means of safekeeping on a password protected laptop.

To ensure that the telephonic interviews were conducted in an ethically sound manner, care was taken not to inconvenience the participants (by ensuring that the time arranged for the call was convenient for the participants) or to take up more than the agreed upon time (Tracy, 2013:245).

The researcher sought to ensure that the ethical standard for welfare and consideration of the participants was fully adhered to (Tracy, 2013:245). The researcher allowed for breaks where needed and also agreed to phone back at a later stage where the participants requested it. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any point in time and that if any of the posed questions were uncomfortable or embarrassing, they could decline to answer or withdraw without any repercussions.

In keeping with ethical requirements, no participant was subjected to coercion or forced to partake in the study (Tracy, 2013:243). With some of the participants coming from rival studios, this was a particularly important aspect to ensure that all participants participated voluntarily without fear of retribution for partaking or not partaking in the study. The researcher sought to accommodate the participants accordingly by treating them all with respect and dignity.

No participant was subjected to any undue physical or mental stress (Tracy, 2013:243). The belly dancers, who were selected as participants, were all interviewed in the privacy of their home, office or over a telephone.

5. FINDINGS

The present qualitative study explored women's experiences of belly dancing in South Africa. The findings will herewith be considered and discussed under four main sections. The first section pertains to the preparatory past experiences of women who practice belly dancing and how this significantly contributed to their susceptibility to participation in belly dancing. The second section describes the media platforms through which the participants were exposed to belly dancing. The third section details how the participants experienced this exposure. The fourth section describes the experiences of the participants as observers and then as practitioners of belly dance, which was found to be multi-layered and include personal experiences, experiences within the communal realm as well as experiences in the public realm.

5.1 Preparatory past experiences

Analysis of the interviews suggests that the majority of participants had specific types of past experiences in common, which appeared to significantly contribute to the participants' susceptibility to future participation in belly dancing.

5.1.1 Pre-existing interest

A majority of the participants expressed a pre-existing interest in belly dancing. This interest was more than just a fleeting whim. It was a long standing interest which has originated from the understanding that belly dancing was a unique dance. This was clearly illustrated by the following quote: *"I have always been interested in this form of dancing as it's so unique..."* (Participant 1, 26 July 2017). This was also expressed by Participant 10 as: *"ek wou nog altyd belly dancing gedoen het"* (*I always wanted to do belly dancing*) (Participant 10, 21 August 2017).

5.1.2 Challenges related to finding a suitable dance partner

The analysis of the data revealed that most of the participants shared a preparatory past experience pertaining to the problem associated with dance forms requiring dance partners. In particular, they experienced difficulty in securing willing/able dance partners, which hampered their participation in dancing. Participant 14 said: *"I was actually doing ballroom with my husband, and enjoying dancing, unfortunately he then*

chose to leave... ballroom and I wanted to continue some kind of dancing" (Participant 14, 21 August 2017). Belly dancing became attractive to these participants as it was seen as a way to circumvent the frustrations associated with finding and retaining a dance partner. Participant 4 stated: *"I also loved the idea that you did not require a partner"* (Participant 4, 31 July 2017).

5.1.3 Trauma

From the data collected, it emerged that the experience of a traumatic past had left a significant number of participants with great fissures in their sense of well-being as well as their social relations. Such trauma was reported to have been experienced in a variety of forms, including abuse, body image distortion, and diminished well-being. A past experience of abuse is clearly illustrated in the following quote by Participant 9 who said: *"I was 4 years old and my godfather started sexually abusing me. So some psychologists have said it was to protect myself - distorted body image – you know – to protect myself – some said it was comfort – either which way from the age of 4 to about 12 I put on a lot of weight"* (Participant 9, 23 August 2017).

However, the participants typically indicated that this trauma made belly dancing more attractive to them as an art form, as they believed that it might represent a form of healing. As expressed by Participant 4, *"I [have] a history of trials, troubles, tribulations and temptations and believed that movement was the answer to my healing process"* (Participant 4, 31 July 2017).

5.1.4 Boredom and loneliness

Boredom and loneliness have to a lesser extent emerged as preparatory past experiences from the data collected in the present study. Three of the participants stated that experiencing boredom and loneliness prompted them to pursue belly dancing. Participant 10 said: *"Toe trek ons van Johannesburg af die kant toe, Brits se kant toe en ek het nie regtig vriendinne nie en ek is alleen en dit is 'n nuwe omgewing en toe het my man gesê, nee, ek moet maar iets kry om te doen. Toe besluit ek maar op belly dancing"* (and then we moved from Johannesburg to Brits and I did not have friends and I was alone in a new environment, my husband said I must find something

to do. That is when I decided on belly dancing) (Participant 10, 21 August 2017). This experience of boredom was reported by Participant 6 who said: *“I was by myself during the week, so bored and a colleague of mine saw in a newspaper article about belly dancing..., and that was 11 years ago”* (Participant 6, 12 August 2017).

5.1.5 Previous participation in other dance genres

Belly dance is not always the first dance genre that the participants experienced or practiced. Five of the participants indicated that they had pursued other dance genres prior to starting with belly dancing. These genres include ballet, modern, Latin, ballroom and Spanish dancing as the more popular choices. Acrobatics and tap were also mentioned as reported by Participant 3 who said, *“I’ve been dancing (the) genres which include ballet, modern dancing, Spanish, acrobatics and tap”* (Participant 3, 29 July 2017). It seems that participants’ familiarity with these dance forms made the notion of belly dancing seem more accessible than it might otherwise have been. Furthermore, participants often experience these other dance forms as restrictive and belly dancing as unrestricted, which was another way in which previous exposure to dancing inclined them towards taking up belly dancing. This was clearly reported by Participant 3 who said, *“belly dancing allows you the freedom to express yourself in a way that other genres don’t really allow”* (Participant 3, 29 July 2017). The data suggests that dance styles which require a certain body type are also experienced as restrictive and inaccessible. This made the participants more susceptible to developing an interest in belly dancing, which they perceived as being less restrictive. This was clearly articulated by Participant 9 who said, *“[I] did modern dancing but always with these body complex body distortion images”* (Participant 9, 23 August 2017).

It is noteworthy that the findings suggest that once the participants started belly dancing, they were not willing to leave the genre. As Participant 3 stated: *“and I was not willing to give it up under no circumstances as I love it so much...”* (Participant 3, 29 July 2017). Participant 6 said, *“it was just a hobby at that stage and as not yet a passion... now it’s changed. It is a passionate hobby”* (Participant 6, 12 August 2017).

5.2 Exposure to belly dancing

The past experiences outlined in the previous section appear to have engendered a heightened susceptibility among the participants to participate in belly dancing. However, in all cases, the eventual decision to take up belly dancing was catalysed by one or more events where participants were exposed to belly dancing as observers. Seemingly as a result of the susceptibility engendered by their past experiences (as noted previously), this initial exposure to belly dancing typically left a lasting impression on the participants and was experienced as a pivotal moment in which they decided to pursue the art form. The catalytic exposure typically came through one of two channels – the media or a live performance, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

5.2.1 The media

Some participants experienced their first exposure to belly dancing through the media. The findings indicate that the media portrays belly dancing in a manner that typically instantly drew the participants in. Participant 13 said: *“I think I saw belly dancing on TV and I really fell in love with it”*. (Participant 13, 21 August 2017). The findings also indicate that some advertisements placed by belly dance studio owners are experienced by the participants as compelling. This was expressed by Participant 10 who said *“Ek het nog een aand in die kombuis gestaan toe sien ek in die koerant hoe sy adverteer en toe, ja, toe bel ek xxxxxx en dis toe ek begin het”* (I was standing in the kitchen one night and I saw in the newspaper how she advertised, and then, ja, I phoned xxx and that is when I started) (Participant 10, 21 August 2017).

5.2.2 Live performances

Many of the participants experienced their initial exposure to belly dancing through a live performance, which they either chose to attend on their own, or which they encountered in the context of a work or social function. In some cases, participants were also taken to a live performance by friends. As expressed by participant 2, *“[I]...tagged along with a friend”* (Participant 2, 25 July 2017). In all the related interviews, this initial visual experience of belly dancing was the deciding factor in the participants’ decisions to start belly dancing. It was not only about the dancer, but about the costuming as well. This is perfectly encapsulated in the following excerpt, *“and this absolutely stunning lady came out in this purple costume and started dancing, and that*

was me” (Participant 9, 23 August 2017). These live performances were generally performed by a single dancer who left a compelling image with the participants. Participant 15 said, “*ons was een nag by n funksie gewees en ek het ‘n performance gesien van een belly danser wat opgetree het...en ek moes net dit try doen*” (we were at a function one night and I saw a performance by a belly dancer. I just had to try it) (Participant 15, 21 August 2017).

The experience of the initial exposure to belly dancing through the two mediums reported by the participants (media or live performance), coupled with their past preparatory experiences, ultimately lead the participants to start belly dancing. Many of the participants reported their initial exposure to belly dancing as a strong emotional experience which unconsciously resonated with their preparatory past experiences. This initial exposure to belly dancing created a twin domain from where the participants experienced belly dancing.

The first domain was the experience as an *observer* of belly dancing. The second domain was as a *practitioner* of belly dancing. The two domains are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

5.3 The experience of exposure to belly dancing as an observer

Observing belly dancing for the first time had a magnetic attraction for the participants towards the dance style. The experience was compelling and strong and was further stimulated by the visual appeal of the belly dancer and the belly dance genre.

5.3.1 Compelling visual experience

Many of the participants reported their first visual experience of belly dancing as a compelling one. The analysis of the data revealed that it is the actual belly dancer and the way she articulated the movements that the participants experienced as compelling. Participant 9 said, “*and this absolutely stunning lady came out It was stunning – that was me. From watching her I knew actually what I wanted to do*” (Participant 9, 23

August 2017). Participant 3 said, *“but I have to admit the undulations and isolations are simply awe inspiring”* (Participant 3, 29 July 2017).

5.3.2 Spiritual experience

To a lesser extent, some participants explained that watching a belly dancer perform for the first time, was experienced as a transcendent or spiritual experience. One participant described it as: *“I mean I did not know the person who was dancing, but I thought it was a very spiritual experience”* (Participant 13, 21 August 2017). Another participant stated, *“dit het vir my gevoel, dis my answer ek moet dit, ek moet dis ‘n “calling” ek moet gaan daarvoor, ek moet dit try”* (*it felt to me, this is my answer I must do this, I must, this is a calling, I must go for this and try it*) (Participant 15, 21 August 2017). For these participants, this experience cemented the gap between wanting to start belly dancing and actually starting belly dance training.

5.4 The experience of belly dance as a practitioner

Participating in belly dancing elicited a different kind of reported experiences from the participants as opposed to the experience reported from being an observer of belly dancing. The present study revealed that the experiences as practitioners of belly dancing included personal experiences as well as communal experiences. The participants all indicated that they were practitioners of belly dancing for an extended period of time and resultantly reported experiencing enhanced physical and psychological well-being. The data further revealed that participants experienced a merging of fantasy into reality during their performances on stage and in public. To a lesser extent three participants referenced religious dimensions in relation to their experience of belly dancing.

5.4.1 Personal experiences

From the data collected, many participants revealed they had experienced belly dancing as having a positive effect on their emotional as well as their physical well-being. These experiences were their own personal experiences which did not include interaction with other parties. To a lesser extent, some participants also indicated that practicing belly dancing was experienced as having their needs for safety and belonging fulfilled.

5.4.1.1 Enhanced psychological well-being

The participants reported enhanced psychological well-being which particularly included the experience of being more confident and feeling happy. The following quotations from the transcribed data encapsulate this:

“Dancing has kept my mind occupied and my heart beating whilst dealing with the hardest life lessons and helped me to get past them. I am more confident.” (Participant 4, 31 July 2017).

“.. ek sal se vroulik en jy voel goed oor jouself....want dit bring jou vroulikheid, jou femininity uit” (I would say feminine and you feel good about yourself...because it brings out your femininity) (Participant 10, 21 August 2017).

“Belly dancing makes me happy” (Participant 1, 26 July 2017).

Another aspect of psychological well-being revealed by the data was that of self-love. Although it was only expressed in such exact terms by one participant, the data did show that the participants were more inclined to love themselves and feel comfortable within themselves after starting belly dancing as stated by Participant 16 who reported that *“... I just found that something shifted in me and like almost self-love happened.., uhm... You know... Ja... I don't need someone else to feel loved, I can feel it in myself now”* (Participant 16, 21 August 2017). It was more subtly expressed by Participant 3 who said: *“Belly dancing saved my life. It helped me find 'a happy place' again”* (Participant 3, 29 July 2017). The experience of feeling comfortable within yourself was well articulated through the following quote from Participant 6 who said: *“it's finding your voice, your style of dancing and being comfortable in what you are”* (Participant 6, 12 August 2017).

5.4.1.2 Enhanced physical well-being

The analysed data revealed that participants experienced enhanced physical well-being as a result of practicing belly dancing. This included health benefits such as the strengthening of the pelvic floor, enhanced flexibility, weight loss, and easier birthing experiences, as will be discussed below.

5.4.1.3 Improvement of pelvic floor control and alleviation of urine incontinence

Many of the participants reported experiencing a definite improvement in the condition of the muscles of the pelvic floor, which included the experience that their urine incontinence was alleviated or reversed. This may be ascribed to the fact that the pelvis, which includes the pelvic floor, is the focus of movement in belly dancing and therefore significantly exercises the muscles of this region. This is best illustrated with the following quotes taken from the data collected in reply to the specific question of whether belly dancing had any impact on urine incontinence as a result of childbirth or trauma. Participant 8 stated: *“Well, definitief. Ek meen ek kan voel na ek my kinders gehad het, omdat ek keisersnee gehad het dat – ek ja – jou spiere ook daar waar jy jou snit gehad het is nie meer dieselfde nie. Maar ek dink wat belly dancing baie help is wanneer jy jou tummy rolls doen wanneer jy jou bewegings doen waar een deel stil is en een deel beweeg – dit help definitief weer om spiere te versterk”* (well definitely, I mean I can feel after I had my children, because I had a caesarean, I yes, your muscles, even there where your caesarean incision is, are not the same any more. But I think what belly dancing helps a lot is when you do tummy rolls, where you do movement where you need to isolate a part and move a part – that definitely helps to strengthen your muscles again) (Participant 8, 21 August 2017).

Participant 9 replied as follows on the question posed of whether she experienced belly dancing to have any impact on the urine incontinence she experienced after giving birth to her second child: *“definitely better”* (Participant 9, 23 August 2017). Participant 11 responded to the same question posed by stating that *“after I had my daughter then I didn’t have a lot of control there, because the muscles were properly stretched out and everything like that, and then I found when I got back into belly dancing, I strengthened up those muscles”* (Participant 11, 21 August 2017).

5.4.1.4 Easier birthing process

Belly dancing was reported by some of the participants as having made their birthing experience easier. This was ascribed to the exercise of the pelvic floor and subsequent muscle control acquired through belly dancing. This is typified with the following quote from Participant 9 who said: *“I was petrified because it’s eina (painful). The third one, because of having danced was definitely an easier, more smooth birth”* (Participant 9, 23 August 2017).

5.4.1.5 Weight loss

Many of the participants said that they experienced direct physical body improvement after having started belly dancing. Of these improvements, weight loss was the most widely reported. Participant 15 said: *“Ek het baie gewig verloor, net met dit.” (I lost a lot of weight just with this)* (Participant 15, 21 August 2017). Participant 16 elaborated: *“We trained so hard for that show, for 3 months before. I think I lost something like 16 kgs of weight”* (Participant 16, 21 August 2017).

5.4.1.6 Enhanced mobility and flexibility

Mobility is an important aspect of any dance genre. It is the essence of allowing a dancer to perform and move effortlessly across the stage or in the dance class. The data indicated that it was widely reported by the participants that they experienced improved mobility as a result of practicing belly dancing. Participant 7, who is also a belly dance teacher said, *“in fact the one dancer in my school, her doctor told her she must keep on because it helps for her mobility”*. (Participant 7, 12 August 2017).

Flexibility, or the means to stretch the muscles of the body in a way that allows the participant to achieve otherwise difficult dance positions, was reported as an aspect of the enhanced physical well-being experienced by the participants as a result of participating in belly dancing. Participant 7 said, *“You are more mobile – something like backbends. I can bend more back now than I could when I was 45. I can touch my toes that I couldn’t when I was 45. It definitely helps”* (Participant 7, 12 August 2017).

5.4.1.7 Pain relief

Pain relief was also noted as a physical body improvement. Participant 13 said: *“I hurt my back in several places so I’ve got de-generations in several places in my back and in my neck.... I had like continuous, continuous pain since then... there was a stage where they thought I was...., going to have they called it pseudo- paralysis. It’s really, really belly dance, to me, that gave me back the power over my body, because the strength around my, the muscles around my spine, is so strong now, I still get pain, the most pain I get is over December month, where I don’t do any, any dancing”* (Participant 13, 21 August 2017).

5.4.1.8 Improved posture

It was also revealed in the data collected that belly dancing is experienced as a method to correct bad posture. One of the participants, a belly dance teacher, reported an experience with a student who had a hunch back which affected the student's posture very negatively. The hunch back was remarkably corrected under two years of belly dance training. The participant reported the experience as follows: *"She was 16 years old, she had a hunch back. the young one xxx – so (inaudible) and he said so you don't understand and he called xxx and said just please – aunty xxx has obviously seen the back – just show her – and it wasn't gone – but what had happened – what had sort of happened around the stomach and the obliques and that had moved straightened her spine – she still had a tiny hobble but that wasn't like it used to be... posture and I think she was lucky enough to be at that age where it could correct quite easily"*. (Participant 9, 23 August 2017). The correction of the posture was also reported by Participant 8 (21 August 2017) as follows: *"Well, physically definitely because it actually helps you with your posture"*.

It would seem that the elements identified in the theme of well-being are interrelated. As the participants began to experience physical benefits such as losing weight, gaining fitness, and experiencing themselves as more feminine, they also felt happier and more confident, with improved self-esteem.

The experience of the enhanced physical well-being impacted on the experience of psychological well-being which is illustrated by Participant 16 who said *"we trained so hard for that show, for 3 months before. I think I lost something like 16 kgs of weight I was very honest, that I've got a problem with my weight and when I go on stage, I'm self-conscious about it and I always make sure I dance backline because of that. So in my show, when I danced the duet with xxx, that was huge for me to push myself forward like that"* (Participant 16, 21 August 2017).

There are many styles of belly dance which South African women practice, such as tribal, classic, romantic, modern and folkloric to mention a few. However, not all styles are positively experienced by all of the participants. Although this was not the case with the majority of participants, Participant 7 said: *"I don't like tribal at all so I won't go for that....it is too dark for me"* (Participant 7, 12 August 2017). This implies that women's

experiences of belly dance cannot be entirely separated from the style of belly dance and its associated forms of music and props.

5.4.2 Experience of fulfilment of needs for safety and belonging

Many of the participants indicated an experience of feeling a sense of safety and belonging within the practice of belly dancing. This is exemplified by Participant 16 who stated: *"...but as soon as I walked in there, I was welcomed and I felt like part of the family. While I was there I didn't feel alone at all"* (Participant 16, 21 August 2017). The dance class environment is also considered a place where the participants can escape to. Participant 4, stated that it was *"my happy place where I can escape [feel safe], learn more about myself and go through all the things of the past"* (Participant 4, 31 July 2017). The participants also stated that the dance class created a positive environment where they could train without disturbances. According to Participant 13 the dance studio was *"a place where you know, there is no disturbances, there is no worries, there is just positive energy [safety] and ja, like creating a positive bubble around you, you know, and just dance inside of it"* (Participant 13, 21 August 2017).

5.4.3 Experience of a unique identity as a belly dancer

The findings suggest that participants construct a unique identity as "belly dancers". The actual practice of belly dancing seems to bring with it a certain status which accompanies this identity of "belly dancer." This was well illustrated by Participant 8 who said, *"maar outomaties as mens sê 'I'm a belly dancer' – dan kyk die mense jou so ooh..."* (But automatically if a person says 'I'm a belly dancer' – then the people look at you like ooh...) (Participant 8, 21 August 2017).

5.4.4 Spiritual experience of belly dancing

The thematic analysis of the data revealed that the experience of belly dancing extends into the spiritual/religious realm. Three of the participants referred to religion or a religious deity in their interviews. Participant 4 said, *"I dance for my heavenly King, He leads and I follow as He guides me through my journey in life. Guidance, God, You and I dance. He has taken my mourning and clothes me with dancing and JOY!!!"* (Participant 4, 31 July 2017).

5.5 Experiences within the communal realm

Further to the personal experiences reported by the participants, the data also revealed that the participants' experience of belly dancing as practitioners also occurs within a communal realm. Almost all of the participants experienced some form of sexual element associated with the dance form which was either from the sexual articulation of the movements by the dancers or their own sexual liaisons as a result of the confidence that belly dancing promotes within the dancer. In addition to the sexual dimension of belly dancing, the participants also had other communal experiences associated with teaching or being taught belly dance. One of the most prominent experiences reported within the theme of communal experiences was that of a sisterhood. The analysis of the data revealed that this was an experience which was virtually identical for all of the participants, although it does have polarities in its expression.

5.5.1 Participants' experiences of belly dance teachers and associations

For many of the participants, partaking in belly dancing has opened vocational opportunities. Most of the participants indicated that as a result of participating in belly dancing, they worked their way up to a teacher status and opened up their own studios as well as started to explore additional avenues within the dance genre. Participant 5 said: *"I, through belly dance own a dance school. It has opened avenues of dance fit which is also my passion and it is amazing to see woman "heal" mentally, physically and emotionally through the expression of dance"* (Participant 5, 1 August 2017).

Transcending the student/teacher level has also been reported as liberating in that the teachers can pursue a deeper experience of dance. According to Participant 3, she experienced teaching as a means to *"'heal' so many other ladies"* (Participant 3, 29 July 2017).

The analysis of the data revealed that most participants regarded their dance teachers and the teaching styles of these teachers as an integral aspect of belly dancing and that elicited both positive and negative experiences. Participant 1 reported her experience of her tutor's inappropriate behaviour as one where she *"lost all respect for my tutor, due to inappropriate behaviour"* (Participant 1, 26 July 2017). The data collected revealed that many belly dance teachers were not formally qualified and therefore rendered inefficient and inappropriate training. Participant 9 said that *"because there is lots of little*

things – actually not little things because they are quite important that you get taught and this has to become second nature to you went on to the floor, about which the fly – we call it the fly by night teachers are having no idea about” (Participant 9, 23 August 2017). However, not all participants had negative experiences relative to their dance teachers. Participant 15 describes her teacher as, *“nie net ons teacher nie, sy’s ons structure, vandag ons ma, weg van ons huis af, sy’s ons alles”* (not only our teacher, she is also our structure, today our mother away from our homes, she is our everything) (Participant 15, 21 August 2017).

Participant 3 reported that the dance instructors and dance associations were *“putting dancers in ‘boxes’”* (Participant 3, 29 July 2017). This was perceived as limiting their freedom of expression. Participant 3 also reported breaking away from the associations because *“there were biased opinions”* (Participant 3, 29 July 2017).

Another aspect that was revealed through the data analysis, is that South African belly dance associations and the teachers they accredit, have to contend with more rules than their overseas counterparts, which resulted in a significant amount of frustration. Participant 9 lamented that *“there’s so many rules about the bra 5cm from the nipple and nothing sneaking – so there is a lot of rules for us – and in a lot of countries they don’t have those rules”* (Participant 9, 23 August 2017).

5.5.2 Sexual nature of belly dancing

The general perception surrounding belly dancing is one of being a sexual dance. However, this is contrary to what the participants reported. Though participants generally regarded belly dancing as a sensual dance, most explicitly indicated that they did not believe that this dance form has a sexual side to it. Participant 7 reported that she is *“very quick to help them and tell them that it is not a sexual dance, it is a sensual dance. And it is about womanhood; it is not about trying to go to the bedroom and doing whatever”* (Participant 7, 12 August 2017). Participant 9 reported that she felt that *“personally it is definitely sensual – I have been in situations where people have – I can see the way they look at it as being sexual”* (Participant 9, 23 August 2017).

The participants were asked what they perceived the reasons to be behind the sexual perception surrounding belly dancing. Participant 7 felt that *“there is dancers out there that don’t respect the art form and I think that when they dance they do the more sexual movements”* (Participant 7, 12 August 2017). Participant 9 felt that *“unfortunately there are a lot of women who are taking this to the sexual level and not keeping it in an art form and not keeping it sensual”* (Participant 9, 23 August 2017).

Almost all of the participants, who reported that belly dancing is a sensual dance and not a sexual dance, clearly articulated that they blame the contradiction of sensual versus sexual on dancers who express the movements sexually rather than sensually and also added that it was not an accepted practice in the belly dance circles.

Participant 8 reported that one of the dancers she saw, *“het inappropriate movements gemaak voor die man wat langs sy vrou sit en voor al die ander dansers – ek meen almal het skaamgekry dink ek en die wat die skaamste gekry het is ons”* (made inappropriate movements in front of the man who was sitting next to his wife and in front of all the other dancers – I mean everyone felt embarrassed and I think we were the most embarrassed) (Participant 8, 21 August 2017).

Not all the participants shared the view that belly dancing does not have a sexual side to it. Those that took the liberty to discuss the sexual nature of belly dancing reported that it has a definite impact on their sexual side. This was exemplified by Participant 8 who said that *“natuurlik moet dit n positiewe invloed hê op jou seksuele kant.”* (of course this must have a positive influence on your sexual side) (Participant 8, 21 August 2017). In response to the question of whether this participant felt belly dancing offered any sexual benefit, Participant 9 replied, *“uhm with my second husband yes – not my first. Also being a lot older and having been dancing for a couple of years.”* (Participant 9, 23 August 2017). Participant 10 reported, *“die sexual act, ja, dit het, ja, dit het.... die performance, die performance het verbeter. Dit word stywer daaronder..want jy leer mos nou om jou spiere te oefen daaronder so ek dink in daai opsig het dit gehelp daar.”* (the sexual act, yes, it did yes, it made the performance better. It gets tighter down there because you learn how to exercise your muscles down there so I think in that respect it did help there) (Participant 10, 21 August 2017).

5.5.3 Reality versus fantasy

Almost all of the participants reported the experience of spontaneously forming an alter-ego or transcending into a different persona when they perform on stage or for the public. This persona was not part of their daily routine, yet one they clearly cherish and embrace as belly dancers. Although this transcendence took place in a public setting, the experience itself was very personal and unique only to that participant. This is clearly illustrated by Participant 16 who said: *“You just... you become this other person and you know, to me a different person takes over when I get on stage.... I don’t know what... your alter ego takes over”* (Participant 16, 21 August 2017). A similar experience was reported by Participant 6 who said that when she performed she *“had like an alter ego on stage”* (Participant 6, 12 August 2017). Participant 7 reported her dancing experiences as transcendental because, *“when I dance I transform into someone... when I step onto a stage or if it is not a stage just between people that I have to dance – I feel – I don’t feel like myself – I’m, I don’t really know how to say this – when I dance I feel I can do more. I can do things that xxx in the normal world will never do”* (Participant 7, 12 August 2017).

5.5.4 Sisterhood

The experience of a sisterhood was widely reported by the participants. The analysed data revealed that the sisterhood is not limited to the classroom but extends to social activities outside the dance class. Participant 14 reported: *“We’ve got quite a social class, so we do things outside the group as well”* (Participant 14, 21 August 2017). This experience of sisterhood is attributed to the forming of social groups of like-minded women who practice together in the same class. Participant 7 described this social group as *“my sisterhood and womanhood and that’s what I try to bring in to my class.”* Participant 7 (12 August 2017).

Making like-minded friends was widely reported by participants. It would seem that belly dancing creates a platform for communal interests which lead to making friends. Participant 15 described the sisterhood as, *“jy het vriendinne gemaak” (you made friends)* (Participant 15, 21 August 2017).

The data further revealed that the sisterhood experience extended to social gatherings where belly dancers congregate and take part in communal activities such as raising

money for charity. Participant 16 stated: *“I’ve been able to even at my show, I was even able to bring all these women together to, the sisterhood of belly dancers, to raise R13 000 for animals and that to me was fantastic”* (Participant 16, 21 August 2017).

The experience of sisterhood in belly dancing is also expressed as extending to different cultures within the belly dance fraternity. The following quote clearly illustrates this: *“I love the sisterhood. Where friends come to meet and greet of all ages, colours, cultures and different walks of life”* (Participant 4, 31 July 2017).

The data also revealed that the experience of sisterhood was not always reported as pleasant, but was also experienced as adverse by some of the participants. It would seem that as the group of belly dancers in South Africa grows, so does the potential for conflict as a result of differing personalities and ages partaking in the dance style. Participant 13 reported that *“I wouldn’t call it a sisterhood, as much as, just because, I mean you must know, there is a lot of different personalities that clashes”* (Participant 13, 21 August 2017).

The analysed data also suggests that the sisterhood experience is not always the uplifting supporting experience that it is exemplified to be. There is an indication that the sisterhood can create a platform for malicious behaviour. Participant 16 mentioned that: *“I hear that they are actually leaving belly dance through bitchiness and things like that. I get sad in my heart for that because to me, I’m just friends with everybody and I don’t believe there’s place for that, especially when it’s your passion, you should be happy when you do it”* (Participant 16, 21 August 2017).

5.6 The experience of public engagement as a belly dance participant

The analysis of the interviews brought to light that engagement with the public formed a significant component of participants’ experience of belly dancing. Two sub-categories emerged from the analysis of the data which indicate that public engagement is mostly experienced through the two primary avenues of competition as well as shows and restaurant performances. Each subcategory will be discussed in detail below.

5.6.1 Competition

Competition is a form of public engagement which is primarily experienced with and through fellow belly dancers. The participants were explicitly asked about their experiences pertaining to competition. Competition was reported as an experience which alienated certain belly dancers. Participant 13 describes her experience of a specific competition as *“a negative side..., where people actually, after a competition, like that, just stopped dancing completely”* (Participant 13, 21 August 2017). This is ascribed to the negativity associated with back stage observers who are mostly belly dancers themselves. This is clearly exemplified by Participant 7 who said that, *“because you want to be better than the next person obviously if you are in competition so you are bitchy and catty – what else can I say. I have heard people talk ugly about other people while they are on the stage you know”* (Participant 7, 12 August 2017).

A number of participants felt that competition ought to belong within the younger age groups. Participant 7 stated, *“maybe competition is good when you are young”* (Participant 7, 12 August 2017). This was particularly ascribed to the aging of the participants and the growth within the dance genre. This was exemplified by participant 16 who stated that *“as I got older, the competition became less important and the belly dance became my pride”* (Participant 16, 21 August 2017).

There were however participants who felt that competition was a good thing. The findings suggest that this was because some participants experienced competition as a healthy means to allow younger dancers to find themselves and their particular style. Participant 11 felt that the way one experiences competition *“depends on the type of personality that [a] student has, if they have the passion to want to learn from you, and you give them the freedom to compete and be more than what they are, which I also try to let them be, then ja, it’s a good thing competition”* (Participant 11, 21 August 2017).

5.6.2 Experience of public performance

Performing in public was commonly experienced in dualistic terms by the participants. Although the experience of the dance itself was typically positive, the experience of the public’s attention was not always positive. This is particularly ascribed to the sensual/sexual dichotomy surrounding belly dancing. According to some participants, performing often brought with it unwanted and unsolicited attention and behaviour from

the audience. Participant 5 reported dancing at a café when *“the gentleman I pulled up dropped his pants and stood there in his underwear”* (Participant 5, 1 August 2017). This kind of experience is ascribed to Western influence on the dress code associated with belly dancing. Participant 11 described it to be *“the way how people dress and some of the overseas belly dancers dress, where there is very, very minimum clothing, I just think men just get the wrong impression”* (Participant 11, 21 August 2017).

Several participants reported uncomfortable experiences pertaining to overt sexual dance articulation from fellow dancers while performing in public. Participant 7 reported on an experience at a belly dance function where a fellow dancer *“did a dance like ‘that’ and uhm I tried to talk to her, tried to tell her you know what that is not the correct move, please don’t do that, please wear pants under your skirts – do that do this whatever whatever (laughing) and she got upset with me”* (Participant 7, 12 August 2017). This behaviour is mostly ascribed to the lack of respect for the art. Participant 15 stated that belly dance is: *“‘n art form, ons het werk wat in daai dans ingaan, dit is, dis ‘n art. Dis nie enige iets om enige man, betools te maak”* (an art form, we have a lot of work that goes into that dance, it is, it’s an art. It is not something to arouse any man with)” (Participant 15, 21 August 2017).

As a result of the negative public misconceptions about belly dancing, focussed on the perceived sexuality of the dance and the dancers, as well as how many of the participants are treated as a result of this misconception, several participants were prompted to find ways to educate the public accordingly. Participant 3 reported that *“in the beginning everyone had a very negative opinion regarding the belly dancing. We were called strippers, some people thought we could be bought. It took some time, but soon they realised that it is an art form as well... so I did lots of shows, newspaper interviews etc. to enlighten and educate them”* (Participant 3, 29 July 2017). Participant 14 stated that *“we went to one of the other studios, we having, sort off a fun thing on the beach front they had some of their advance group teaching the public, in general”* (Participant 14, 21 August 2017).

More than one participant also referenced public misconception about belly dancing as being a result of the amount of unqualified teachers presenting classes. This is well illustrated in the following quote: *“Dis regtig so, want elke 2de een, deesdae dink hulle*

kan 'n teacher wees en as jy hoor dan was daar iemand wat, hy's nou teacher, jy was nou die dag 'n beginner gewees, so hoe kan jy 'n teacher wees?" (It is really so, because every second person nowadays thinks they can be a teacher and you regularly hear about someone who claims to now be a teacher, who was just recently a beginner, so how are they a teacher now?) (Participant 15, 21 August 2017).

5.6.3 Teaching students

Most of the participants are teachers and therefore experience belly dancing in the realm of the dance class with students of their own. The experiences reported by the participants who are belly dance teachers reveal that teaching is a demanding aspect of belly dancing. Participant 6 reported that allocating time for belly dancing was problematic in the past, *"because now I only have private students – so I don't have an active studio with girls coming for a couple of days a week... because with a studio I was having numbers. There is always shows that's coming up to be part of and then you have to get the girls ready and then its extra time spent with them for rehearsals"* (Participant 6, 12 August 2017).

Teaching was also reported as an adverse experience by one participant, as a result of ongoing negative interactions with students. Participant 11 reported, *"a little bit of a negative experience with student back talk and stuff like that... actually made me stop teaching, because I found it's like an ongoing thing"* (Participant 11, 21 August 2017).

6. DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore a sample of South African women's experience of belly dance. A qualitative approach was used and data were collected via semi-structured interviews with a total of 15 purposively selected participants, and subsequently analysed through inductive thematic analysis. In this section the findings that emerged from the study will be discussed, using the Symbolic Interactionist perspective as a framework to elucidate the findings where relevant.

Below is a diagrammatic representation of the findings which will be followed by a detailed discussion.

STAGE ONE - PREPARATORY

PREPARATORY NON BELLY DANCE EXPERIENCES

- pre-existing interest
- trauma
- boredom
- challenges related to dance partners
- participation in other dance styles



STAGE TWO -OBSERVER

EXPOSURE TO BELLY DANCE

- Media
- live performance

EXPERIENCE OF EXPOSURE

- compelling visual experience
- spiritual experience

The exposure (and associated positive experience) and preparatory experiences prompts them to become practitioners

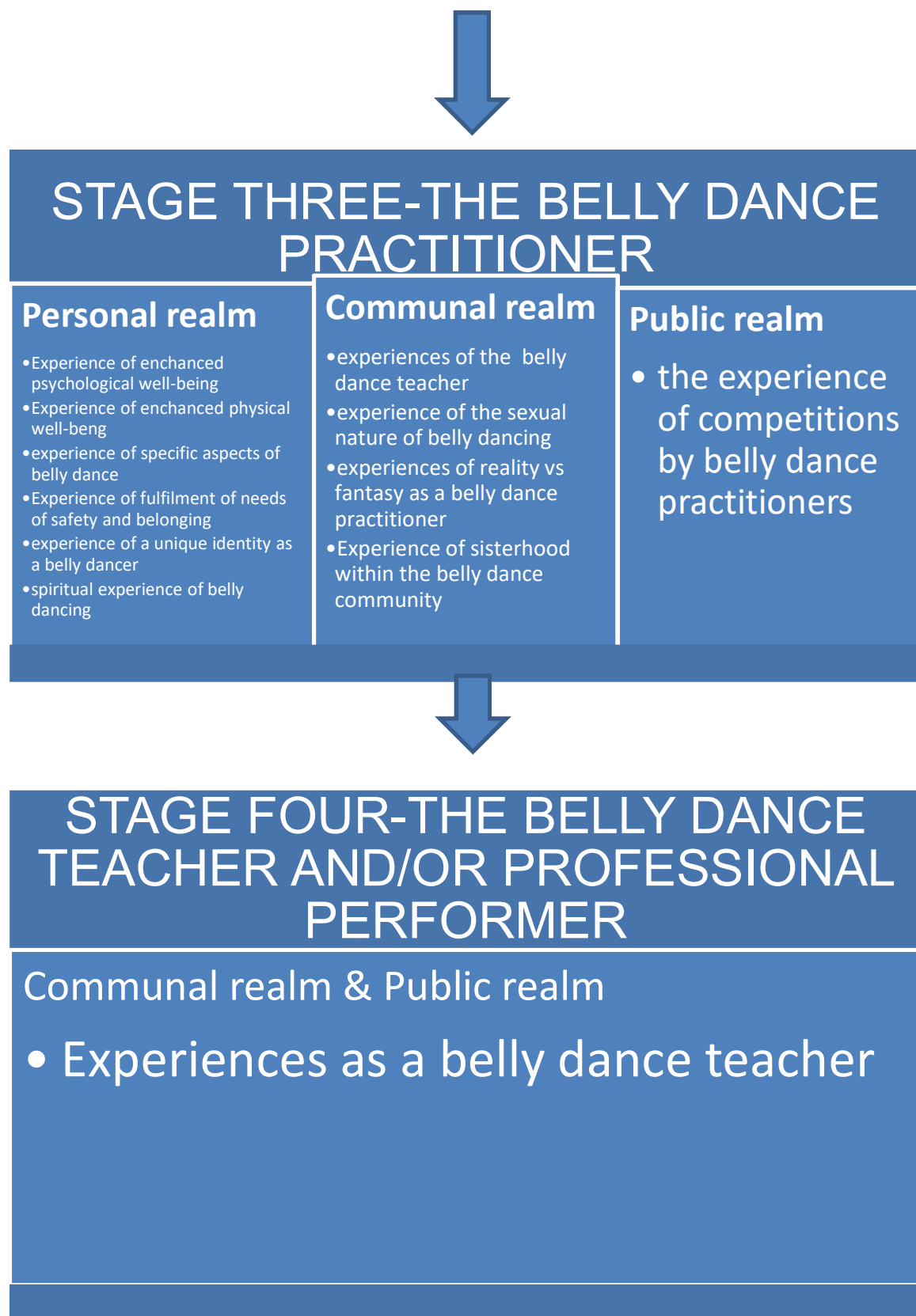


Figure 1: Experiences of belly dancing (Researcher's own construct)

When regarded as a whole, the findings suggest that there is a progressive stage-like dimension to women's experiences of belly dancing, which is presented in a simplified format in Figure 2. As such, the experiences of women (like those who took part in the

study) seem to evolve and unfold through various stages, and take on a different nature during each stage. First, there appears to be a preparatory phase, which is not overtly related to belly dancing. During this time certain preparatory experiences occur which heighten these women's susceptibility to developing an active interest in belly dancing.

During the next stage, the participants proceed to experiencing belly dance as observers, and in almost all instances, what they observe has a pronounced positive impact on them. The experiences of this phase are largely passive and temporally limited.

From this, some women who were sufficiently moved by the exposure proceed to a third stage - that of a student-practitioner of belly dance. Associated with this are personal, communal and public experiences that encompass physical, emotional, social and even spiritual dimensions. This phase brings with it both active and passive dimensions of experience that stretch over significant time periods and affect various aspects of the dancers' lives, such as their health, relationships, sense of femininity and more.

Finally, many, but not all of the participants progress to a fourth stage, that of teacher, and/or professional performer, which again brings with it a new set of experiences associated with their financial lives as well as with interaction with professional dancing bodies and more. These practitioners progress beyond the student role to that of teaching or professionally entertaining others, as belly dancing now evolves from a hobby or pass time into a vocation.

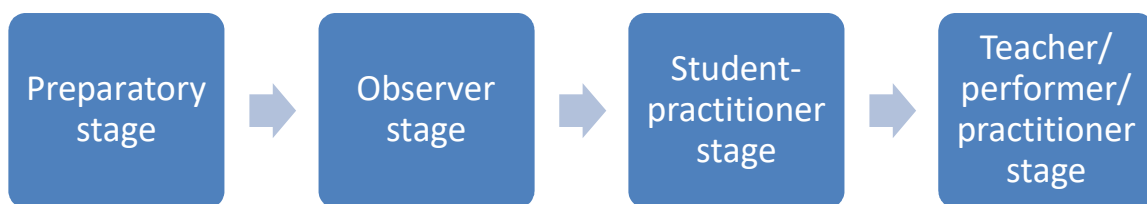


Figure 2: Experiential stages of belly dancers (Researcher's own construct)

The remainder of the section is devoted to a discussion of these dimensions.

6.1 Stage 1: Preparatory past experiences

The themes emerging from the study indicate that in almost all cases, the participants shared recurring types of past experiences, not belly dance related (though in some instances related to dancing in general), which appeared to predispose them towards future involvement in belly dancing by rendering them more susceptible to be attracted to this dance form.

The past experiences reported by the participants as predisposing them to taking up belly dancing were varied in theme. Some of the reported experiences were related to dance directly in cases where the participants felt that the dance style they participated in at the time was constricting or problematic with regards to finding a suitable dance partner. Belly dance does not require a partner and is therefore a better suited option for someone who wants to dance and perform, however is prevented from doing so because they do not have a dance partner.

Other predisposing experiences were of a more traumatic nature which was reported to leave the participants with a distorted sense of their own bodies, sense of femininity, as well as eating disorders. Some of the participants reported going through divorces, challenging courting situations, and other life-changing experiences at the time that they were exposed to and started belly dancing.

All of these past experiences appear to have engendered a heightened susceptibility to participate in belly dancing because through engaging in belly dancing the participants felt that they would be able to overcome these obstacles (such as being able to dance unencumbered by the need for a dance partner or without feeling restricted by weight or somatotype). This ties in with the notion that past experiences influence future behaviour by allowing the individual to construct a notion of future behaviour based on the past and present experience. This is done in an adaptive manner that secures future benefits and avoids future difficulties (Martin-Ordas, Atance & Louw, 2012:209-210).

6.2 Stage 2: The observer

The data reveal that the catalyst which prompted the participants to start belly dancing was exposure to the art form through either the media or a live performance. This initial

exposure to belly dancing, which the participants reported as having left a lasting impression, was experienced as a pivotal moment in which they decided to pursue the art form. Some participants reported experiencing it as a spiritual experience.

According to Maslow (1970) occurrences of flow – or “peak experiences” (such as pivotal moments experienced by the observer while watching a belly dancer telling a story through her movements and gestures) are moments when the individual transfers outside their conventional state of consciousness to feel a sense of pleasant connection between physical and spiritual realities (Cowper & Michelle, 2013:100-101). In its broader sense, spirituality includes a sense of connection (such as the connection felt by the observer with regards the movement and story the dancer is depicting to music) to something bigger than the individuals themselves (Krentzman, s.a.:1). These peak experiences not only lift the individual (as does an observer while being mesmerised by the movements of a belly dancer performing), but also stimulate their creativity and convey power and purpose (the observer resolving to start belly dancing). When these peak experiences are particularly powerful, they promote feelings of unity with a higher connection, often perceived as having a sacred essence (Cowper & Michelle, 2013:100-101). A minority of the participants reported experiencing their initial exposure to belly dance as a spiritual moment.

Initial exposure to belly dancing was predominantly reported as being via live performances although a minority of participants stated that it was through the media. This acknowledges a pre-determined setting and atmosphere from where this exposure takes place. Studies have shown that the atmosphere (ambience) of a space constitutes a fundamental aspect of human experience of the world. Atmospheres fill a space we inhabit and may therefore define moments for individuals (Bille, Bjerregaard & Sorensen, 2014:31). In restaurants and theatres where most of the live interactions with belly dancers take place, the atmosphere is loaded with celebratory mode, smells of good food, friends, and pleasant music - all aspects symbolically associated with happiness, good times and fun, thus making it more likely that belly dancing would symbolically be constructed in a positive light. The ambience surrounding belly dance, with its rich repertoire of symbolically pregnant sounds, sights, gestures, dance movements, music and objects seems to have added to the positive manner in which the participants as observers experienced the belly dancer. Often, just before a belly

dancer emerges from the curtains or enters the restaurant to dance, the lights are dimmed and she enters with fire or a similar prop. This dimming of lights and fire accompaniment adds to the elements of mystery, sensuality and romance. Humans attach meaning to symbols based on their knowledge of the world through the various forms of communication, interaction and socialisation (Ritzer, 2010: 351; Wiley, 2014:303). The meaning assigned to the symbol of belly dance, as constructed and reconstructed during the non-verbal communication taking place between the belly dancer and the observer, including the atmosphere created during the initial exposure to belly dancing, is what ultimately prompted the participants to actively pursue belly dancing. It was that pivotal moment when the symbolic meaning constructed of belly dancing was congruent with their expectations of a dance form which was influenced by their past experiences.

Several participants who were exposed to belly dancing through printed media also reported it as a pivotal moment in which they decided to pursue belly dancing. Printed media also influences the behaviour of the reader when they are first exposed to a product or brand, because brands or products are built and developed through linking such with images and meanings which reside in a consumer's mind (Terech, 2018:46). The advertisements resonated with the images that the participant had constructed of belly dancing and that prompted her to pursue the art form.

Research suggests that repeated exposure to a stimulus is more likely to elicit a positive appraisal of that stimulus. However, past experience (past exposure influence) also impacts on how one would perceive the stimulus (Nanay, 2017:58-59; Martin-Ordas, Atance & Louw, 2012:209-210). Blumer (1969:4-5) stated that acting and roles form part of the social world which we experience and also interpret as we are interacting and experiencing it. According to Mead (*cited* in Ritzer, 2010:357-358) acting towards a stimulus does not elicit an automatic response, but rather the stimulus becomes an opportunity to act. The first stage of acting is that of impulse. This stage involves an immediate sensuous stimulation (image of belly dancing) which the actors (observers) experience as needing to do something about it. A stimulus (such as exposure to belly dance) does not elicit an automatic response from the observer, however sets the stage for an opportunity to act in a certain way based (in this case) on the inner construction

of preferred future experiences on the memory of past experiences (Nanay, 2017:58-59) and the symbolic meanings attached to belly dancing as a result of the positive exposure experience. For example, a participant who experienced a traumatic past event that prompted the construction of a negative meaning of her own body as a symbol (such as being overweight, and thus not suitable for dancing, as this notion has been constructed by the participant) may then be prompted by the stimulus of the belly dance performance (for example a woman who might be described as overweight, dances in a way perceived to be graceful, elegant and feminine), thus allowing the participant to construct a preferred image of a future self-associated with belly dancing. In these ways, the stimulus (exposure to belly dance) prompted the participants to actively seek (setting the stage for an opportunity to act) belly dancing teachers and studios in their area from where they could start participating in the art of belly dancing. This is in keeping with the central tenets of Symbolic Interactionism that human beings act towards things (such as belly dancing) based on the meanings they have constructed around them, and that such meanings are in turn constructed via processes of social interaction which are typified by symbols and gestures (such as a belly dance performance) which are modified via interpretative processes used by people in dealing with the things they encounter (Blumer, 1969:2). Put differently, reality is seen to be constructed through people's actions, which result from their definitions and interpretations of their daily interactions with other people (Tracy, 2013:51). In this case, participants constructed new realities that prompted them to actively seek belly dance teachers and take up the dance form, thus becoming belly dancers themselves.

The perceived images of feminine sensuality and grace evoked (constructed) in the participants whilst observing a belly dance performance that were commonly done by dancers with physiques that would not be typically regarded as 'thin', drew them to the dance form as a potential avenue of healing and reclaiming this lost sense of femininity. This may be attributed to the manner in which the preparatory past experiences of many of the participants left them with 'negative' constructions regarding their femininity and emotional well-being. This includes aspects of weight and body type which they constructed and reported as being unsuitable for other dance styles. Some of the participants reported that where prior exposure to other dance forms was often experienced with a concomitant degree of frustration, such as the inability to find a dance partner or not having an 'ideal' physique; this predisposed those participants to

have a strong positive response to witnessing belly dancing. This is because this dance form was seen as an avenue to pursue dance that would be free of these constraints such as having to find and retain a willing partner or having to conform to a given body shape. The data revealed that almost all of the participants reported problem-saturated constructions of their own weight and body size which they (in some instances) believed was a deterrent in pursuing other dance styles. Western society has for decades scrutinised the symbol of the female body, defining and redefining the ideal look for a healthy woman. Vast polarities exist between these socially constructed ideals, ranging from big breasts to flat chests and from slim hips to voluptuous hips (Burke, 2013:496).

The exposure to the belly dancer performing belly dance was reported by the participants to spark the need to reignite their innate femininity and sensuality, while still acknowledging the female body without somatotype dogma. Literature suggests that the dance style of ballet, which is also seen as feminine and elegant is traditionally associated with the emaciated look (Kelly, 2012:1), a somatotype that is expected and sought in a ballet dancer. By contrast, belly dancers are often portrayed by the media as midriff bearing, mysterious women with veils over their faces (Bannourah, 2016:1) who do not look emaciated, but embrace voluptuous curves. As such, greater room exists for a variety of body types to be accommodated within the context of this dance form (Luna, 2015:1). The data clearly supports this literature in that all the participants reported that they experienced belly dancing as a dance style in which dancers of any shape or size are accepted (as per the socialisation of belly dancers by belly dancers and belly dance teachers), which in itself constituted a positively constructed experience of this dance form. Abu-Odeh (1996:170) echoes this observation when offering the view that the visual experience of the solo dancer performing encapsulates the epitome of freedom, femininity, sexual expression and control. It is this meaning which is symbolically conveyed through her movements that the participants interpreted subjectively through their past experiences (Philippe & Koestner, 2011:1279) as compelling and which led them to pursue belly dancing. The visually compelling aspect of observing belly dancing was noted by virtually all the participants. This response is not unexpected, given that belly dancing is considered an artistic dance and is therefore defined by a complex system of highly gracefully stylised movements which convey a meaning and which the artist intentionally seeks to express and transfer to the audience (Vukadinovic, 2012:710).

However, this does not explain why not everyone exposed to belly dance through the media or a live performance in South Africa is prompted to start belly dancing. A possible reason may be related to religiously influenced constructions by institutions such as the Christian church regarding the appropriateness and suitability of the music, revealing clothing, cultural origins and movements associated with belly dance (Kraus, 2010:462). Previous research suggests that the Afrikaner culture is disposed to indoctrinate its young females to pursue abstinence until marriage, with such abstinence often extending to anything that may represent or simulate a sexual essence or element (Van Niekerk, 2017:1; Wicomb, 2008:73). In the context of Christianity, sexual purity and abstinence before marriage is strongly emphasised, as are male leadership, female subservience and reserved sexuality (Kraus, 2010:462). In the context of these views, the revealing clothing, expressive movements involving the hips and pelvis, assertive expressions of dance movements by females might seem to become symbols prompting the construction of negative views of this dance form as being sexually alluring and/or inappropriate (Tiggemann, Coutts & Clark, 2014:1999), and therefore may not be deemed as a suitable pass time for the more conservative Afrikaner woman. As such, the symbolically negotiated order that prevails in the context of many Christian Afrikaner and other women might serve as barrier to the construction of belly dancing in a positive light.

6.3 Stage 3: Experiences as student-practitioners

Once the participants decided to pursue belly dancing, their experiences and the construction thereof expanded beyond that of an observer to include that of a practitioner. As practitioners, the participants experienced belly dancing in three distinct domains, which included personal, communal and public domains. The personal realm was predominantly characterised by experiences of enhanced psychological well-being as well as experiences of enhanced physical well-being. The participants also stated that their experiences of belly dance within the personal realm included the experience of fulfilment of safety and belonging, a unique identity as a belly dancer and also a spiritual experience of belly dancing. Within the domain of communal experiences, the participants reported experiences of the sexual nature of belly dancing as well as the experiences of reality versus fantasy as a belly dance practitioner. Almost all of the participants reported the experience of a sisterhood within the belly dance community. The third domain identified from this study, the public realm, revealed experiences of

competitions by the participants as belly dance practitioners as well as their experiences of public performances.

6.3.1 Experiences in the personal sphere

The personal realm included experiences of enhanced psychological as well as physical well-being. This includes experiencing improvement in their flexibility and pelvic floor control, as well as easier birthing and mental well-being.

A very relevant and pertinent issue of modern times is the understanding of human health and health care. Medical sociology offers a unique approach to making sense of these phenomena via its focus on social and cultural conditions of human health and medicine (Polacek, 2013:119). Belly dance not only has distinct socio-cultural dimensions, but, based on the participants' views as well as existing literature on the topic (Sookoo, 2008:40), also has relevance to human health and a positive impact on well-being. A prominent finding that emerged from the data analysis is the repeated experience of improved physical well-being, with particular reference to the improvement of pelvic floor control. The bladder is housed in the pelvic floor and connected with suspensory connective tissue. When the pelvic floor loses its elasticity, or there is damage to the suspensory connective tissue, urinary incontinence may occur. This is characterised by the involuntary loss of urine (Papa Petros, 2007:2). Many of the participants reported that they experienced urine incontinence after giving birth and that through participation in belly dancing found a definite improvement in the curbing of involuntary loss of urine. Urine incontinence (due to stress induced from childbirth) is commonly treated through invasive probing requiring the contraction of the pelvic floor muscles (Newman & Laycock, 2008:92-93). Belly dancing is characterised by contractions and isolations of the pelvic floor as part of the movement articulation. This experience of improvement in pelvic floor control is attributed to the belly dance movements within the pelvis that require contraction and isolation which emulate what is done in a medical setting, but does so in a less invasive manner. Medical literature also states that contractions and isolations of the pelvic muscles as an exercise form in the months preceding giving birth prevent undue damage to the suspensory connective tissue of the pelvic floor (Otte, 2016:1). Belly dancing is historically considered a rite of passage from childhood into womanhood. This includes preparations for giving birth (Aleenah, 2016:1). The undulations and the contractions articulated during a belly

dance performance or class are emulative exercises for the strengthening of the pelvic floor. This explains why some of the participants experienced easier childbirth after having started practicing belly dancing prior to falling pregnant. It appears that these experiences echo many of the original constructions of belly dancing as being associated with matters such as childbirth (Cooper, 2004:7-8).

The findings of this study suggest that belly dance may provide an alternative means to supporting certain aspects of physical health. The analysis of the data revealed that many of the participants reported alleviation of pain in the neck and back which they attributed to their practice of belly dance. Pain restricts the movements and abilities of a person to function in their daily roles. However, the practice of belly dance has allowed the participants to function normally within their daily roles. The findings suggest that at least some South African women who belly dance construct the symbolic meaning of belly dancing as one that enhances their physical well-being.

The data further revealed that the participants constructed their experience of belly dance as fulfilling some of their needs for safety and belonging. According to Baumeister and Leary (*cited* in Taormina & Gao, 2013: 158) the need for belongingness is universal and found within every human society. The participants felt that they did not belong in other dance genres for various reasons as stated earlier. They assigned meaning to the symbol of belly dancing as a dance style which is accessible and open to all, and thereby constructed the view of the symbol (belly dance) as one that fulfils their needs for safety and belonging. Deprivation of the need to belong can lead to anxiety coupled with feelings of social isolation and rejection (Taormina & Gao, 2013:158), which was experienced by some participants when they were partaking in other dance genres which they experienced as restrictive. The participants reported that their associations with dancers in their dance class lead to forming friendships which extend outside the dance class. This finding concurs with notions put forward in literature on human needs which suggest that satisfaction of the belongingness or safety need allows for the person to begin forming pleasant interactions with others in their social circle (Taormina & Gao, 2013:158). As explained by the participants, these pleasant interactions, as well as their membership to the group were reported to give rise to the construction of a new and a shared identity as a belly dancer. The essence of the meaning to have a self refers to the continuous reflective processing that humans

engage in. They socially develop a sense of “me” through on-going interpersonal contact and interaction (as is the interaction between belly dancers and between belly dancers and their audience). This “me” is learned through evaluations of others, such as a belly dancer’s teachers, fellow dancers and audiences. The essence of the self therefore, is the internalised attitudes of others towards the “me” and how the “I” reacts to those attitudes (Dillon, 2014:274-276). By virtue of the belly dancers dancing together (social interaction) and through the learned evaluation of others, they construct meanings of the self and thereby a unique identity as belly dancers, which in turn fulfils their need of belonging to some degree.

Almost all of the participants reported enhanced psychological well-being which particularly included the experience of being more confident and feeling happy. It would seem that the elements identified in the theme of well-being are interrelated, as the experience of the enhanced physical well-being impacted on the experience of psychological well-being. Research shows that there is a positive association between exercise (such as belly dancing) and mental health or well-being (Evans, *et.al.* 2017:118-123). As the participants began to experience physical benefits such as losing weight, gaining fitness, and experiencing themselves as more feminine, they also felt happier and more confident, with improved self-esteem.

6.3.2 The communal sphere

The second domain from where the participants reported experiencing belly dance was from the communal realm. This realm encompasses all the associated community of belly dance teachers as well as fellow dancers. Within the communal realm, the duality between reality versus fantasy as a belly dance practitioner as well as the sexual nature of belly dance emerged as prominent themes.

South Africa is a new democracy with a history of forced segregation and stringent regulation on matters concerning sex and sexuality. The unmarried Afrikaner daughter represented sexual innocence, which was under strict control of the father and expected to lay dormant until marriage required her to perform conjugal duties. The married woman was seen as a “*Volksmoeder*” and was nothing more than a means to fulfil her national duty to reproduce and nurture the “*volk*” (Klausen, 2010:42-43). Belly dancing as a dance style was not considered a leisure activity a decent Afrikaner women should

pursue because of the sexual connotations attached to the dance style. Belly dance is practiced by many races and cultures which include those making up the demography of the new South African population. Since 1994, South Africa has been playing catch-up with the rest of the world by being exposed to more liberal policies on the display and representation of sex and sexuality (and racial interaction) (Posel, 2004:53).

Though participants generally regarded belly dancing as a sensual dance, most explicitly indicated that they did not believe that this dance form has a sexual side to it. This contradicts the historical origins of belly dance as a fertility rite and as a birthing ritual (Astaria, a.n:1; Cooper, 2004:7-8) It also contradicts statements by some of the participants who reported increased sexual well-being resulting from their experience as belly dance practitioners. As such, the findings reveal a dichotomous experience and conceptualisation of the feminine, sensual and sexual elements of belly dancing. These elements are often both explicitly denied but implicitly attested to by the same participants. This raises the question as to why the sexual elements of the dance are denied in spite of other statements which depict the contrary. According to Tiggemann, Coutts and Clark (2014:1999) belly dance is commonly viewed as sexually alluring in both the costuming and the movements. Not only does it allow the dancer to creatively express her sexuality, but also allows her to enjoy the subsequent sexualised attention, thereby promoting the liberation of women from restricting gender norms. The sexuality assemblage of the dancer is covered in a multiplicity of relations, which include appearance, family environment and sexual cultures. Different relations dominate different contexts, which produce a different set of capacities of the dancing body in each context (Austin, 2016:281-284). A large segment of those participants who stated that they did not believe that belly dancing was in any way sexual were from the Afrikaans culture. Previous research notes that the Afrikaner culture at times tends to indoctrinate its young females to pursue abstinence until they get married, and this abstinence often even extends to anything that may represent or simulate a sexual essence or element (Van Niekerk, 2017:1; Wicomb, 2008:73). This normative construction of sexuality outside of the context of marriage as 'taboo' might have contributed to these participants' conscious construction of belly dancing as being asexual. However, seen from a dramaturgical approach (Goffman, 1956:78), it also seems plausible that such claims performed in the setting of the interview represent

impression management associated with front-stage behaviour, and that such publically aired views might differ from privately held or 'back-stage' ones.

Most of the participants reported that they created an alter ego for dance performance. While performing as the alter ego, they reported that they would do things they would never otherwise do and that they felt they could be anything they wanted. Research shows that dance allows for a temporary shift within the sexual assemblage of a dancer. This pertains specifically to shifting beyond the definition of sexuality in negative terms. The environment of a dance studio, which is extended to the dance stage, allows for the construction of a new (symbolic) meaning of the sexual body (Austin, 2016:284-285). This causes incongruence between the natural appeal of the dance to the participants, and the cultural norms and values of the Afrikaner woman forbidding any public expression or enjoyment of a sexually charged activity (Van Niekerk, 1999:144-145). To bridge this dichotomy, it appears that the women formed an 'alter ego', supported by the elaborate dress, props and music associated with belly dancing. They adopted this 'alter-ego' during performances which seemed to have enabled them to justify their involvement in this dance form and 'absolve' them of personally engaging in any sexually 'tainted' activity. This finding can be well elucidated by the tenets of the dramaturgical approach, where individuals are regarded as being akin to actors and actresses on a stage, and where being in 'front-stage' contexts often elicits behaviours that might be at odds with 'back-stage' aspects of the individual's nature, values and beliefs (Goffman, 1956:78).

The analysis of the data revealed that most participants experienced their dance teachers and the teaching styles of these teachers as an integral aspect of belly dancing that elicited both positive and negative experiences. In some instances the belly dance teacher conducted herself in a manner that saw the student lose respect and leave to seek alternative teachers in the genre. Other teachers were reported as being mother figures that became friends and taught the value of the dance genre. Given that socialisation (process of interaction between the belly dance teachers and belly dance students) is the domain through which meanings are attached to symbols (Martignani, 2016:517; Ritzer, 2010:351; Wiley, 2014:303) (what the symbol of the teacher within the realm of belly dance, means to the student) the student will construct a reality of that teacher and belly dance, based on their experience during said

interaction. According to several participants, the degree of success as a teacher vests in whether or not she is professionally trained. Accordingly, these participants reported that in their experience, a professionally trained dance instructor is privy to certain important nuances regarding the art and the etiquette associated with the art of belly dance. The participants' experiences of dance instructors who were not professionally trained were that their articulation of the movements of this dance style was presented in a manner that was deemed unacceptable by these participants. However, where the dance teacher was professionally trained, the participants experienced their dancing in a mostly positive light, and reported building good relationships with their teachers. This positive experience was extended to the knowledge of the history and ethos of the dance style that the teacher taught them, which several participants experienced as empowering.

It seems that almost all participants constructed a meaning of 'sisterhood' around the symbol of their belly dance schools and their fellow dancers and teachers. More specifically, this construction appears to have emerged through a process of interactions with fellow dancers and teachers that were perceived as supportive, and as enhancing their sense of belonging, thus facilitating a sense of positive togetherness experienced as a sisterhood. In the contexts of the belly dance community participants appear to experience themselves as more free to construct and experience a preferred sense of self, based on the perceived acceptance they reported within the belly dance community where more rounded physiques and adherence to physical ideals of beauty or thinness were not part of the negotiated order. Stated more simply in the vernacular of the participants, the dance group becomes a place where they can be themselves and enjoy a shared interest with other like-minded women, as they know that they are not going to be judged on weight or dance style. There is no pressure to hide their femininity and sensuality, and they can express themselves uninhibited through the music, the moment and the dance.

However, as with many sisterhoods, participants also often reported that they experienced a variety of conflicts and challenges within the domain of this sisterhood. These seem to stem from clashes due to differing constructions of belly dance as an art form, and also from the observation that as the group of belly dancers in South Africa grows, the potential for conflict as a result of differing personalities and ages partaking

in the dance style increases. According to Kraus (2017:73) conflict between belly dancers, especially the younger dancers, is mostly due to disrespect of the world and of themselves. In other instances, the negative experiences marring the sense of sisterhood appear to stem from belly dancers viewing (constructing) fellow dancers as 'competition' rather than 'sisters'. Kraus (2017:72-73) maintains that this stems from the way women are socialised to not form strong bonds with other women and therefore view them as natural enemies.

6.3.3 The public sphere

The third realm identified from the research data from which the participants experience belly dance was that of the public realm. The public realm described the experiences of the participants as belly dance practitioners dealing with the public and within public settings.

The participants reported varied experiences associated with being exposed to and partaking in belly dance competitions. Competition, as a form of public engagement, is primarily experienced with and through fellow belly dancers. Shields, Funk and Bredemeier's (2016:447) analysis of the way that competition is internally construed by participants is highly applicable within the context of Symbolic Interactionism and serves to elucidate the possible underlying processes affecting participants' experiences of this dimension of the dance. These authors suggest that the meaning the contestant attributes to the win or lose structure of the contest will determine the behaviour of the contestant. Where the contestant processes the contest as a contest in partnership metaphor, the etymology of the word competition is fundamentally interpreted as a mutual quest for excellence. This is when the competition is interpreted as healthy by the participants and encouraged and supported. However, where the contestant processes the contest goals as striving against other participants, they interpret the etymology of the word competition as one where the opponent is metaphorically rendered into an enemy, thus behaving in a hostile negative manner. (Shields, Funk & Bredemeier, 2016:447). Some of the participants reported that their experience with belly dance competitions was an experience which alienated belly dancers. Not only did they experience endemic backstage verbal negativity from fellow belly dancers, but this behaviour also caused other dancers to renounce the dance genre completely.

Many of the participants describe how the public in their view has constructed a meaning of the symbol of belly dance which does not resonate with the symbolic meaning attached to belly dance by the participants themselves. According to the participants, some members of the public/audience constructed belly dancing as being an erotic dance. It is during an interactive interplay between two people (such as that between the belly dancer and the observer), that an uncertainty within the symbolic conversation presents itself which is attributed to the way the parties are defining and redefining each other's comments as they converse (or as gestures and symbols are exchanged during the non-verbal communication of dance) (Wiley, 2014:303). Based on this notion, it can be argued that the manner in which the dancer articulates the movements will to some extent determine how the dance is defined and experienced and interpreted by the observer (who themselves base this interpretation on their past experiences and worldview) which will in turn influence how the dancer interprets the reaction/behaviour of the observer and will then either continue with the trend in movement articulation or change the dance vocabulary. When asked about this, most participants felt that many dancers who are not properly and professionally trained tend to articulate the dance in an overtly erotic manner. Where the audience members are first exposed to belly dance by dancers who articulate the dance erotically, their construction of belly dancing commonly becomes one of a sexual dance. It was this sexual construction of the symbol of belly dance that encouraged the participants to actively engage with the public with the aim of modifying their constructions of belly dancing as sexual in nature. They specifically sought to do so through interactional processes such as media reports, interviews and verbally communicating with audiences at live performances. The subsequent creation of new meanings is therefore based on what the observer perceives as valuable to them during the interaction (Wiley, 2014:303), and how their behaviour towards the belly dancer is then reconstructed. This is evident from the data where some members of the public were reported to initially label the belly dancers as 'strippers', but after the interactive interplay through interviews and media reports reconstructed the symbolic meaning of belly dance to that of an art form.

6.4 Stage 4: Experience of belly dance as a teacher and/or professional performer

The fourth stage of belly dance occurs once the participant has progressed beyond the stage of a student-practitioner to that of a teacher and/or a professional performer.

Almost all of the participants in this study are currently teachers of belly dance, and one is a professional performer. The experiences associated with this fourth stage of belly dance were predominantly clustered in the communal realm. Within this realm, the participants reported experiences within vocational and competitive settings as professional performers as well as dance teachers.

The participants reported that teaching is a very demanding part of being a belly dance practitioner. Not only does being a teacher take up a lot of their time, it is also experienced as demanding when trying to balance a healthy family life with a busy dance schedule. Preparing for a performance is especially demanding as the teacher is responsible for the costuming, the performance choreographies as well as ensuring that the necessary props and music is ready on the night of the performance.

Literature suggests that it may be the growing attraction to the earning potential associated with dancing for corporate clients and restaurants that attracts the students to the art and the teachers to the profession (Dworin, 2008:1-2).

However, participants' experiences as teachers seemed to transcend the practicalities of teaching, as many appeared to construct a eudaimonic sense of meaning and value in relation to their teaching. Being employed not only reveals that an individual is valued as a worker but also that the "self" a person brings to the workplace is both shaped and expressed in their work (Fadyl & Payne, 2016:2166). Human capital – or the value within a role is more than the skill and work experience that the person possesses. It includes characteristics of the self and the ways that this is constructed in relation to the job roles. Interactions with the worker identity are also described in terms of prior social experiences and how the teacher as worker perceives the self (Fadyl & Payne, 2016:2166). The participants widely reported that as teachers they were able to 'heal' many of the students who danced with them, and that they received positive feedback from them in this regard. Through these interactional processes, teachers seemingly constructed an even more favourable sense of self.

In light of the above it could be speculated that with the inclusion of cultural dance in the South African curriculum (Department of Education, 2003:10), the prospect of an accessible vocation may add credibility to the subject choice.

7. LIMITATIONS

As with any research, this study was not without its limitations. Due to constraints pertaining to the reluctance on the part of some invited participants to take part in the study, the initial number of participants suggested for the study was not reached. However, given that data saturation was achieved within the first 10 interviews, this limitation would likely have been mitigated to a significant degree.

Furthermore, although the researcher actively sought to include belly dancers from all age groups ranging from eighteen years and older in the study, only participants in the age group of thirty years and older responded to the invitation. A follow up interview with the participants sought to identify the reason for this under-representation of the twenty year old age group. The participants responded unanimously, stating that they felt it is because the 20 year olds have other interests relevant to their life phase. This is also echoed in available research which maintains that women in their 20s are far more carefree and less inclined to experience life-affecting decisions than women in their 30s and older (George, 2015:1). Consequently, the experiences of dancers in their twenties are not well represented in the sample. It is accepted that different stages within the lifecycle of an individual influence their life roles and experiences (Louw *et al.*, 1998:510-512). It seems very probable that the belly dance related experiences of such women might differ from the experiences reported by the participants in this study.

Additionally, although the researcher sought to include the diverse racial groups within South Africa, only one person of mixed race responded to the invitation. As such, the experiences of non-white belly dancers are under-represented in the data and the findings.

The limitations outlined above also have implications for the transferability of the findings, which is likely limited to predominantly middle aged, white, South African women who belly dance.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the researcher sought to include participants from all cultural and racial groups within South Africa, only one participant of mixed race responded to the invitation.

Based on the findings from the present study it is recommended that further research be undertaken to explore the experiences of belly dancers among the various racial and cultural groups who belly dance in South Africa. An understanding of the experiences of belly dance between the various racial and cultural groups who belly dance in South Africa would be of benefit to sociologists, psychologists and therapists in better understanding women's experiences of belly dancing as well as how the benefits they receive from it differ culturally.

Despite the fact that all belly dancers from the age of eighteen onwards were invited to take part in the study, only participants from the thirty year old age group and older responded. It is therefore recommended that additional research be undertaken to investigate the experiences of women under the age of 30 who belly dance. This is particularly relevant when taking into account that cultural dance has been introduced into the South African school curriculum (Department of Education, 2003:10). This implies that younger girls will be exposed to belly dance and in the process construct meanings in relation to belly dancing. Due to the dichotomy that exists between the sensual and sexual essence of belly dance, it will be beneficial to explore how younger women experience these elements of belly dance as well as how practicing this form of dance may impact their construction of their own sense of gender identity, femininity and sexuality. Whilst it was not the aim and purpose of the present study to use theories of gender and/or feminist theoretical perspectives to elucidate the findings, future research could meaningfully explore women's experience of belly dancing through the lens of such theories.

The findings of the present study revealed that many of the participants experienced enhanced physical health benefits, which are currently considered anecdotal in this study as they are not grounded in empirical medical research. Whilst the benefits of belly dance in reducing urine incontinence induced by the stress of giving birth have been medically documented (So-Young, Seung-Suk, *et al.*, 2017:384), empirically exploring the value of the health benefits of belly dance associated with pain relief and mobility as reported by the participants may add credence to belly dancing as a complementary therapeutic or health maintenance modality for medical professionals to prescribe in addition to allopathic medicine in the treatment of certain pain and mobility ailments.

The findings reveal that belly dance represents a significant vocational avenue. Belly dance is not regulated in South Africa and the teaching and dancing thereof is at the discretion of the “teacher” and “dancer”. It is recommended that further research be done to determine whether regulating the industry would be beneficial to establishing a standard and code of ethics for the profession. With the inclusion of cultural dance in the South African curriculum (Department of Education, 2003:10) and belly dance being a cultural dance, an industry standard presentation of the dance would be valuable in ensuring that belly dance is taught uniformly across the provinces. Given that there exists a dichotomy surrounding the sensual/sexual expression of belly dance (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003:13-37) a regulation of the vocation may serve to promote a collectively agreed upon ethos for the dance style as well as how it should best be taught.

9. CONCLUSION

The aim of exploring the experiences of belly dancing among a selected sample of women who belly dance in South Africa guided this present study. From the extensive study of literature on belly dancing as well as the study of earlier research conducted on the topic of belly dancing, it would appear that there is a lack of research on women’s experiences of belly dancing in South Africa. This prompted the present study, which aimed to explore experiences of belly dancing via semi-structured interviews with fifteen purposively selected participants between the ages of thirty and fifty-nine, which were subsequently analysed using thematic analysis. The Symbolic Interactionist perspective was used as a framework to elucidate the findings as well as to contextualise them within the subject of sociology.

The findings suggest that belly dance is more than just a dance style, and although women experience belly dance as they are performing it, the experience is not limited to just the moment of the dance construction, but extends itself through this lived experience of the dance to the participant’s reconstruction of their own sense of self in relation to their body image, sensuality, sexuality, sense of femininity, as well as their vocational identity. Whilst not without some challenge, it appears that these experiences are predominantly positive, and associated with a significant number of physically, psychologically and socially beneficial outcomes.

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INTERVIEWS

Participant 1 (White female, age 36, bilingual). 26 July 2017.

Participant 2 (White female, age 37, English) 25 July 2017.

Participant 3 (White female, age 45, English) 29 July 2017.

Participant 4 (White female, age 47 English) 31 July 2017.

Participant 5 (White female, age 40, bilingual) 1 August 2017.

Participant 6 (Coloured female, age 46, bilingual) 12 August 2017.

Participant 7 (White female, age 57, Afrikaans) 12 August 2017.

Participant 8 (White female, age 36, bilingual) 21 August 2017.

Participant 9 (White female, age 40, bilingual) 23 August 2017.

Participant 10 (White female, age, 36 Afrikaans) 21 August 2017.

Participant 11 (White female, age 30, English) 21 August 2017.

Participant 13 (White female, age 54, Afrikaans) 21 August 2017.

Participant 14(White female, age 59, English) 21 August 2017.

Participant 15 (White female, age 34, Afrikaans) 21 August 2017.

Participant 16 (White female, age 37, English) 21 August 2017.

*Participant 12 asked to be deleted from this study due to the sudden loss of her mother– I had already allocated her participant numbering.

CHAPTER THREE

10. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter outlines the conclusions, recommendations, and limitations that emerged from the study. A discussion of the noteworthy conclusions drawn from the findings will be followed by an overview of the limitations that affected the study. The chapter ends with recommendations for future research based on the conclusions and limitations discussed.

10.1 Conclusion

The main research aim that guided the present study was to explore the experiences of a select sample of women who belly dance in South Africa. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 belly dancers who met the purposive sampling criteria, and data was subsequently analysed by means of thematic qualitative analysis. Four main stages participant experiences of belly dance were identified which were characterised by specific themes within each stage. The Symbolic Interactionist perspective was used as a framework to elucidate the findings as well as to contextualise them within the subject of sociology.

The four identified stages, each characterised by varied themes, suggest that belly dancing is a dance style experienced on multiple levels and through multiple perspectives, and that the experiences and the construction thereof are multi-layered and interrelated.

The findings suggest that stage one of belly dance, characterised by preparatory non-belly dance past experiences, appears to predispose the participants to construct various positive meanings in relation to belly dancing which in turn appears to have engendered susceptibility among the participants in relation to future participation in belly dancing. The data also revealed that the average age the participants started belly dance was 33 years. Turning 30 is a contentious age for women. The reality of the biological clock, career goals and domestication come to the fore and it is also a period when many changes within the spheres of career, domesticity and parenthood take place as a result of introspection (Edwards, 2017:1). Where with other dance styles, age

brings on a reduction in participation in most dance genres, especially after injury (Junck, Richardson, *et al.*, 2017:156-167), belly dancing seems to often attract older women. This suggests that women's experiences of belly dancing might likely be unique in some respects, when compared to experiences of other contemporary forms of dance. In particular, when viewed in the light of other themes that emerged from the study, it seems that belly dancing was experienced as enhancing self-esteem, body image and overall wellbeing among women, and that this was the case especially among women with less than perfect figures or those more advanced in age, as belly dancing provided a unique context within which they experienced acceptance.

The second stage of belly dance, as revealed by the data, pertains to the observer stage. It is within this stage that the participants describe their initial exposure to belly dance and how this became the pivotal moment when they realised they wanted to pursue belly dancing. Communication, interaction and socialisation are some of the ways in which humans attach meaning to symbols based on their knowledge of the world (Ritzer, 2010: 351; Wiley, 2014:303). During the non-verbal communication taking place between the belly dancer and the observer, a meaning is assigned to belly dance, which, in the context of Symbolic Interactionism, takes on the nature of a symbol that is laden with content and gestures (such as clothing, props, dance movements, music and more) to which symbolic meaning could be ascribed. This includes the atmosphere created during the initial exposure to belly dance. The construction of the symbolic meaning of belly dance as a traditional notion of feminine beauty, through the non-verbal communication taking place between the dancer and the observer, is what ultimately prompted most of the participants to actively pursue belly dancing. It was that catalytic initial exposure which the participants defined as a pivotal moment, when the symbolic meaning of belly dance, as reconstructed by the participants during the observation, prompted them to act by taking up belly dancing themselves.

The third stage of belly dance centres on the participants experiences as student practitioners. Once the participants started belly dancing their experiences of belly dance centred on three domains – a personal domain, a public domain as well as a communal domain.

Participants' personal experiences of belly dancing included enhanced well-being. This was a dualistic well-being as it pertained to both the psychological well-being as well as the physical well-being of the participants. Psychological well-being was mostly reported in terms of enhanced confidence, self-esteem, and self-love that was attributed to the confidence gained as a result of weight loss due to the exercise value of the dance genre as well as feeling accepted for who they are (even if their physiques were less than 'ideal'). The findings suggest that the experiences of enhanced physical well-being included improved pelvic floor control. The participants reported experiencing this enhanced control as a reduction in urinary incontinence which was brought about as a result of giving birth. The participants also experienced additional physical health benefits, which included pain alleviation and an increase in mobility. Although considered anecdotal in this study, as these claims have not been verified medically and/or empirically, previous clinical research has proven belly dance to positively influence pain alleviation and increase mobility (Castrillona, Hanneva, *et al.*, 2017:447-496). This suggests that belly dance may provide an alternative means to maintaining some aspects of female physical health as well as pain alleviation.

According to Polacek (2013:120), medical sociology is founded on the premise that biomedical explanations alone cannot account for the intricacies of human health, but that the latter also includes the sociological environment too. Social determinants of health have an effect on the health of individuals as well as social groups, and include social practices (such as belly dancing) and conditions, class position, economics, politics as well as religious factors (Cockerham 2011:4). The findings clearly show that belly dancing, as a social practice, adds value towards well-being, fitness and sexual expression for at least some South African women who belly dance.

Within the personal realm, participants also experienced belly dancing in its varied aspects pertaining to styles and props. Belly dancing encompasses many different expressions of articulating the movements as well as the use of props with which to enhance certain movements. Each of the various belly dance styles, such as tribal, classic, modern and folkloric comes with its own set of costuming and movement articulation. Not all the participants resonated with each different style of belly dance. As such, the findings from this study suggest that participants' experience of belly dancing was significantly influenced by the style of belly dancing they engaged in, as well as by

the concomitant props, music and clothing. The Symbolic Interactionist theory was employed to elucidate this finding by suggesting that these belly dancing accoutrements could be regarded as symbolically fertile phenomena around which different participants may likely construct differing meanings, which in turn would affect both their experience and actions in relation to belly dancing.

Within these different styles the participants also reported experiencing a unique identity as a belly dancer which stems from their construction of an identity of the self while interacting in their specific belly dance group. As explained by the participants, their pleasant interactions as members of their belly dance group were reported to give rise to the construction of a new and a shared identity as a belly dancer. This identity refers to the self which is constructed through the continuous reflective processing that humans engage in. Through on going interpersonal contact and interaction (as is the interaction between belly dancers and between the belly dancers and their audience) the “me” is constructed through the evaluations of others (how belly dancers evaluate themselves and how the audience evaluates belly dancers) and learned through the internalised attitudes of others towards the “me” and how the “I” reacts to those attitudes (Dillon, 2014:274-276). The participants also experienced the construction of the me - “the belly dancer” - as a symbol which not only unified them with their fellow dancers (the sisterhood) but also allowed them the opportunity to express their sexuality through the formation of an alter ego which allowed them to be who they could not be outside of belly dance.

The analysis of the data also suggested that the participants experienced a sense of sisterhood in belly dance, which was also experienced as fulfilling their needs for safety and belonging. This construction appears to have emerged through a process of interactions with fellow dancers and teachers that were perceived as supportive, enhancing their sense of belonging, thus facilitating a sense of positive togetherness which they experienced as a sisterhood. Within the context of the belly dance community, participants appear to experience themselves as more free to construct and reconstruct a preferred sense of self, based on the perceived acceptance they reported within the belly dance community, than they do in many other contexts. This includes the reconstruction of the symbol of an accepted physique as being more rounded, rather than an adherence to the previous construction of physical ideals of beauty as

that of a slender physique. Stated more simply in the vernacular of the participants, the dance group becomes a place where they can be themselves and enjoy a shared interest with other like-minded women without being judged in relation to their figures.

The analysis of the data revealed that most participants experienced their dance teachers and the teaching styles of these teachers as an integral aspect of belly dancing that elicited both positive and negative experiences. Where the teachers were professionally trained they not only taught the value of the dance genre, but allowed for the students to construct a positive symbolic meaning of belly dance and their teacher, with the resultant action that students remained with the teacher. However, where the dance teacher was professionally trained, the participants experienced their dancing in a mostly positive light, and reported building good relationships with their teachers.

The findings revealed that many of the participants stated that the movements could be performed from a sexual point of reference. This was contradictory to the insistence of many participants who labelled belly dancing as a sensual dance and explicitly negated its possible sexual nature. The ensuing dichotomy between the sensual and sexual nature of belly dance resulted in an incongruence within some of the participants in relation to constructions of the sexual nature of belly dancing and the sense of modesty and 'propriety' they were socialised into. In order to deal with the incongruence, the participants made use of an alter-ego when performing belly dancing in public. This appears to constitute a deliberate attempt, by the participants, to bring congruency between the indoctrinations of the Afrikaner culture pertaining to sexual expressions as well as their inner sexual desires which they try to suppress (van Niekerk, 1999:144-145). Their formation of the alter-ego is experienced as allowing the participants to do things which they would not do within the context of their regular daily life.

Many of the participants reported that they experienced negative public responses to their belly dancing. This typically involved audience members acting in ways that the participants constructed as sexually inappropriate, which the participants ascribed to a lack of knowledge about belly dancing among the public. This has necessitated the participants to engage in educating the public in an effort to facilitate a reconstruction of the meanings ascribed to belly dance by the public and their audiences. This includes hosting shows, doing media reports and interviews as well as holding public talks. This

interaction and communication with the public has created a platform from where the belly dancers, through verbal (talks) and non-verbal (dance) communication, work towards reconstructing the meaning the public have assigned to belly dance from that of a sexual dance to that of a sensual art form.

The fourth stage of belly dance is characterised by the experiences of the teacher/professional performer. The findings also indicate that for several participants, belly dancing, as a vocation, has opened up an avenue for employment. This is clearly exemplified in the data by the manner in which the participants stated that they not only worked their way up to teacher status, but also explored additional avenues within the dance genre. These avenues included 'healing' of the students whom they taught. This was experienced as meaningful by the participants and led to the construction of their role as belly dance teachers as being more than a mere 'job.' Progressing to the fourth stage of being a teacher or professional performer seems to have opened up an earning potential for the participants.

The negative experiences of belly dance seem to stem from the lack of regulation of the dance genre. This has allowed for anyone to teach or perform belly dance regardless of their ability and technical knowledge of the dance genre. This has a definite impact on the manner in which an audience constructs the symbolic meaning of belly dance after interaction with the dancer, contributing to the perpetuation of the dichotomy that exists between the sensual and sexual nature of belly dance as well as the manner in which an audience behaves towards a belly dancer. Resultantly, educating the public has become a priority for many of the professionally trained and certified belly dancers in South Africa.

In conclusion, despite some challenging experiences such as those outlined above, the findings suggest that the participants' overall experiences of belly dancing were predominantly of a positive nature. Furthermore, these experiences were not limited to the context of belly dancing, but often spilled over to other areas of participants' lives, such as their general health and physical well-being, emotional well-being, self-esteem and self-confidence, their sexual health and their sense of identity. Taken together, these findings suggest that belly dancing potentially offers many women a unique pathway towards a rich tapestry of (mostly positive) experience that whilst not without

some challenge, enhances various aspects of their emotional, psychological, physical, sexual and social well-being.

10.2 Implications

The findings presented in this study have a number of implications for theory and practice. These implications are discussed in this section.

In terms of theory, the findings would hopefully contribute to the understanding of the subjective experiences among women participating in belly dancing, thereby complementing existing research on the physical and psycho-social aspects of this dance genre. The findings also served to highlight areas for future research (as discussed in a later section).

By utilising the Symbolic Interactionist perspective as a framework to elucidate the findings, the study also makes some contribution towards bringing a sociological perspective to dance as a social phenomenon in general, and to belly dancing in particular.

In terms of practical implications, the findings of the study present a significant anecdotal indication that belly dancing might be effective in dealing with female health related matters, such as birthing and urinary incontinence as a result of the birthing process. In light of previous empirical research (So-Young, Seung-Suk, *et al.*, 2017:384), the findings add additional weight to the notion that belly dancing might serve as a valuable therapeutic adjunct to address these conditions, and that it would constitute a gentle, non-invasive alternative to the allopathic remedies.

The findings further indicate that belly dancing was often experienced as supporting women in healing after experiencing trauma or life crisis, as well as enhancing their sense of femininity, self-worth and sexuality both in cases of past trauma, as well as in general. These findings imply that mental-health professionals such as therapists and counsellors may fruitfully incorporate belly dancing as part of the therapy process in cases where the client might experience problems in relation to some aspects of their femininity, self-worth or sexuality.

Given the influence that belly dancing appears to have on women's sense of self-worth, femininity and sexuality, and given that many of the negative experiences reported by participants were associated with teachers who were not adequately trained, the findings suggest that the presence of ill-trained belly dance instructors might negatively impact the experience and well-being of belly dance students. This may detract from the many benefits that belly dancing can offer the participants. This is especially relevant when considering that cultural dancing has been brought into the South African academic curriculum (Department of Education, 2003:10) and that the experience of young girls exposed to belly dance would be significantly affected by the nature of the teaching they receive. As such, the findings would lend support to initiatives aimed at increasing the regulations in terms of teacher training and certification.

Given that the majority of participants involved in this study were able to make a living from belly dancing, it seems that the planned addition of cultural dance in the South African academic curriculum (Department of Education, 2003:10) may hold promise for creating employment. Given the high unemployment rate in South Africa (Compton *et al.*, 2005:1494-1502), and the dense populations found in the townships which lends itself to high crime rates and drug use (Mondal, 2016:12), the potential of belly dance as an easily accessible vocation (starting at school level), presents an opportunity not only for employment, but also a means to make belly dance accessible to a broader spectrum of the population group in South Africa.

10.3 Limitations

As with any research, the study was not without its limitations. Whilst the initial aim was to interview a larger number of participants, only fifteen belly dancers ultimately took part in the study. Constraints pertaining to limited time to complete the study as well as the reluctance of participants to take part in the study contributed to this eventuality. However, given that data saturation was achieved, this limitation would likely have been mitigated to a significant degree.

Furthermore, although the researcher actively sought to include belly dancers from all age groups ranging from twenty years and older, only participants in the age group of thirty years and older responded to the invitation. Consequently, the experiences of dancers in their twenties (as well as those over fifty) are not represented in the sample.

Given that the stage of the lifecycle that an individual is in will likely profoundly influence their life roles, needs, expectations, beliefs and experiences (Louw, van Ede, *et al.*, 1998:510-512), it seems very probable that the belly dance related experiences of such women might differ from the experiences reported by the participants in this study.

The researcher also sought to include participants from different race and cultural groups. Despite invitations issued, with the exception of one participant of mixed race, all participants were white. A follow up interview conducted with the participants was held with the specific intention to ascertain if there was a specific reason for the less-than-expected participation of members of other ethnic and cultural groups in this study. Many of the participants stated that it may be as a result of access to dancing given that the black students tend to live far from where the dance classes are held and therefore are less likely to be committed to the extent that they would partake in interviews for research purposes.

A further limitation of this study is that the transferability of the findings is limited to predominantly middle aged, white, South African women who belly dance. As such, the findings reported in this study cannot be assumed to apply in other contexts. It is however hoped that it would serve as a starting point for further research on the topic. The context of the participants and belly dancing have been described in sufficient detail to enable other researchers to make a determination as to whether or not the findings from this study might resonate with and transfer to their own contexts of interest.

10.4 Recommendations

This study highlighted a number of research areas within the belly dance genre that could be explored more fully which would hopefully add to the sociological body of knowledge of belly dance.

The underrepresentation of belly dancers in the age group of twenty to twenty nine year participants requires further research to fully explore the experiences of these belly dancers. Young adults (20 - 29 year olds) are at a life stage where they are completing their studies and starting with their careers and domestic arrangements. The need to form bonds such as those symbolically interpreted by the participants as a sisterhood may stem from different needs to those of the older belly dancer. Their construction of

the dichotomous elements between the sensual and sexual nature of belly dance may be experienced differently to the older belly dancer given that the 20-29 year old age group is typically more hedonistic and experimental in their sexuality (Brinkhurst-Cuff, Witt, *et al.*, 2017:1) than the older age groups.

Women experience sexuality and sensuality differently as they age and mature (Brinkhurst-Cuff, Witt, *et al.*, 2017:1). The sexual element of belly dancing needs to be explored in more depth because of the dichotomy that exists both within existing literature as well as the experiences of many of the participants. In particular, the findings suggest that belly dancing might offer a socially acceptable avenue for women to access and express their innate sensuality in a way that also positively impacts their sexuality. As such, the role and potential value that belly dancing can play in terms of sexual well-being appears to represent a fruitful avenue for future research.

Similarly, research needs to be conducted among different racial and cultural groups, to examine how their experiences and constructions of belly dancing might differ from those reported by the participants in the present study. Given that belly dancing includes matters such as sensuality and sexuality, it seems very likely that a woman's experience of this form of dance would depend on how these aspects of the dance intersect with her cultural and racial identity and beliefs, the stage of life she is in, and her religious beliefs.

Belly dancing is not only practiced by women it is also danced by men in Egypt and the Middle East (Hooi, 2015). Men and women differ biologically, sociologically as well as emotionally (Newman, 2018:1) which understandably renders differences in construction of symbolic meanings attached to objects as well as experiences. Although gender related aspects of belly dance were not investigated as it was not the aim of this study, further research into the gender related aspects of belly dance may provide valuable insights into better understanding the construction of the symbolic meaning of belly dance between men and women who belly dance in South Africa.

In a related way, whilst it was not the aim of the present study to apply feminist and/or gender-related theoretical perspectives to the findings, given that the experience of belly dancing seems to significantly intersect with women's constructions of their own

sensuality, sexuality and femininity, there could be significant value in exploring belly dancing through these theoretical lenses.

Literature suggests that most dancers stop dancing after the age of thirty, especially after sustaining injuries (Junck, Richardson, *et al.*, 2017:156). However this study reveals that belly dancing appears to predominantly attract dancers older than the age of thirty. Many of the participants reported that belly dancing helped with mobility and pain alleviation associated with various ailments or non-dance related injuries. It is therefore recommended that further research be done to ascertain the types of injuries and ailments that are common to ladies who seek belly dance for pain alleviation and mobility problems and how belly dance training (if any) differs from other mainstream dance styles in dealing with them. An understanding of these differences may assist dance teachers in improving methods of teaching movements that potentially allow for alternative methods of assisting with related injury healing. Specifically, participants' experiences of the relationship between the health risks (e.g. via possible or actual injuries) versus the health benefits associated with belly dance could be compared to the perceived or experienced injury/risk-benefit ratio of other dance forms, such as ballet. Whilst this would need to be conformed in future studies, the fact that belly dancing typically attracts an older age group when compared to other dance forms, suggests that a favourable (actual or perceived) health benefit-to-health risk/injury ratio might be a significant distinguishing aspect characterising the experience of belly dance.

The data further revealed that there are different styles within the belly dance genre and that not all the participants enjoyed all the styles. It is therefore recommended that further research be done to describe the experiences of the dancers within each style and why certain styles within the belly dance genre attract certain dancers and not others.

The data also revealed that there is a lack of professional training of belly dance teachers in South Africa due to the non-regulation of belly dance. With the inclusion of cultural dance within the South African school curriculum (Department of Education, 2003:10) it is recommended that further research be done into the regulation of the belly dance genre which includes a comprehensive curriculum and a level standard required

by all who wish to teach the genre. This will not only assist in deferring from a negative construction of the symbol of belly dance, but also ensure that training in the dance genre is professional and adequate.

10.5 Summary

This chapter provided a brief review of the research process and the main findings that emerged from the study. Following this, the most significant conclusions and implications emanating from the study were outlined. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the limitations that affected the study, as well as recommendations for future studies based on these limitations.

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Appendix A: Ethics approval certificate



ETHICS APPROVAL CERTIFICATE OF STUDY

Based on approval by the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) on 19/07/2017 after being reviewed at the meeting held on 18/07/2017, the North-West University Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (NWU-IRERC) hereby approves your study as indicated below. This implies that the NWU-IRERC grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Project title: A qualitative exploration of women's experiences of Belly Dancing in South Africa																	
Project Leader/Supervisor: Prof. H.W. Nell																	
Student: Ms M Basson																	
Ethics number:	<table border="1"><tr><td>N</td><td>W</td><td>U</td><td>-</td><td>H</td><td>S</td><td>-</td><td>2</td><td>0</td><td>1</td><td>7</td><td>-</td><td>0</td><td>1</td><td>0</td><td>3</td></tr></table>	N	W	U	-	H	S	-	2	0	1	7	-	0	1	0	3
N	W	U	-	H	S	-	2	0	1	7	-	0	1	0	3		
Application Type: Single study																	
Commencement date: 2017-07-19	Expiry date: 2020-07-19																
Risk:	Low																

Special conditions of the approval (if applicable):

- Translation of the informed consent document to the languages applicable to the study participants should be submitted to the BaSSREC (if applicable).
- Any research at governmental or private institutions, permission must still be obtained from relevant authorities and provided to the BaSSREC. Ethics approval is required BEFORE approval can be obtained from these authorities.

General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, please note the following:

- The project leader (principal investigator) must report in the prescribed format to the NWU-IRERC via BaSSREC:
 - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the progress of the study, and upon completion of the project
 - without any delay in case of any adverse event (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the project.
 - Annually a number of projects may be randomly selected for an external audit.
- The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Would any changes to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the study leader must apply for approval of these changes at the BaSSREC. Would there be deviation from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such changes, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the project may be started. Would the project have to continue after the expiry date, a new application must be made to the NWU-IRERC via BaSSREC and new approval received before or on the expiry date.
- In the interest of ethical responsibility the NWU-IRERC and BaSSREC retains the right to:
 - request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;
 - to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process.
 - withdraw or postpone approval if:
 - any unethical principles or practices of the project are revealed or suspected;
 - it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the BaSSREC or that information has been false or misrepresented;
 - the required annual report and reporting of adverse events was not done timely and accurately;
 - new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.
- BaSSREC can be contacted for further information or any report templates via Chairman@baassrec.nwu.ac.za or 018 210 3483.

The IRERC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your project. Please do not hesitate to contact the IRERC or BaSSREC for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely

Linda du Plessis
Digitally signed by Linda du Plessis
(CN=Linda du Plessis, o=IRERC,
ou=North West University)
DN: cn=Linda du Plessis, o=IRERC,
ou=North West University

Prof Linda du Plessis

Chair NWU Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (IRERC)

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LEAFLET

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT: A qualitative exploration of women's experiences of belly dancing in South Africa

REFERENCE NUMBERS:

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Marina Basson

ADDRESS: 36 Lapwing Street, 3 Rivers East, Vereeniging, GAUTENG

CONTACT NUMBER: 076 836 4065

You responded to the national invitation for belly dancers to take part in a research project that forms part of the researchers MA: Medical Sociology degree. Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this project. Please ask the researcher any questions about any part of this project that you do not fully understand. It is very important that you are fully satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how you could be involved. Also, your participation is **entirely voluntary** and you are free to exit at any time. If you exit, it will not affect you negatively in any way whatsoever. Prior to publication of the study's results (or the point that publication is in process), you may also withdraw the data you generate.

This study has been approved by the **Humanities and Health Research Ethics Committee (HHREC) of the Faculty of Humanities of the North-West University (NWU– HS- 2017-0103)** and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of the international Declaration of Helsinki and the ethical guidelines of the National Health Research Ethics Council. It might be necessary for the research ethics committee members or relevant authorities to inspect the research records to make sure that we (the researchers) are conducting research in an ethical manner.

What is this research study all about?

The objective of this research is to better understand South African women's experience of belly dance. More specifically, the study aims to explore why women select belly dance as a dance form and how this influences their well-being.

This will involve telephonic interviews with pre-selected questions and any additional questions that may arise out of the answers from the interview questions. The researcher has been trained to conduct interviews.

Approximately 15-30 participants will be included in this study.

Why have you been invited to participate?

You have been selected to participate because you responded to an invitation extended to South African belly dance schools inviting those who are interested to take part in the study.

You have also complied with the inclusion criteria, which is: that you are a South African woman who is actively practicing belly dance.

What will your responsibilities be?

You will be expected to answer questions regarding your experience of belly dancing during a telephonic interview.

The interview will last approximately 20 to 50 minutes.

It will be scheduled at a time and place convenient to you.

The interview will be recorded so that the researcher can transcribe it at a later stage.

You will not be expected to take part in any follow up activities.

The following questions will be asked in addition to questions that may arise out of the interview:

What prompted you to start belly dancing?

How old were you when you started belly dancing?

How does belly dancing make you feel?

Which aspects of belly dancing do you find most enjoyable? (music, movements, props, expression in music, freedom of expression, femininity).

How has belly dance influenced your life?

How does your family feel about you belly dancing? How do you deal with that?

Have you ever had any negative experiences or experienced any internal or interpersonal conflict in relation to belly dancing? If so, would you mind telling me what happened?

At what level of belly dance would you say that you are currently?

Has there been a progression or evolution as you have moved through the levels in your belly dancing?

Whilst the experience of reflecting on the value that belly dance has for you might likely be positive, your participation will hold no direct benefits for you.

The indirect benefit will hopefully be a better understanding of women's experience of belly dance which may be used by therapists, general public and prospective dance teachers wanting a better understanding of the genre belly dance.

Are there risks involved in your taking part in this research and how will these be managed?

The risks in this study, and how these will be managed, are summarised in the table below:

<i>Probable/possible risks/discomforts</i>	<i>Strategies to minimize risk/discomfort</i>
Due to you having to spend about 50 minutes completing the interview telephonically, it is possible that you may become bored.	The interviewer will ask every 20 minutes if the participant is still ok and if they require a break in which case the interviewer will phone back after an agreed time.
Due to the length of time on the phone, there may be an inconvenience for the participant as the call may interfere with daily routine.	The participant may at any time request a break or call back in order to deal with possible unforeseen distractions.

However, we do believe that the benefits to science (as noted in the previous section) outweigh the risks we have listed. If you disagree, then please feel free not to participate in this study. We will respect your decision.

Who will have access to the data?

Reporting of findings will be anonymous by means of reporting group findings and not individual findings. When referring to what participants said in any research reports, pseudonyms or other non-identifying labels (e.g. 'Participant 1') will be used (unless you expressly wish to have your identity acknowledged, in which case your name will be used in accordance with your wishes).

Only the researchers and her supervisor will have access to identifying data. Data will be kept safe and secure by locking hard copies and electronic recordings in a safe in the researcher's house.

Data will be stored for 5 years in the safe of the researcher.

What will happen to the data?

The data from this study will be reported in the following ways:

It will be written up as a research article (as part of a mini-dissertation) in fulfilment of the researcher's MA: Medical Sociology degree.

In all of this reporting, you will not be personally identified. This means that the reporting will not include your name or details that will help others to know that you participated.

The data will be reused for secondary research involving the same general topic (centring on various aspects of women's experience of belly dance). This will be undertaken by the researcher at a later stage.

Will you be paid/compensated to take part in this study and are there any costs involved?

No, you will not be paid/compensated to take part in the study. Due to the fact that you will be interviewed telephonically at a time and place convenient to you, you should not incur any expense in lieu of this research.

How will you know about the findings?

The general findings of the research will be shared with you by means of a summary of the findings via email once the article has been approved and published.

Is there anything else that you should know or do?

You can contact Ms Maryka Pretorius on 082 521 6740 or email Marina Basson at marina@cairomoonbellydance.co.za if you have any further queries or encounter any problems.

You can contact the chair of the Humanities and Health Research Ethics Committee (Prof Linda Theron) at 016 910 3076 or Linda.theron@nwu.ac.za if you have any concerns or complaints that have not been adequately addressed by the researcher.

You can also contact, the co-chair, Prof Tumi Khumalo (016 910 3397 or Tumi.khumalo@nwu.ac.za). You can leave a message for either Linda or Tumi with Ms Daleen Claasens (016 910 30441)

You will receive a copy of this information and consent form for your own records.