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navigating disrupted habitus and identity loss/evolution in a UK  
context**

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**Professional contemporary dancers becoming mothers: navigating disrupted *habitus* and identity loss/evolution in a UK context**  
**Angela Pickard and Anna Ehnold-Danailov**

*There is a paucity of research into female-identifying dancers as parents, how the transition from dancer to pregnancy to parent is managed, and whether and how a dancing parent can maintain a career in dance. This paper shares findings from a qualitative interview study with (n=30), predominantly female professional contemporary dancers that have become parents and are working within the contemporary dance industry in the UK. It uses Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual framework of belief and practice to make greater sense of how the dancers navigate becoming parents and the disruption to their dancer's habitus and embodied identity, as they attempt to manage work-family conflicts within contemporary dance. Findings reveal that when the dancers became a parent the disrupted taken-for-granted norms and expectations of the dancer's habitus and identity as a dancer, intensified the fragility of lives and livelihoods and brought new physical, psychological, social and economic vulnerabilities. The dancers in the study shared experiences of barriers, but also enablers for dancers that are parents within the contemporary dance industry in the UK, with examples of managing transition, evolution of identities and capital gain.*

**Introduction**

A professional dancer's sense of self and their life as a dancer are inextricably intertwined through years of socialisation in training, often from a young age, and in the profession, so identity is deeply embedded within the dancers' body and embodied sense of self. The cultural norms and expectations of the dance industry are that dancing is not just what dancers do, it is who and what they become, inside and outside the profession. The highly competitive, precarious, social world of professional contemporary dance places artistic, physical, technical and psychological demands, and dancers often work long hours and push their bodies in the studio and in performance. Contemporary dancers work predominantly in a self-employed, freelance, short-term contract capacity, so livelihoods depend particularly on their physical ability and taken-for-granted abilities of the body (van Assche, 2016, Author, 2020, de Peuter *et al* 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic has magnified key issues related to the sustainability of the contemporary dance industry in the UK, including occupational structural expectations and wellbeing of the workforce, a lack of demographic data pertaining to inclusivity and diversity in the sector, a paucity in understanding retention and loss and working/studio policies, practices and conditions of dancers. In 2021 approximately 17,100 people identified as being employed as dance artists (dancers and/or choreographers) in the UK (Office for Statistics) and in 2020 this was 18,300, so there has been a significant talent loss. The contemporary dance landscape in the UK is complex including larger companies to small groups, some wholly dependent on public or private financial support with dancers often being employed on a project basis. Some dance artists have portfolio careers as dancers and choreographers and may also do other work outside the arts. The intensity of project funding and working means that studio-based work load for dancers can increase up to 10 hours per day with proximity to performance periods (Wyon, 2010). This workload is likely to be a contributing factor to dancers self-reported high levels of fatigue, injury rates, burnout (Koutedakis, 2000) and talent loss (Hong and Milgram, 2011). Dependency on freelance, short-term contracts, portfolio

working, public funding and physical and psychological vulnerability can become barriers that deter or prevent career progression and workforce longevity (Brook *et al.*, 2018).

Work undertaken some time ago in 2007 (Dance UK) and 2009 (Burns and Harrison; Vincent Dance Theatre) suggested that the UK contemporary dance industry is predominantly female, under 35 years and that there was a high attrition rate of mature dancers. One reason cited for this talent loss of the more mature dancer was motherhood, and that the main childcare responsibilities in this study lay predominantly with female-identifying dancers. Childcare challenges due to the irregularity of work hours and touring had an impact on ability to sustain a dance career (Vincent Dance Theatre, 2009). Although the Burns and Harrison (2009) report, *A window on dance*, and Vincent Dance Theatre (2009) report, *Pregnancy and parenthood: The dancer's perspective* are now dated, they still appear to have relevance today as the majority of professional contemporary dancers in the UK identify as women under 34 years (Office for Statistics). There is a paucity of research into dancers in pregnancy and dancers that are mothers that has captured the barriers and challenges that are faced by female identifying professional contemporary dancers. Research undertaken within the wider performing arts during the Covid-19 pandemic, by Parents in the Performing Arts (PiPA) in 2020, found that 72% of performing artists that were parents responding to their survey, were considering leaving their profession. Furthermore, 7 out of 10 people with caring responsibilities regularly turned down work and 4 out of 10 have left their careers due to caring responsibilities. Similarly, Musil *et al.* (2022) suggest that a number of dancers in their US study made a decision to leave the workforce until their children reached school age, often due to the expense of childcare. Pregnancy and parenthood can impact professional dancers' careers socially, financially, physically and psychologically (Sanders, 2008; Mallina, 2009; Musil *et al.*, 2022) and this may prevent continuation, career progression and longevity in the profession.

### ***Embodiment***

Embodiment can be defined as the bringing together of body and mind and the mode by which human beings practically and holistically engage with, navigate and interpret social and cultural experiences. It is perception, memory, history, culture and identity, and it is through the body that understanding and meaning of the self and others is developed. Dancers experience the world somatically and build embodied knowledge within the holistic body. Physical lived experiences and identity are entwined in body and movement, and there is no separation between body and mind. The mind according to Dewey, (2005), is the reflective action of the body. For a dancer, transactions in the world, and connectedness to others (Sheets-Johnstone, 2014), are narrated through, in, with and by the body/somatic knowledge, 'within a matrix of mind, body and environment' (Akinleye, 2016:180). According to Merleau-Ponty (1962) perceptual facilities are patterned across our experiences and that experience is a culturally engrained interpretation of being, what is perceived is determined by what we do. This acquired embodied knowledge or *habitus*, according to Bourdieu, places dancers in a position of power and security within the dance world.

### ***Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual framework***

Dancers have trained, often from a young age, to build their physical and social capital within the field of professional dance, and in doing so have developed their *habitus*. *Habitus* is a term used by Pierre Bourdieu to describe how a social world is inscribed on the body, as an acquired set of dispositions, beliefs and habits 'in things and in minds' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) that cultivate particular behaviours and become ingrained (Bourdieu, 1993:86). The *habitus* shapes a person's or players attitudes and actions as bodily belief and in understanding 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu, 1990) and is practiced as a 'logic of practice' (*ibid*) thereby producing

and reproducing the *habitus* as taken-for granted cultural (field) norms, values and expectations. The *habitus* is inseparable from the field: a social arena and a structured system of social positions, and within the field, the players compete for resources and power by drawing on their capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The body is a core part of the dancers' *habitus* and 'the way people treat their bodies reveals the deepest dispositions of the *habitus*' (Bourdieu, 1984: 190). The body expresses the field in which it is inhabited, and value is retained, accumulated, appropriated or lost as a process of capital as symbolic exchange in the social arena, through particular ways of being, doing and thinking within the *habitus*.

This paper contributes to existing conversations that use Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual framework to make greater sense of the social world of dance (e.g. Author, 2015, 2020, 2021; Rimmer, 2017; Styrike, 2013; Alexias and Dimitropoulou, 2011; Risner and Stinson, 2010; Wainwright and Turner, 2005; 2006).

### ***Pregnancy and motherhood- impacts on the habitus***

Dancers are strong, supple and perform with speed and impressive stamina (Koutedakis and Sharp, 1999). Physically, during pregnancy, the female body changes each trimester (and sometimes daily) in size and shape; this can affect, for example, co-ordination, control, balance (Alter, 2004), use of the pelvis and abdominals (McCoid, Harris, and Rafiefar, 2013; Quin *et al*, 2015), pain in hip and lower extremities (Pivarnik *et al*, 2006), aerobic activity (Ingram *et al*, 2021) and proprioception. However, there is an increase in flexibility due to the hormone relaxin (Quin *et al*, 2015). For many dancers, the size, shape and image of their body is a core part of their look, feel and identity as a dancer. As aesthetic athletes, professional dancers have increased vulnerability to body changes and to more serious consequences such as eating disorders, with three times higher risk than non-dancers (Gorrell, *et al*, 2021). Dancers hone their bodily shape, strength and ability and this involves daily practices. They may have felt the need to maintain a particular body weight over a period of years to gain work, according to cultural expectations. Body changes in pregnancy and post-natal may have physical but can also have psychological impacts as dancers can struggle to accept and adapt to bodily changes. Discontent with weight and shape is a salient risk factor for low body image (Stice and Shaw, (2002) and may be exacerbated among elite aesthetic athletes (Sundgot-Borgen and Torstveit, (2004). In addition, dancers may have a tendency to exploit the effects of relaxin and the increased looseness and flexibility they have to push the body in new ranges of motion (Quin *et al*, 2015:222).

Socially, professional contemporary dancers are used to working on a project basis, often intensively and for long, unsociable hours in rehearsals and performances, and may also commute or tour work across the UK and abroad. Dancers adapt quickly to working with different dancers, companies, choreographers and in a variety of venues. A company of dancers, even if newly formed, is often close-knit as many hours are spent together in close proximity. The dance industry in the UK is relatively small so dancers tend to meet each other at auditions, dance jobs or at performances or events, and there is a thriving contemporary dance scene and community. Professional dancers have a *habitus* with high exchange value as physical and social capital in the field of contemporary dance. They are confident with the 'rules of the game' and can navigate the expected norms, values, and ways of working in the industry. Pregnant dancers and dancers as mothers, with responsibilities outside dance, are still considered an exception in the field of contemporary dance in the UK, rather than a norm. Therefore, a dancer that is pregnant or a mother can experience a considerable loss of identity as well as social community. The disruption to the known *habitus* and consequently transition, is an example of 'fractured identities' with some similarities to the psychological impact of

coping with long-term injury, illness, ageing or retirement (e.g Wainwright, Williams and Turner 2005; 2006, Shupp, 2022).

## Methods

In this exploratory study dance artists' experiential frames of reference (Schlesinger and Wealde, 2012) were valued and it is suggested that this study contributes to the need to include dance artists' voices in research about dance (Stinson, 1990; Gray and Kunkel, 2001; Grau, 2007). As a useful way to understand the lived experiences of the dancers, qualitative interviews were used. These were on-line interviews over a period of 5 months in 2021 with (n=30) professional contemporary dancers, that were pregnant or a parent, using the video conferencing tool *Zoom*. On-line interviews were considered the most efficient and flexible choice, given caring responsibilities. Ethical approval was given via the University research committee.

Dancers were invited to volunteer to be part of the study, via an open call shared across the UK via social media platforms and networks. The research sample were representative of the contemporary dance sector in the UK and included a range of ages, gender, ethnicity and disability. Dancers were sent the interview questions before the interview and each semi-structured interview lasted between 45 minutes'-1 hour, all were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The dancers could opt out at any time, did not have to answer any questions where they were not comfortable, knew the study was voluntary and that their answers were confidential and anonymised through the use of pseudonyms. The dancers were as follows:

**Table 1** Participants in study *Professional contemporary dancers becoming parents: navigating disrupted habitus, embodied identity(ies) and work-family conflicts*

The transcriptions were content analysed after multiple readings. Open coding created units of analysis and categories as emergent themes (Polit and Beck, 2012; Creswell, 2013). The narrative responses and words expressed by the dancers illuminated general conceptual themes and the frequency of themes and sub-themes became the focus to identify narratives that revealed experiences of the dancers (Elliott and Bonsali, 2018). Final stage analysis occurred as the findings were interpreted. Data was also shared with two other research colleagues for triangulation, trustworthiness and reliability. Transcription software and content analysis such as NVivo8 were not used, because the physical analysis connected with the researcher's need to engage with the felt sensation of the research process.

There are limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. Firstly, this research shares voices from female identifying dancers and their experiences of pregnancy and motherhood. Male-identifying dancers that are fathers would have stories to tell, but it has not been possible for us to do this in this study as fewer male dancers took part, and when they did, their female partners were the ones that undertook the lion share of caring responsibilities. There is scope for further research that focuses on the experiences of male-identifying fathers, as there is also a paucity of research that captures their voices and experiences. Another limitation is that this is a small-scale study as representative of female dancers working in contemporary dance in the UK. Although the dancers volunteered to be part of the study, there was limited opportunity to build rapport and trust as for some, this was the first time they had met a researcher or engaged in a research project. Further, the dancers appeared comfortable and open to sharing deep, personal and sometimes complex experiences, however, some may not have revealed aspects of their experiences due to the lack of relationship with the researcher. I did not share my own experiences of pregnancy or being a mother with a career in dance. It is the intention to return to the dancers involved in this research, to share findings and engage them in further

research. It should also be acknowledged that although there were similar experiences, each dancer's pregnancy and experience of being a parent is different.

## **Findings**

### ***Body and identity***

Professional dancers have invested much time, energy and effort to become dancers. They may have made sacrifices in other areas of life such as friendships, social events and wider experiences to engage in training and the process of becoming a dancer (Author, 2015). From a young age the shape, size and use of the body will have become embedded as a core part of the dancer's identity and the body's ability will have become taken for granted. This commitment as a *habitus* of the body and mind can feel at odds with the norms and expectations of the field of contemporary dance and with expectations with wider society, as the dancer Martha describes:

Dance is very good at making people feel, from a young age, that they must be disciplined, professional and committed. They must give their body and soul to dance and live for dance. This is amazing because it helps you become a dancer and build your identity, network and work. However, we all forget that you might want to be part of wider society at some stage in your life, as you get older, to have a partner, to have a child. The sector is not set up for dance artists to do anything but dance (Martha, female, 32 years).

Another dancer, Nadia, spoke about the adjustment to changes in the body during pregnancy and post-natal. These had physical but also psychological impacts on body image:

Dance is embodied so the body and mind work together and when the body does not look or feel as it once did, it is hard to get your head around and this is a deep challenge mentally. If all were a bit more patient and understanding I would feel more confident but I think I need to stop working at the moment until I'm back as I was. I feel embarrassed that I still have a tummy and I feel heavy and lumpy (Nadia, female, 27 years).

The expectation that the dancer's body will fit particular body expectations can be stressful for dancers that are trying to cope and navigate an 'unknown' body that does not fit such expectations. The lack of understanding in the dance industry raised by Nadia led to talent loss, perhaps in the short-term or longer-term. Some similar concerns were raised by a male dancer, Kenny:

My wife and I are both dancers. When we had our child, I was able to step right back where I was but she took a while to shed the baby weight, she found it very challenging to exercise or do any classes as she was feeding. She was fatigued and got very low. She had worked for years to be the peak of fitness and aesthetic beauty and then she watched herself changing and then she was a different person. She didn't look or feel like a dancer. Being a dancer was what she was, then she was a mum...There is an expectation to look a certain shape and size in the industry and she knew she would not be accepted or given work if she didn't fit that expectation. She thought she would pop back quickly but she gained a lot of weight and with the feeding, struggled to have time to think about fitness or dance...- not knowing if she would even dance again. It was a bit like being out with an injury. She felt embarrassed that she did not snap back. In dance, you feel a sense of laziness as it is so disciplined, but she had no control over her body and its shape suddenly. Being freelance she couldn't respond to an invite for

work as she did not feel ready. Her technique was there but she didn't feel she looked right and importantly, she just didn't feel right, she didn't feel like she fitted (Kenny, male, 33 years).

The feeling of knowing and being in control is significant as the disruption to the known 'rules of the game' and *habitus* made the dancer described above consider herself not worthy to enter or continue to play the game. She felt that she did not fit and lacked the necessary capital or exchange value.

One dancer shared how when she was pregnant she felt shamed by a female choreographer because of a lack of understanding of how pregnancy affects the body:

I was told I was too fat, I had put on too much weight. The choreographer, a female, knew I was pregnant and it was a healthy pregnancy. They contracted me. They said they had not realised that I would change the way I did and expected my pregnancy to be all in the front. I felt embarrassed and almost shamed that I did not have control of how my pregnancy shaped my body. It made me just want to leave and hide. This really affected me as I became very conscious of what I was eating as soon as I had my baby. I was on the verge of disordered eating, I am sure of it (Hayley, female, 28 years).

Ana spoke about how she felt loss and that she was like 'a fish out of water'.

None of us know what to expect when you are pregnant or have a child. But I feel it's a bit harder for dancers. We are used to being in complete control of our bodies but when I was pregnant and a new parent I felt a complete loss. I lost my body, my ability, my identity as a dancer, my community and sense of belonging. I was like a fish out of water or drowning (Ana, female, 40 years).

Katia, spoke at length about how she had felt lost, but that later, she brought something new as a performer:

It took me a long time once I became a parent to realise my dancer identity again. I had worked for many renowned choreographers and just did all without question. Dancing was my life. When I became pregnant, I was supported well during a job as I was already contracted and all went well. When I became a parent, it was all encompassing. I felt a bit lost really with this new responsibility. I wasn't the me I knew. It was so different to dancing. I didn't want to think about anything else so I took leave and got statutory pay, things were tight. I learned how to be a mum.... Only when my child started school did I start taking jobs. My confidence has actually increased though as now when I'm on stage I feel experienced and I draw on all that experience. I also see dancing as more of a job now rather than a vocation as I am more than just a dancer. I didn't forget the technique aspects as that is embodied and comes back like riding a bike. I built my fitness. I also think I'm better at expressing now too as I have lived more. I think I, and dancers that are parents do bring a new quality, experience and talent to performing- it's like the experienced actor – there are bodily tools to draw on. You know your body so well, even when it becomes a new body, that you know how to use it well and adapt where certain aspects don't work as well as slight adjustment in alignment here and there. I think work would be a bit samey if all the dancers were young and just out of training (Katia, female, 36 years).

The examples show that pregnancy and parenting impacted on fitness, fatigue levels, body shape and size and also has psychological impacts, such as embarrassment. Some of the dancers also suggested that the sector could be more supportive and accept dancers for their experience rather than necessarily always the perfect body shape.

### ***Barriers in the UK dance sector***

The findings suggest that there is very little knowledge in the dance sector of physical and psychological impacts of pregnancy on dancers' bodies. If dancers were working whilst pregnant, they felt that they were left to take responsibility for themselves and to work things out on their own in relation to how much to push the body. Dancers have been trained to push the boundaries of their bodies and ignore pain so this can be challenging. In contrast to dancers working in larger companies such as those in ballet, there is not access to wider medical care or physiotherapists for example. This would need to be a referral from a GP or found privately and this is expensive.

I had my role reduced considerably because the choreographer was so worried that I would hurt myself or the baby. I had gained advice but the mid-wife did put all the responsibility on me. The choreographer was coming from a place of kindness and, as this was my first pregnancy, I was not sure what I could or should do. There doesn't seem to be anywhere to go for advice specifically for professional dancers (Charlie, female, 38 years)

In addition, there appears to be a lack of knowledge in dance of body post-natal and how much the body can do when returning to dance. Ana spoke about how she felt she could not speak about the fact she was a parent:

Although more dancers are having children now, we do not really speak about pregnancy or being parents- it's like you just leave the profession or get on with it quietly as something you do out of dance. We do not have many shared experiences, strategies, or tried and tested methods or ways of working that support us as dancers or even as choreographers or Artistic Directors. Also, as a parent, even though my children are older now, I don't feel I can ask for time off if my child is in a school play or something. This is frowned upon I feel. Even though I have worked with some choreographers before, I feel I'd be judged and not seen as committed to the job. Because our work depends often on word of mouth, I think this might threaten my career. You give 100% of yourself to dance or nothing – there is no sense of balance really. It can be a real challenge to continue for some people (Ana, female, 40 years).

One male dancer suggested that the way that dance projects are funded can be a barrier for dancers that are parents and that this is a talent loss to the sector:

The challenge is rooted in the sector. Choreographers often have 8 weeks to make a piece, let's say as an intensive block, because that is how the funding works. Therefore, they want dancers that can commit to all day, every day- early 'till late. They are more likely to employ the young dancer that does not have any caring commitments. However, when this is happening, the experienced dancers that may be parents are a loss to the works. The experienced dancer brings habitual knowledge – the technique, the ability and the adaptability as well as the expression that younger dancers don't really have. We tend to be quicker to learn the work and more efficient (Ash, male, 30 years).



Further, financial concerns were raised by dancer Neisha:

The Arts Council for example, fund on a project basis. This is precarious. You tend to be paid a rate but if you do more that was set in the beginning, you are working for free- say a rehearsal over-runs or you have to research something in your own time. That puts me financially out of pocket because I cannot afford extra childcare costs. I feel guilty for having to leave at the time agreed because I cannot be late for school pick-up. I have to negotiate traffic and I don't want to be that mum that the teacher is tutting at. But at the same time, I don't want to be that dancer that is seen as unprofessional for having to do other things as well as dance. The guilt can be quite overwhelming (Niesha, female, 30 years).

One dancer spoke of how she concealed her pregnancy for fear of not being able to continue with her job:

Pregnancy is not seen as something to be celebrated if you are a professional dancer. Outside of dance it is something people expect to happen as part of life, but in dance you are not supposed to grow up, have sex, have a child, have a life outside of dance. In dance pregnancy and parenthood is seen more like an injury as it changes you, it is seen as preventing you from being at your best, something dragging you down. Your body belongs to dance not you really. I didn't tell anyone I was pregnant as I was in a job and I wanted to complete the project and the performances. I was worried that there would be fuss and frowning. I just took care of myself. I was 4 months, but when I look back, I think I got my priorities wrong (Nancy, female, 29 years).

Dancers often raised the notion of work-life conflicts, especially time as a key barrier to working as a dancing parent: 'dance doesn't have a history of understanding private life. It doesn't understand balance,' and 'it is very hard to understand how precious time is unless you have conflicts on it, dance expects to take all your time.' Further: 'I am always trying to negotiate time to make something viable, with travel, finances and childcare, as dance thinks you can always be at its call.'

### ***Supportive solutions***

There were examples of experiences where dancers had been enabled to manage transitioning from dancer to parent but also returning to, continuing and progressing in dance.

I was supported by various choreographers throughout my pregnancy and once I became a parent, I was able to do some small jobs and breastfeed within the studio during rehearsals. I also did on-line classes for fitness. I got some good support and advice from an organisation that does classes especially for returning dancers. Now, my child is older, I take jobs that provide flexible hours, rehearsal schedules in advance so I can work out childcare, and even got funding so I can take my child and my husband on tour. I know particular choreographers that are supportive of parents that are dancers and I will only work with them. You have to pre-plan as a parent because childcare is a challenge and expensive but it is possible to manage a career as a dancer (Nanda, female, 28 years).

There was evidence that some dancers felt that they were stronger dancers once they had become a parent and their identity and ability had evolved:

I think once you've had a child you feel strong and more confident. You felt strong as a dancer but you realise that your body can do even more amazing things. Two choreographers I worked with said they appreciated my focus, no nonsense approach and my confidence and they were not saying these things to me before I was a parent. This acknowledgement was important validation that I should continue as a dancer in my career. I think I am a stronger dancer now, as I feel I have even more control over my body and I can express even more, as I have emotions to draw on that I didn't really have before. I do think my identity is invested in my body but that is my work and I am also invested in my identity as a parent. I can have a pretty good work-life balance but it is about choosing what work I do and who with carefully. I think some choreographers employ a range of dancers of different ages, experiences and that are parents or not and this makes for better pieces and performances I think. (Zara, female 35 years).

Some practical ways of supporting dancers that are parents were shared by dancer Lucia:

The best choreographers are aware that all dancers suffer fatigue, whether they are parents or not. If a schedule takes account of fatigue for all dancers then a schedule that asks us to work for 5-6 hours a day instead of 8 hours a day means all get the best of all worlds. I can commit and still drop and pick up from school. All works better. This fits much better with parenting. And flexible hours are useful, schedules in good time so I can plan childcare, that sort of thing (Neve, female, 37 years).

Sheddi shared that:

My choreographer let me bring my child into rehearsals and paid for my partner to come on tour. She has a very clear family-friendly policy so I feel very supported as she is a mum too (Sheddi, female, 26 years).

## **Discussion**

### ***Disrupted habitus***

A professional contemporary dancer has somatic, embodied, taken-for-granted knowledge, and high physical capital as a core part of their dancer *habitus*, that has been developed over years of training. Dancers also have a bodily belief, bodily authority and understanding of physicality as a performing athlete. Particular values and expectations relating to 'rules of the game' in relation to expected body shape, size and ability exist in the field contemporary dance in the UK. The pregnant dancer and dancer-mother appear to be at odds with cultural norms, so this is an example of a disrupted *habitus* for the dancer. The disruption to the dancers' *habitus* impacts the dancer to question their bodily knowledge and expectations of self and their ability to utilise physical capital, experience and understanding of 'rules of the game' that were previously taken-for-granted. Here the unconscious becomes conscious, and this affects the dancers' life as they face physical, social and psychological challenges. As the dancer identity is rooted in embodied (bodily/somatic) knowledge, navigation and transition for a dancer that is pregnant and a dancer that is a parent can be problematic, due to the strong connection and identification with the profession, embedded sense of body as self and body as identity.

Bourdieu suggested that: ‘when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a ‘fish in water’ . . . it takes the world about itself for granted’ (1992: 127). When a professional dancer is pregnant this impacts their embodied identity and physical capital, so the currency does not carry such a high value-exchange within the social world of dance. This can shatter the acquired dancer *habitus* and can lead to unease, anxiety, disorientation, lack of confidence and authority, feelings of loss of capital and embodied knowledge that has been accrued over years of sacrifice and training and can result in an identity crisis. Further, when a dancer is a mother, there may be conflicting priorities. Whereas dancers are encouraged to commit fully to dance and ‘live’ for dance, they have to share their time and energy with dance and parenting.

At the centre of disorientation is where *habitus* suddenly finds itself ‘out of sync’ (Bourdieu, 2000) and this is accompanied by the gradual loss of identity, of the sense of self and the achievements that have been created over a period of years, as well as the established social community and sense of belonging. Findings suggest there are barriers to continuation, career opportunities and progression when a female identifying dancer becomes a mother, partly because there appears to be a lack of knowledge and support across the contemporary dance industry in the UK, particularly amongst those in positions of power to employ dancers such as choreographers and artistic directors, but also due to the ways contemporary dance is funded. Funding for project-based work and pressures to complete projects within an intensive time period were raised by dancers as a barrier to commitment or continuation in the profession. Professional contemporary dancers in the UK tend to work on a freelance basis so the fragility to life as a dancer and the uncertainty of work is compounded when balancing parenting and childcare costs is added to an already precarious occupation. Findings suggest that many professional dancers did not feel prepared or supported in pregnancy or as a parent within the field of contemporary dance. A number of those interviewed shared work-life conflicts and that they had to turn down work because it did not cover their costs such as travel or childcare or that they could not commit to the hours (early mornings and/or late evenings).

### ***Evolution of embodied identities***

Evidence from this study suggests that dancing remains a core part of the dancer’s identity in pregnancy and as a mother. The transition as a dancing mother is a challenging period in the dancers’ life where they feel a sense of loss of ability, confidence and identity. A disruption to the *habitus* reveals the taken-for grantedness and has potential for development or change. Some dancers in the study shared examples where they had positive experiences, navigated their disrupted *habitus*, managed transitions between pregnancy, parenting and work as a professional dancer, and were able to navigate home, work and old and new evolving *habiti* successfully. Some dancers discussed the strength they gained from becoming a mother, new embodied identit(ies) and capital gain in relation to strength, control of their body and enhanced ability to express more emotionally during performance. This could be viewed as an evolution of identities. Further, there was evidence of some practical supportive structures in place such as flexibility, planning of rehearsals and scheduling and children on tour.

The *habitus* is a core part of the embodied identity, not only a state of mind but a state of being, a residue of the past that functions in the present, and is reproductive and productive, so the rules of the game are learned through practice. The dispositions are durable however, so the *habitus* continues to generate practices to maintain the environment that construct them. The *habitus* not only reproduces itself but has the potential to and ability to generate and organise other practices and representations in the field.

## Conclusion

There are a number of implications for practice for the UK contemporary dance field stemming from this study. There is a need to raise awareness of the lack of knowledge, need for support structures for retention, to reduce talent loss of experienced female-identifying dancers within the sector. This work forms part of wider conversations within the contemporary dance sector around diversity, inclusion, sustainability and longevity. Some examples of advocacy, campaign, change and support for dancers that are parents do exist in the UK, such as the work of the Parents in Performing Arts (PiPA), One Dance UK and Dance Mama. Some choreographers and companies are also leading in this area, making clear choices to retain experienced dancers, for example, Richard Alston, some time ago in 2007, employed and toured dancers that were pregnant, Siobhan Davies and Charlotte Vincent Dance have family-friendly protocols and New Adventures support dancers through job and tour sharing. This research is ongoing, and the next step is to engage choreographers, Artistic Directors and other stakeholders in the work, to identify specific challenges, understand further barriers that employers face and to explore solutions in a co-constructed way.

The evolution or transformation of the core female dancer embodied identity and *habitus* has physical, social and psychological impacts. Dancers accumulate a range of cultural knowledge and capital as part of their *habitus* through their dancing career. The centrality of the dancers' *habitus* is all-encompassing as dance is viewed as a calling, vocation and lifestyle. A dancer that is pregnant and becomes a mother can experience disorientation, a sense of loss but can also experience an evolution of their identity and capital gain.

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