Bullying victimisation and social support of adolescent male dance students: an analysis of findings

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Bullying victimisation and social support of adolescent male dance students: an analysis of findings

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This analysis ($n = 33$), drawn from the findings of the author's larger mixed method research study, investigated bullying and harassment of adolescent male students (ages 13–18) pursuing dance study at the pre-professional level in the United States. Procedures for this analysis included review of primary and secondary sources from the international literature in psychology, adolescent and public health, paediatrics, sexuality studies, and dance education, an adapted version of the Dancer's Social Support Scale, and data from online surveys and in-depth interviews. Findings indicate significant bullying of adolescent males engaging in western concert dance training. Analyses reveal pervasive heterocentric discourses and continued homophobic attitudes surrounding the adolescent male dancer and his experiences regardless of his sexual orientation. The importance of social support in and outside the dance studio especially support from his dance teacher-director, best friend in dance or school, and his mother figure prominently. Findings from research on bullying in the general and sexual minority populations are discussed. Pragmatic and critical approaches for understanding bullying and supporting bullied adolescent male dancers are presented.

Keywords: bullying; gender; adolescent development; boys; social support

1. Introduction

As a global public health concern, bullying affects significant numbers of adolescents (Craig et al. 2009). Bullying victimisation over the past decade has been recognised as a leading adolescent health problem throughout the world (Craig and Pepler 2003; Nansel et al. 2003; Due, Holstein, and Lynch 2005). In their 40-country analysis, Craig et al. (2009) found that "Bullying involvement transcends cultural and geographic boundaries" (219). Adolescent "children who are unusual in some way" are more likely than others to suffer bullying and harassment (Berger 2007, 105). Boys perceived to be or who identify as non-heterosexual are especially at risk. Bullied frequently and severely, these boys report "distressing and intrusive memories of those events of their school days and being victimized" (Rivers 2004, 171). Additionally, Berlan et al. (2010) report that:

> [S]exual minority youth (gay, lesbian, bisexual, questioning) are more likely than their heterosexual peers to be threatened or injured at school, skip school because of feeling unsafe, be violently attacked requiring medical treatment and witness violence, and experience sexual and physical abuse. (366)

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Questions surrounding the male dancer in western concert dance, especially those about his masculinity and sexual orientation, have dominated popular discourses and societal assumptions for more than a century. Regrettably, society's propensity to denigrate qualities associated with femininity makes gender conformity more difficult on non-conforming boys than on non-conforming girls (Meyer 2008). Creativity, expressiveness, caring and empathy – often considered feminine characteristics – signal weakness in boys. Based on these dominant signals, the prevailing stereotype of boys who dance is that they are unmanly, effeminate, and gay (Gard 2003; Risner 2007). These social descriptors clearly position dancing boys, as Berger (2007) asserts, as children who are unusual, and particularly susceptible to bullying and harassment, and research confirms that teasing, verbal and physical harassment, and aggression directed toward adolescent males in dance training and education have been empirically documented in the international literature (Williams 2003; Gard 2006; Lehikoinen 2006; Risner 2009). Based on adolescent development research (Rivers 2004; Berlan et al. 2010) and given the significant sexual minority of male adolescent population in which 47% identify as non-heterosexual (Risner 2009), boys in dance are additionally vulnerable to bullying.

In this investigation the lives of boys who dance provide an important lens for investigating bullying, harassment and aggression in the general adolescent population as well as the ability to develop an informed understanding of and proactive strategies for, confronting bullying behaviour and supporting adolescent male dance students. Therefore, the present investigation sought to extend and develop the findings of Risner (2009) by comparative analyses with bullying and social support literature from the fields of psychology, adolescent and public health, paediatrics, and sexuality studies.

2.   Literature review

2.1.   *Bullying in the general adolescent population*

Beginning in the late 1990s, a number of highly publicised school attacks linked student violence with bullying behaviour and victimisation. These incidents drew international attention to the climate of bullying and harassment occurring in schools (Spriggs et al. 2007). Since that time, research conducted on bullying and victimisation has grown significantly throughout the world (Swearer et al. 2010). The professional literature generally defines adolescent bullying "as a specific form of aggression, which is intentional, repeated, and involves a disparity of power between the victim and perpetrators" (Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel 2009, 368); bullying behaviour can be perpetrated in various forms, such as verbal, physical, and relational or social (Olweus 1993; Crick and Grotpeter 1995). Bullying of a verbal nature includes name-calling, taunting, and teasing in a purposely hurtful manner. In physical form, bullying behaviour includes hitting, slapping, pushing, shoving, and kicking. Both verbal and physical bullying are direct forms, "while relational bullying refers to an indirect form of bullying, such as social exclusion and spreading rumors" (Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel 2009, 368). Berger (2007) reports,

> The first wave of research reported that bullying decreased steadily with age, and that more boys were bullies and victims than girls. Later research confirmed that physical bullying declines with age but found that other forms increase, with a sizable bump between ages 11 and 15 when children experience puberty and change schools. (97)

In a cross-national study of adolescents ($n = 202,056$) from 40 countries, 11% indicated bullying others, 12.6% reported being bullied, and 3.6% indicated that they were both a bully and a victim of bullying (Craig et al. 2009). Regular and repeated bullying victimisation or bullying others has been linked to high risks of depression and suicidal ideation and suicidal attempts compared with adolescents not involved in bullying behaviour; adolescents who are both victims and bullies run the highest risk and are the most troubled (Klomek et al. 2007). Over the past decade, a number of anti-bullying campaigns have been launched on local and national levels,[1] and as Berger (2007) notes, "Thousands of popular books and guides for parents, children, and teachers promulgate untested and sometimes destructive suggestions … often it seems as if the scientific method has been forgotten" (93).

For the purposes of this analysis, understanding the experiences of bullied adolescents and their victimisation is particularly important. The effects of bullying on victims have been closely associated with physical and mental health difficulties (Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, and Bonanno 2005). Dislike of school and avoidance of school are often by-products of being bullied, which in turn can affect academic performance and positive socialisation (Juvonen, Nishina, and Graham 2000). Alcaraz, Kim, and Gendron (2010) summarise the literature:

> Research on victims of bullying behavior has demonstrated that these individuals are more likely to report loneliness and greater difficulty making new friends compared to non-involved peers. Victims have also been found to be lower in social acceptance, in terms of number of friends and amount of time socializing with other peers. Compared to non-victimized counterparts, victims of bullying are more likely to be anxious and insecure, exhibit higher rates of depression, diminished performance in school, and are lower in self-esteem. (3)

Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, and Bonanno (2005) conclude, "Perhaps most alarming is the number of teens who have ended their own lives because of both bullying and victimization" (1).

2.2. *Bullying in the adolescent sexual minority population*

In order to understand young male dancers' heightened vulnerability, I review the literature on bullying victimisation in the adolescent sexual minority population. Studies indicate that nearly half of male dance students self-identify as sexual minority youth (Risner 2002, 2009).[2] The adolescent health profession defines sexual minority youth as "young people with same-sex or both-sex sexual attraction and/or partners or youth who self-identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual" (Berlan et al. 2010, 366). Research studies demonstrate that sexual minority youth are subject to high levels of bullying, from verbal harassment to physical injury (D'Augelli, Pilkington, and Herschberger 2002).

At the foundation of much sexual minority bullying and harassment are idealised notions of masculinity and femininity – socially constructed and well-rehearsed in schools, mass media, and society (Meyer 2008). Boys who do not adhere to dominant codes of masculinity are in peril, whether they identify as gay or are perceived to be gay. Meyer (2008) notes "The pressure on boys to conform to traditional notions of masculinity is great and the risk of being perceived as gay is an effective

threat in policing the boundaries of acceptable behavior" (39). A former male dance student explains:

> When I was in elementary school, I did a lot of ballet. I was at the National Ballet School one summer. And that sort of stigma (laugh) which I never thought was a stigma, or could be a stigma, but which became a stigma, followed me into high school. And that was followed with comments continually – "fag," you know, "fag." I think that was actually … one of the reasons why I eventually gave up ballet was just because of the constant harassment, and also pursuing other interests. But I think that was at the back of my mind a lot of the time with the harassment, and realizing that they're right. That's what I was. I knew that that's what I was. (Smith 1998, 322)

In a study of 522 middle and high school students in the northeastern US, Gruber and Fineran (2008) reported that sexual minorities experience higher levels of bullying and sexual harassment than their heterosexual peers. Similarly, a Canadian school-based study of high school adolescents ($n = 1598$) reported that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and youth who are questioning their sexual orientation reported more bullying experiences than heterosexual youth (Williams et al. 2005). A statewide survey of public high students ($n = 3522$) found that sexual minority youth were significantly more likely than other students "to have been bullied (44% vs. 23%), to have skipped school because they felt unsafe (13% vs. 3%), have been in a physical fight (42% vs. 28%), and been threatened or injured with a weapon at school (14% vs. 5%)" (Massachusetts Department of Education 2006).

Schooling, as an extension and reproduction of dominant social ideology, often privileges and valorises individual strength, competition, aggressiveness, independence, and toughness, typical of traditional codes of masculinity (Risner 2007). From this masculinist perspective, it is no revelation that "typical victims are described as physically weak … tended to be timid, anxious, sensitive and shy … [I]n contrast, bullies were physically strong, aggressive, and impulsive, and had a strong need to dominate others" (Hoover and Juul 1993, cited in Meyer 2008, 35). Readers may be familiar with the "It Gets Better" anti-bullying campaign founded by American writer Dan Savage with his partner Terry Miller after a number of gay youth suicides in 2010. The high-profile project's website "invited adults to submit videos that offer messages of hope and encouragement to youth who may be struggling with their sexualities in difficult environments" (Mason 2012, 83). Later the project received widespread criticism from the LGBTQ community and scholars, especially for its adult-centred evasiveness of homophobia, heterosexism, and realistic strategies for confronting adolescent sexual minority bullying and violence.

The lasting effects of bullying and harassment on victims are well documented and severe (Rivers 2004). Adolescent targets of sexual and homophobic harassment are at increased risk for harmful behaviours and leaving school (Williams et al. 2005). Meyer (2008) indicates that many of these "students perceive school as a dangerous place, and that causes significant damage to their level of engagement in the school community" (35).

3. Research design

This mixed method empirical analysis ($n = 33$), drawn from the data of a larger three-year research project (Risner 2009), investigated the prevalence and severity of bullying and harassment of adolescent male students (ages 13–18) pursuing dance

study at the pre-professional level in the United States. It is important to note that the larger study did not focus specifically on bullying perpetration and victimisation. Rather, the theme of bullying emerged from the findings of the larger study. The purpose of the present investigation was to extend and analyse participants' bullying victimisation and harassment, as well as the social support resources available to them.

Procedures for this analysis included: review of secondary sources from the international literature in psychology, adolescent and public health, sexuality studies, and dance education; data from an adapted version of the Dancer's Social Support Scale (Williams 2003; Risner 2009); participant data from an extensive online survey; and participant narratives from in-depth interviews. Beyond traditional strategies, recruitment of participants was also facilitated by the endorsement and support of a well-established national dance company and its educational training programmes in the US. This allowed participants to be identified from across the nation, ensuring a large cross-section of male adolescents and dance genres (ballet, contemporary, modern, jazz, and musical theatre). Participant assent and informed consent from participants' parents were obtained, based upon the requirements of human subject investigation approval from Wayne State University.

3.1. *Mixed methods framework*

At the outset, readers are encouraged to see the author's three-year study for a full description of the research design and mixed methods framework from which the data for this article were drawn (Risner 2009). Interpretive research frameworks allow researchers to render a better understanding of what it is to be human in the world and to bring forth meaning and understanding rather than proving or disproving facts (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Meaning is revealed in diverse ways and requires that researchers engage conceptual frameworks and methodologies that account for multiple perspectives, contextualisation, and complexity. The realities of participants are considered multiple, socially constructed, and contextual (Creswell 2014).

For the present analysis, I briefly outline the purpose and necessity of employing a mixed methods approach from both a pragmatic researcher's (what works best now) and a critical researcher's (what empowers positive social change and action) perspective. Describing the pragmatic researcher's turn, Creswell (2003) notes:

> Truth is what works at the time; it is not based in a strict dualism between the mind and a reality completely independent of the mind. Thus, in mixed methods research, investigators use both quantitative and qualitative data because they work to provide the best understanding of a research problem. (12)

Prior to 2009, the lack of published, empirical research on bullying victimisation experiences of male adolescents pursuing pre-professional dance training required quantifiable baseline data from which tentative and cautious generalisations could be formulated. Therefore, collecting and analysing quantitative survey data on a relatively large scale about teasing, verbal and physical harassment, threatening behaviour, and physical harm was necessary.

At the same time and from an interpretive researcher perspective, the processes and methods of qualitative research design and generated data allow researchers to assemble concepts, develop grounded theories, and seek emergent patterns through

interpretation and contextual analyses (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). When coupled with a critical approach, Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) state that:

> Qualitative dominant mixed methods research is the type of mixed research in which one relies on a qualitative, constructivist-poststructuralist-critical view of the research process, while concurrently recognizing that the addition of quantitative data and approaches are likely to benefit most research projects. (124)

Extending this research perspective further, Erickson (2005) elaborates that:

> The interpretive qualitative researcher would say that the question "what is happening?" is always accompanied by another question: "and what do those happenings mean to those who are engaged in them?" And a critical qualitative researcher would add a third question, "and are these happenings just and in the best interests of people generally?" (7)

Therefore, the present analysis and the larger study utilised a mixed methods, qualitative design from a critical interpretive perspective.

3.2.　Methods and procedures

The author's larger study ($n = 75$), from which data were utilised in the present investigation ($n = 33$), included the following research methods: review of secondary sources; qualitative and quantitative data from an extensive online survey; narrative data from in-depth participant interviews with 20 participants of geographic diversity across the US. The extensive online survey required 30–45 min to complete. Each of the 20-participant subset selected was interviewed once; interviews were 90–120 minutes in duration.

Comprised of eight sections, the online survey generated the following participant data: (1) demographic information; (2) school data; (3) dance education and training experience; (4) attitudes about dance and dance study; (5) an adapted version of the Dancer's Social Support Scale (Williams 2003; Risner 2009); (6) written responses to questions regarding interest, attraction, enjoyment, support, peers, challenges, and advice to other boys in dance; (7) participant gender and sexual identity; and (8) interest in participating in an interview. From those in the survey pool who indicated interest in completing an interview, randomly selected survey participants ($n = 20$) were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews that took the form of guided conversations based on participants' survey data.

Interview protocols centred on participants' experiences and attitudes as boys and young men in pre-professional dance training. Formatted in a semi-structured, open-ended fashion, interview questions allowed participants to speak candidly about themselves and their experiences (Kvale and Brinkmann 2008). As in previous interview research conducted by the Risner (2000):

> [W]hat we want to know informs how we conduct our research. The questions we ask shape the words and stories we record, analyse, and interpret. The questions pursued by the narrative researcher are therefore broad and heuristic in order to allow and facilitate individual authorship. Interpretive inquiry, then, often illuminates a slice of the proverbial pie previously unseen or unexpected. Narrative research reveals the plurality of our human experience as evidenced by the singularity of our individual existence. (158)

In this spirit, each interview protocol was unique to the participant's earlier survey data (quantitative and qualitative), as well as his own interests and inclinations within the interview itself. Participants were encouraged to share stories and to give examples when possible. Interview data were recorded on audio tape, transcribed, and then destroyed. Analysis of data generated was based on procedures of interpretive inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 2004). Extraneous material was eliminated while emerging themes and patterns in each narrative account were identified and coded (Bernard and Ryan 2009) with an independent researcher verifying edited reductions. Although each interview protocol was unique, sample questions and prompts included:

- Tell me how you came to study dance.
- What were your perceptions about dance before you began pre-professional study?
- What, if any, obstacles (personal or otherwise) did you encounter in deciding to study dance?
- What does it mean to you to as a male to study dance?
- What do you find satisfying about studying dance?
- Who gives you the most support for dancing?
- Do you have male role models as a dancer?
- Tell me about what you find interesting about dancing.
- What role does dancing play in your life?
- What might other males find satisfying about dancing?
- Why do you think so few males pursue dance study?
- What would be necessary to attract more males to dance?
- Have your attitudes about dance changed since you began studying?

3.3. *Participant profile*

The participant population (ages 13–18) for this analysis was comprised of the following age groups: 13–15 years old (28%); 16–17 years old (36%); and 18 years old (36%). By ethnicity, participants self-reported as white or Caucasian (82%); black or African-American (9%); Hispanic or Latino (6%); and American Indian or Alaskan Native (3%). The majority of participants' familial living arrangements included mother and father, or mother, father, and siblings (73%), with remaining family structures: mother (9%); mother and siblings (6%); and other familial arrangements including grandparents and siblings (6%). In terms of demographics, participants resided in: suburb of large city (39%); medium-sized city (27%); small town (21%); and large city (12%).

School attendance data for participants included the following: public or charter high school (39%); university (27%); home school (12%); performing arts middle or high school (9%); public or charter middle school (6%); liberal arts college (3%); and private high school (3%). Regarding academic achievement, participants reported they received: mostly grades of A and B (45%); usually B grades (27%); all A grades (15%); mostly grades of B and C (9%); and 3% reported that their school does not give grades. Beyond their interests in dance and the arts, school subjects of highest interest to participants included English and literature, history, and sciences. Other co-curricular activities in which participants actively participated

were reported as: dance/dance company (75%); drama/plays (50%); and musical theatre (47%). In terms of sport activities, 20% of the overall population reported participation in organised sports, with swimming/diving and soccer as the primary activities.

The vast majority of participants have studied dance for six years or more (70%). Primary dance study environments were described as: dance studio (39%); college or university dance programme (27%); performing arts high school (15%); dance academy (12%); and professional dance school affiliated with a dance company (7%). Additional pre-professional dance training was reported by 8 out of 10 participants who attended summer dance workshops (local and regional), as well as summer dance study at national intensive training programmes. Participants reported that their dance teachers were three times as likely to be female than male, with 63% of all participants reporting zero to one male dance teacher in their studio or programme setting. In terms of sexual orientation, participants self-identified as heterosexual (52%), gay (44%), and bisexual (4%).

4. Presentation of data

The aim of this analysis was to investigate bullying, harassment, and aggression in the lives of adolescent male dance students (ages 13–18) pursuing dance study at the pre-professional level in the US. Data for this analysis were drawn from the Risner (2009) larger research study of male dance students' lived experiences and the meaning they construct from dancing and dance training. In the following, I report the survey data and provide additional narrative data to support the quantitative results organised around the following emergent themes: (1) social environment; (2) bullying, harassment, and aggression; and (3) social support.

4.1. Social environment of adolescent male dancers

The stigma associated with boys in western concert dance is longstanding and generally linked to dominant attitudes about dance and its feminisation (Williams 2003; Risner 2002, 2009). More specifically, the stigma that boys who dance garner marks them as effeminate, homosexual, and not real men (dance is for girls). In order to better understand this stigmatisation and the social isolation that often accompanies it, the larger study's survey posed questions about adolescent males' social environment and relationships. In the following, relevant data are presented.

Inside the dance world (studio, school, conservatory, academy, or programme), boys encounter a gendered social environment in their dance study and training. When asked the question, "How many other male students study in your studio/ school or program?" participants reported none (12%); one to three males (18%); four to five males (33%); six to nine males (15%); and 10 or more males (21%). The majority of male adolescents (63%) studied in programmes with five or fewer male peers. However, when asked "How many other male students are enrolled in your class/level?" participants reported considerably lower numbers of male peers: no other males (48%); one to three males (34%); four to five males (10%); and 10 or more males (8%). In terms of male adolescents' daily training, the vast majority (82%) studied with three or fewer male peers.

Survey data indicated that participants' dance teachers were four times as likely to be female than male, with 63% of all participants reporting zero to one male dance teacher in their studio or programme setting. In relation to their peers and the predominance of dance teachers who are women, male adolescents in dance encountered an overwhelmingly female social environment inside the studio, both in terms of peers and authority. Over half of the participants (55%) indicated the importance of male role models in dance; however, only 38% reported that having a male dance instructor had a positive effect on their dance study.

For adolescent males pursuing pre-professional dance study, issues of marginality and privilege play out in complicated and often contradictory ways. Within the dance environment, males hold highly valued status but leaving the dance studio often means enduring social isolation, stigma, and questions about their masculinity. Open-ended survey questions asked participants about their experiences outside the confines of dance:

Survey Question 30: How do people react when you tell them that you are a dancer?[3]

- (Carson, 14 years old) Some people are a little weirded out at first, they sometimes question it because it is thought to be feminine by some people. There are always the people who hate me for some reason and just say "he's gay" and will never give me the time of day.
- (Ben, 17 years old) They are generally very surprised and they sometimes drop gay jokes.
- (Alex, 15 years old) Some people tease you or assume you're gay. The people who would make fun of me or react badly are, frankly, not the people I try to hang out with.
- (Jeffrey, 13 years old) They are in shock and usually start to question me and automatically say that I am gay. It's happened like 30 times.
- (Carlos, 16 years old) People would respond with, "oh do you wear tights," "are you gay" and things of that sort.
- (Ryan, 13 years old) Girls immediately think im gay and just open themselves up to me. Guys think im gay and kick me out of anything that they say, "isn't for girls."
- (Jesse, 18 years old) It's not like there disgusted when i tell them i just don't think its what they were expecting from a boy.
- (Rob, 14 years old) Well, if it is a girl there is this look like hmmm is he gay? Then I tell them I am not gay and they say oh haha. On the other hand, if I tell a guy they get this look on their face like "SHIT! I am talking to a gay person!!!!!"
- (Eric, 15 years old) I don't generally call myself a dancer
- (Josh, 17 years old) It's usually a tone of, "Well, yeah … you're gay." It generally gets me all up in arms and defensive of the straight guys I dance with. A lot of my uncles and older male cousins think that I'm "girly" or "a pansy" because I dance.

These narrative accounts provide a deeper understanding of the daily stigma and social environment that male adolescent dancers repeatedly confront outside their dance sphere. Additionally, these findings not only corroborate and extend previous research that has identified social isolation as a prominent theme in male dancers'

experience (Gard 2001, 2003; Keyworth 2001; Risner 2002, 2009; Williams 2003), they also place adolescent dancing males at higher risk for bullying and victimisation as indicated by the professional literature discussed earlier. Social support findings will be presented later in this section.

4.2.   *Bullying, harassment, and aggression*

The prevalence of bullying and harassment in the lives of participants was addressed directly in one survey question, "As a male who studies dance, I have experienced …" Four possible responses were listed, based on findings from previous research studies on male dancers (Risner 2002; Williams 2003; Lehikoinen 2006). Participants were asked to select "all that apply." Five participants did not respond to this question; however, 85% of participants reported the following experiences:

- Teasing and name calling (93%).
- Verbal or physical harassment (68%).
- Verbal threats or threatening behaviour (39%).
- Physical harm or injury (11%).

Self-identified non-heterosexual participants reported that they experienced verbal threats or threatening behaviour at nearly three times the rate of self-identified heterosexual participants.

In order to learn more about the minority status of adolescent males in dance study, the survey asked participants to complete the sentence, "I think more boys would study dance if …," which participants completed by choosing from a number of different answers based on previous research findings on adolescent male dance students (Williams 2003). Participants were instructed to select all applicable answers. The majority of responses were: "if boys/males weren't teased and harassed so much about dancing" (87%); "if boys/males knew more male friends who dance" (71%); "if parents were more supportive and encouraging" (68%); and "if there were more male role models" (55%). Only 8% selected "if teachers made dance more like sports."

In tandem and based on a similar methodology, participants were then asked to complete the sentence, "I think that some boys stop studying dance because." The most cited responses were: "because they were tired of teasing and harassment as a male dancer" (84%); "because some people thought they were gay because they studied dance" (78%); and "because their parents weren't supportive" (59%). The words of the participants below illuminate the survey data in tangible and meaningful ways. Their accounts reveal more clearly the sometimes stark survey percentages reported earlier:

Survey Question 34: Has anyone ever teased, harassed, threatened, or hurt you because you study dance?

- (Jackson, 18 years old) Yeah, a lot of the people I went to high school with would make fun of me a lot because I was a dancer. They all assumed I was gay, and that I was not "cool" enough for them to be friends with.
- (Matt, 17 years old) ALLLLLLLLLLL the time.
- (Luke, 16 years old) Yes, especially in elementary school. I was bullied so much that I hid the fact that I danced from about fourth grade through ninth

from everyone. If it hadn't been for some male teachers, I probably would have quit, but they helped me become more sure of myself and confident.

- (Mason, 13 years old) Everyday.
- (Kyle 14 years old) uhhhh ya. only every day of my life. I always get someone asking me if I like guys. or if I have balls or a penis.
- (Willie, 15 years old) Yes. All throughout Middle school. I rarely told anyone i danced because of it.
- (Bailey, 13 years old) Yes I have been teased forever. My mom once told me that if everyone likes you your doing something wrong.
- (Kevin, 13 years old) By uncles and older male cousins on my mom's side, and the occasional trophy-jock who's generally homophobic anyway.
- (Adrian, 16 years old) Yes. Extremely bad.
- (Grant, 14 years old) The people that it affects me the most to be teased by are my siblings.

When asked a more general, open-ended question about the most significant challenges they confront, nearly half of the participants focused on pejorative stereotypes, teasing, and harassment:

Survey Question 35: What are the biggest challenges you face as a male dancer?

- (Evan, 15 years old) Fighting the negative opinions that people have toward me.
- (Rob 14 years old) The biggest challenge … well it is the teasing.
- (Mason, 13 years old) The assumption that dance is only for girls and gay men.
- (Sean, 14 years old) Stereo-types and harassment.
- (Jared, 17 years old) Overcoming all the name calling and harassment as a young dancer was a huge challenge for me when i started dancing.
- (Adam, 13 years old) Harassment from other boys.
- (Marc, 15 years old) Teasing, judging and probably being an outcast.
- (Josh, 17 years old) Homophobic attitude of some.

Hearing the experiences of male dance students who are regularly disparaged and repeatedly ridiculed gives a more complete picture. Boys in pre-professional dance training often report feelings of being different or being perceived as different in social contexts (Earl 1988; Williams 2003). Often these perspectives include feeling different in one's own family, especially with fathers, brothers, and other male relatives (Risner 2002). While there is a wide range of male experience in dance study, boys overwhelmingly report lack of social support from important core male family members (Williams 2003; Risner 2010). Research, though limited, appears to indicate that the underlying reason for this lack of support is rooted in heterocentric cultural beliefs and homophobic attitudes (Risner 2009). When being different carries with it scorn, harassment, and "outsider" status, it results in a kind of contagious exclusion that permits unchecked bullying and fosters the social isolation of stigmatised individuals in a far more substantial swath (Dorais 2004; Risner 2009).

4.3. *Social support in dancing boys' lives*

An adapted version of Williams's Dancer's Social Support Scale (2003) was utilised to gather data pertaining to boys' social support. The scale measures participants'

beliefs about important people in their lives and the level of support for dancing from these individuals. The Likert-type scale listed 21 individuals with a five-level set of responses ranging from 1 – *not at all helpful or supportive* to 5 – *very helpful or supportive*.

Participants reported individuals who were *very helpful or supportive* as follows: best friend in dance (84%); best friend at school (75%); favourite dance teacher-director (71%); and mother (69%). A comparative group of adolescent female students in pre-professional dance study reported *very helpful or supportive* individuals as mother (92%), father (62%), and favourite dance teacher-director (30%). In terms of *unsupportive or unhelpful* individuals, boys reported gym teacher (47%), step-mother (38%), father (23%), and step-father (22%). Males were more than twice as likely as females to report their favourite dance teacher-director as a primary source for help and support.

Male participants reported their overall social support satisfaction as *highly satisfied* or *satisfied* (63%), *somewhat satisfied* (6%); and nearly one in three males indicated they were *dissatisfied* or *highly dissatisfied* (31%). Comparative data found females' overall support satisfaction (80%) higher than males. Overall dissatisfaction for females (*dissatisfied* or *highly dissatisfied*) was significantly lower than males (3%, females; 31%, males).

Overall data provide for additional analyses. Based on the scale range (1 = *highly dissatisfied* with support, 5 = *highly satisfied* with support), average support satisfaction for the study's male population was 3.56 or at the very low end of *somewhat satisfied* with the support they receive for dancing. The female comparative group average was 4.20, indicating that girls were *satisfied* with the support they receive. As shown earlier, females reported significantly higher levels of support from both parents than males did. The higher level of support for females may indicate the significance of parental support in the overall analysis. That is, while males report strong support from a best friend in dance, best friend in school, mother, and dance teacher, having support from both parents may colour females' overall positive perception of support.

Male participants' responses to open-ended survey questions provide qualitative data for understanding the source and level of boys' social support, which the quantitative data have shown, relies heavily on support from best friend in dance and at school (84% and 75%, respectively), favourite dance teacher-director (71%), and mother (69%). The boys' narrative responses focused primarily on support from their mothers, and then favourite dance teacher, as the examples illustrate below:

Survey Question 29: What important person gives you the most support for your dancing?

- (Bailey, 13 years old) My mother gives me the most support throughout dancing. She always has believed in my talent and told me to follow my heart so that is what I am doing.
- (Sean, 14 years old) My mom. she's always been there and always keeps me going when i feel completely overwhelmed.
- (Alec, 18 years old) My mom has to deserve the credit for mostly anything I do.
- (Josh, 17 years old) My main dance instructor for she sees much potential in me and encourages me to try my hardest and put forth my all. She really wants to see me succeed.

- (Christopher, 16 years old) My high school dance director really encourages me to pursue my passion for drama and dance. She has known me since I was a child and has help bring me up in the arts.

Participant narrative responses also illuminate the perceived support deficit that boys experience from male family members and male school peers. These empirical findings flesh out the challenges dancing boys confront more clearly and add an important dimension for understanding teasing, bullying, and harassment in their lives – some of which may be buttressed, if not affirmed, by the lack of support and approval from male family members:

Survey Question 32: What important person gives you the least support for your dancing?

- (Evan, 15 years old) The person that gives me the least support as a dancer would have to be my father.
- (Grant, 14 years old) The males within my family show little or no support.
- (Brett, 13 years old) The guys at school and football jocks.
- (Will, 14 years old) My father, he's never seen me dance.
- (Stephen, 16 years old) My Dad and brothers.
- (Matt, 17 years old) The sports boys at school who think they are soooooo cool.

In summary, data indicate that most participants: experienced a predominantly female environment in dance with few male peers; encountered a social environment of teasing and harassment outside the studio based on their status as males in dance; reported insufficient support and affirmation for their dancing from family members (especially males); and, face questioning and repeated surveillance as to their sexual orientation.

4.4. Disconfirming evidence

Creswell and Miller (2000) explain the process of searching for disconfirming or negative evidence:

> [I]nvestigators first establish the preliminary themes or categories in a study and then search through the data for evidence that is consistent with or disconfirms these themes. In this process, researchers rely on their own lens, and this represents a constructivist approach in that it is less systematic than other procedures and relies on examining all of the multiple perspectives on a theme or category. Further, the disconfirming evidence should not outweigh the confirming evidence. As evidence for the validity of a narrative account, however, this search for disconfirming evidence provides further support of the account's credibility because reality, according to constructivists, is multiple and complex. (127)

The confirming data evidence presented in this section was reported in terms of majority responses of participants; however, disconfirming evidence was also found for some topics: (1) five participants (15%) reported no experiences of teasing or name-calling, verbal or physical harassment, threatening behaviour, or physical harm of injury; (2) self-identified heterosexual participants reported far fewer verbal threats or threatening behaviours but reported physical harm or injury more

frequently; and (3) while fathers were ranked 15th out of 21 individuals who provide support, 40% of the participants reported their father as *very helpful or supportive*. This discrepant data provide opportunities for further research and study.

5. Discussion

The findings of this analysis, when taken together with recent bullying research in the general adolescent and adolescent sexual minority populations, bring up a number of questions and quandaries. Some questions are relatively easy to answer. First, how does the level of bullying experienced by boys in dance compare to that experienced by other adolescents? Based on numerous studies, there is general research consensus that 9–12% of adolescents in the US are the victims of moderate to frequent bullying (Berger 2007; Spriggs et al. 2007). Based on the present investigation's findings, it appears that male adolescent dancers (85%) are at least seven times more likely than the general adolescent population to be bullied (9–12%). Beyond the bullying that results from the feminisation (dance is for girls) of western theatrical dance training (Gard 2006; Risner 2009), another plausible factor in adolescent male dancers' high level of bully victimisation is likely tied to their self-identified or perceived sexual minority status (Berlan et al. 2010). Regardless of his sexual orientation, as we have seen, the adolescent male dancer experiences significant teasing and harassment.

5.1. *What keeps male adolescents dancing?*

A second series of questions centred on coping strategies and support systems: How do young male dance students navigate bullying and harassment? What sources of support and interpersonal relationships provide meaningful assistance and encouragement? More simply, what keeps male adolescents dancing? Attempting to answer these questions must be prefaced by acknowledging that neither this analysis nor any other studies have been conducted on male adolescents who dropped out of dance training. We might get a much better picture of the impact of teasing, harassment, and bullying, among other influences, from studying that population. However, what we can glean from this investigation in relation to bullying research provides some new knowledge for the field.

Part of navigating the difficulties of repeated bullying is likely tethered to the meaning that dance brings to boys' lives. The majority of participants articulated their attraction to dance for its expressive qualities, movement opportunities, physical and emotional pleasure, and their desires for encountering the world in more creative ways. Although their responses to questions about the meaning dance brings to their lives resulted in mostly positive affirmations of enjoyment, satisfaction, and pleasure, when asked to give advice to younger male dancers, participants' personal struggles surfaced quickly, often agitated in tone:

- (Evan, 15 years old) Don't let what anyone else thinks of you affect your want to dance. There will always be negative opinions towards you.
- (Grant, 14 years old) I'd say don't listen to other people. Don't listen to the jokes or stereotypes.
- (Ben, 17 years old) FUCK everyone and their bias opinions. Do what pleases you, if it be dance or not.

- (Jake, 16 years old) Don't let any rude or obscene comments kill your want to dance.
- (Matt, 17 years old) You will get bullied and harassed, but every male dancer gets it so don't let it knock you down.

Their narratives are also characterised by self-described acquiescence to the marginalised status boys in dance encounter outside the studio and then often internalise in their personal lives. In this internalisation, negativity, stereotypes, bias, and harassment are accepted as commonplace – expected, negotiated, and endured. Still, passion and perseverance remain the central messages telegraphed to their younger peers.

Understanding what participants believe others need to know about male dancers and their experiences provides additional insight into the challenges they confront or the feeling they have not been heard. The following comments summarise the majority of participants' perspectives in response to the question, "What would you like others to know about dance for young males?"

- (Sean, 14 years old) Be more nurturing for males … parents also need to support the art, just because you are a male and you dance doesn't mean you're gay.
- (Ben, 17 years old) First off, the stigma and the jokes have to stop. We don't make fun of guys on sports teams for being blockheads (which they certainly aren't), so why should male dancers be made fun of?
- (Jake, 16 years old) Dancing for young males will NOT turn them gay. Its perfectly fine for men to express themselves through dance.
- (Ryan, 13 years old) Well, just let all parents know that if that's what your kid really wants, take him to class let him try it for a while and if he is really interested keep taking him and make sure that he knows that he has your support.
- (Evan, 15 years old) Don't make us out to be wimps. What we do is just as difficult as any sport you play.
- (Brett, 13 years old) That it can be hard while growing up to be dancing because of the many changes one goes through especially if you are dealing with your sexual orientation.

Stating and affirming the significance of parental support was critical for participants. Challenging dominant cultural stereotypes of male dancers as gay (effeminate, weak, not athletic, and not real boys) was equally important, as well as repeatedly reminding others that *not all male dancers are homosexual*. Most participants' narratives also rehearsed well-worn "dance as sport" discourses (Crawford 1994; Risner 2002, 2003, 2009), attempting to rehabilitate the stigmatised dancing male. Both recuperative strategies likely emerge from participants' numerous life experiences of defending themselves and their dancing to others. Regardless of their own sexual orientation, participants indicated a keen awareness of the pejorative status male dancers hold in society. Although male dancers (straight, gay, bisexual, or unsure) experience homophobic bias, teasing, and verbal and physical harassment, they feel strongly compelled to voice denial of the non-heterosexual population of male dancers. The level and degree of distancing themselves from gay and bisexual male dancers indicates continued internalised homophobia, which deserves further investigation.

5.2.   *What social support and interpersonal relationships provide meaningful assistance and encouragement?*

For adolescents, social support from parents, peers, and adults of significance is a key element of transition to a healthy adult life (Fenzel 2000). The stress-buffering benefits of positive social support alleviate the impacts of frustration experienced by adolescents (Dumont and Provost 1999). From the findings, we know that the majority of participants perceived high levels of support from their best friend in dance (84%), best friend at school (75%), their favourite dance teacher-director (71%), and mother (69%). However, nearly a combined third of participants were *dissatisfied* or *highly dissatisfied* with the support their dancing receives. Taken together, qualitative and quantitative data indicated insufficient familial support and affirmation, especially from male family members.

Social psychology researchers find that perceived social support is of more significance than actual support received (Ross, Lutz, and Lakey 1999) and positive perception of support decreases depression and anxiety, leads to higher self-esteem and fewer physical ailments/injuries, and mitigates distress and the effects of life stressors (Antunes and Fontaine 2002). Therefore, rather than focusing on participants' perceived support deficits (Risner 2009, 2010), the following discussion looks more closely at supportive interpersonal relationships identified by the participants and the ways in which these relationships contribute to their well-being and emotional health.

5.2.1.   *Support from best friend in dance, or at school*

Adolescent victims of bullying have been shown to have "fewer friends and are rejected by classmates more than non-involved peers, leaving them vulnerable to aggressive peers" (Spriggs et al. 2007, 2). Research confirms the benefit and value of peer friendship (Bollmer et al. 2005). Having more friends reduces the likelihood of victimisation, "suggesting a 'friendship protection' hypothesis" (Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel 2009, 2). Berger (2007) notes, "Friends not only protect victims, they also help bullies change their ways by decreasing their reliance on dominance, power, and defiance" (98). The high level of perceived support from participants' best friend in dance and best friend in school appears to confirm the value of strong friendships and may also explain participants' ability to cope and persevere. However, the question of number of friends versus one best friend remains. For example, only 34% of the participants indicated "friends in dance" as an important reason for their dancing. Initiating research on adolescent peer interaction and relationships in dance is needed, as Warburton (2009) suggests, "[a] focus on peer-to-peer influences and interactions between adolescent boys and girls may be a profitable way to combat harmful stereotypes, strengthen relations between male and female dancers, and build healthy dance communities" (145).

5.2.2.   *Support from favourite dance teacher-director*

Participants perceived high levels of support from their favourite dance teacher-director, confirming research from previous studies (Williams 2003, Risner 2009). It appears that dance teachers are uniquely positioned to provide support for the young male dancer. In fact, boys may depend on their favourite teachers for advice, mentoring, and counsel well beyond teachers' current understanding – both in terms of need and kind of support. Bullying research from adolescent development and education psychology provides important insights for teachers,

> Teachers play a key role in preventing and intervening with bullying at school, yet they receive little if any help or training in how to effectively deal with such problems. Although teachers have the benefit of understanding the social context of bullying, they do not necessarily know how to best use this knowledge to intervene. In school settings, bullying and victimization are often considered as personal problems of individual youth rather than problems requiring a collective response. (Juvonen, Graham, and Schuster 2003, 1236)

Research has shown that teachers are "more likely to stop direct physical bullying than indirect relational attacks, even though the latter probably is more harmful in the long run" (Bauman and Del Rio 2006 cited in Berger 2007, 95). Additionally, victims demonstrate "quiet signs" of distress, which teachers may not readily detect (Juvonen, Graham, and Schuster 2003, 1236). From the adolescent's perspective, Berger (2007) notes:

> Children themselves do not put much faith in adult intervention. A study of 9–11-year olds in the Netherlands found that only 53% of bullied children told their teachers. When they were told, teachers usually tried to intervene, with half of them helping, a third making no difference, and a third making things worse (Fekkes, Pijper, and Verloove-Vanhorick 2005). A US study of elementary school children found that, particularly for boys, telling a teacher sometimes backfired (Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner 2002), and a British study of adolescents (Smith and Shu 2000) found that telling peers was much more helpful than telling adults. (112)

As primary sources, dance teachers and directors should realise the significance of their support (or lack thereof), to "intervene effectively with incidents of bullying" (Juvonen, Graham, and Schuster 2003, 1236), as well as the ways they can encourage peer and familial support.

5.2.3. *Support from mother*

High levels of perceived maternal support have been reported by male dancers in previous studies (Williams 2003; Risner 2009; Polasek and Roper 2011) and are confirmed by the present findings. Male adolescent dancers in Deborah Williams's (2003) study reported mothers as the most supportive individual of their dancing. Research indicates that "During adolescence, emotional closeness and trust within the mother-adolescent relationship also may buffer problems occurring within the peer or school context" (Williams et al. 2005, 473).

The family origins of bullying victims have received considerable investigation. According to Berger (2007), "Boy victims often are unusually close to their mothers, although their fathers may be more distant" (110). This line of research also studies bullying in terms of family genes:

> Genetic influences are now recognized as pervasive, affecting every behavior. Some children are genetically predisposed to be unusually aggressive, impulsive, or submissive. Could becoming a bully or victim be the result? … A genetic tendency to be weak and submissive by nature and being bullied by older brothers but protected by one's mother is likely to produce a victim. (Berger 2007, 109)

Obviously, we have no inkling of participants' genetic composition in the present study; however, the bullying victim profile described above closely resembles the

majority of participants' experiences. When analysing this study's data by participants' self-identified sexual orientation (52% heterosexual; 44% gay; and 4% bisexual), we see that maternal support becomes more complex, as does social support from best friends discussed earlier. Participants who self-identified as non-heterosexual were more than twice as likely as heterosexual participants to report their mother as unsupportive or not supportive at all. These findings confirm Williams et al. (2005) study of peer victimisation and social support of sexual minority adolescents, which found that:

> Sexual minority youths indicated that they felt significantly less closeness with their mothers and less companionship with their best friends than did heterosexual youths. Although it is unknown whether these adolescents are "out" to their mothers or best friends, this particular finding may reflect the tension arising from keeping their sexual orientation from their mothers and/or best friend. Out of fear, adolescents may withdraw from family and other close relationships to avoid discussing concerns about their sexual orientation. This may be a reaction to fear of parental rejection, or a desire to avoid hurting or disappointing parents. Fear may also extend to losing one's best friend. Compared to their heterosexual peers, sexual minority youth reported more sexual harassment, more bullying, less closeness with their mothers and less companionship with their best friends. (471)

To be clear, the point here is to better understand bullying victimisation based on extensive research and the implications for male adolescent dancers, not to judge or evaluate a mother's (or father's lack of) support of her son's dancing. Understanding the complexity of bullying is tantamount for taking informed action. The work of Spriggs et al. (2007) reminds us that most bullying prevention programmes neglect the importance of familial contexts and "failure to address these contexts ignores important sources of adolescents' learning and norms which perpetuate maladaptive behavior" (8).

5.3. Long-term effects of bullying victimisation

Little is known about the long-term effects of bullying and harassment experienced by male dancers. Adult male dancers tend to minimise their adolescent experiences of verbal abuse and harassment, as well as the lack of support they experienced in their teen years (Risner 2009). These post-harassment narratives often take a "rite of passage" tone, not dissimilar from other dance training discourses in which dealing with inhumane practices and behaviours is tolerated, but then valorised (Abra 1987; Smith 1998; Risner 2009). In the area of bullying research in the general population, studies have found that "Retrospective accounts are biased, although it is not known precisely how much, in what direction, and when" (Brainard and Reyna 2005). However, Berger (2007) found that "victims experience anxiety, fear, and depression, not only when they are victimized but for years afterwards" (105). Longitudinal studies in dance, especially in regard to quality of life, are needed.

6. Further thoughts

6.1. The need for research

This analysis has attempted to trace in detail the level and scope of bullying that adolescent male dancers experience – what researchers in the field of adolescent health and child development, if they were aware of it – would likely consider a

public health crisis in the arts. At the same time, there is still much we do not know. Although the previous decade of dance education research could be considered an explication of male experience in dance education and the challenges of homophobia and harassment,[4] subsequent research for understanding and confronting bullying has been limited. Most studies have replicated previous findings with little to no empirical research specifically addressing bullying from teacher, student, or school perspectives. The need for additional research is dire.

6.2. *The problem with and for bystanders*

> Bullies do not act alone; they seek victims and an audience. (Berger 2007, 97)

Based on the complexity of bullying perpetration and victimisation, it is unsurprising that most organised anti-bullying initiatives in the US result in mixed outcomes and that "meta-analysis of intervention research finds that bullying outcomes showed no significant change" (Alcaraz, Kim, and Gendron 2010, 3). Part of the problem may be attributed to intense concentration on identified bullies and victims themselves, which ignores the social context of bullying and the significant role that bystanders play, as Berger (2007) articulates:

> Research on intervention has discovered some aspects that seem pivotal. One is the recognition that bullying is a social interaction, part of peer culture, a fact stressed by most European experts (Smith 2003). This leads to a strategy of turning bystanders into defenders, an effort that seems successful before puberty (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, and Voeten 2005). This social perspective may be one reason European interventions seem more successful than those in North America, where "bullying and victimization are often considered as personal problems of individual youth rather than problems requiring a collective response" (Juvonen, Graham, and Schuster 2003, 1236). (113)

In their research, Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, and Bonanno (2005) reported that "although peers are present in most bullying situations (85–88%), they seldom intervene on behalf of victims (11–25% of the time)" (1). While these observers are not directly participating in the situation, bystanders provide an audience, and without intervening, give silent but powerful endorsement of the bully's behaviour and the victim's harassment (Alcaraz, Kim, and Gendron 2010). Research also indicates that it is detrimental to one's mental health to be a silent bystander in which feelings of culpability, helplessness, and remorse develop. Rivers et al. (2009) found that,

> Witnesses may worry about or assume that they too will be victimized at some point and this may account for the higher levels of interpersonal sensitivity we observed. Some students who witness others being bullied, but who are nevertheless not directly involved, may experience a degree of cognitive dissonance resulting from the discrepancy between their desire to intervene and their lack of action. (220)

Participants' descriptions of bullying and harassment in this study did not directly address bystanders or observers; however, overall social support dissatisfaction (31%) of participants may have been influenced by perceptions that their peers and teachers did not intervene or take supportive action. Based on the findings of this study, dance educators are encouraged to reflect upon their own bystander experiences (whether silent or active) and to revisit notions about intervention in their teaching practices.

6.3.   *Deep listening*

Although much of the literature investigated here emerges from a social-cognitive perspective, I finish in my voice as a critical interpretive researcher and by turning to the moral aspects of bullying and harassment, "insofar as it involves intending to hurt another person or behaving in a way that causes harm to others" (Bosacki, Marini, and Dane 2006, 231). A moral education approach to bullying extends beyond formulating, articulating, posting, and policing rules, as Jacobson (2010) describes:

> Moral education moves from a program or a set of tools, to a conversation, a relationship between student and teacher; a relationship that involves listening, knowing and learning. [D]eep listening requires a reciprocity … not only students listening to teachers, but teachers listening to students. Moral education means taking seriously those we educate, living in reciprocal relationships with them. And, again, relationship always requires deep listening. (446)

Every time a courageous nine-year-old boy in one of our dance classes is teased and humiliated in front of his peers, we have failed to listen deeply to our programme and school. Every time a 12-year-old boy who has mustered the self-confidence to study dance is denigrated by his father and brothers, we have failed to listen deeply to our programme and our relationships with parents. Every time a devoted ninth-grader in our dance company drops out because he can no longer tolerate getting slammed into his locker and being threatened physically, we have failed to listen deeply to him, our school, and our personal responsibility. Every time we accept that "this is just how it is," we have failed to listen deeply to ourselves and the aims of dance education. Careful empathetic listening allows dance educators to call upon our strongest commitments to human dignity and our beliefs about dance education.

Notes

1. For example, see the US Department of Health and Human Services "Stop Bullying" programme at http://www.stopbullying.gov/.
2. Research indicates that approximately 50% of professional male dancers and male dance students in the US are gay or bisexual as compared to 4–10% in the general population (see Bailey and Oberschneider 1997; Hamilton 1998; Risner 2009).
3. Qualitative survey data are presented by bringing the participants' words into conversation with one another (pseudonyms used). Their responses are verbatim, without grammar editing or spelling and punctuation correction. Selection of participants' open-ended responses was based on a triangulation of quantitative survey data, open-ended qualitative responses, and dominant themes.
4. Extensive research on male dancers' experiences has been published since 2001. See Gard (2001–2006), Keyworth (2001), Lehikoinen (2006), Polesek and Roper (2011), Risner (2002–2010), and Williams (2003), among others.

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