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THE APPLICATION OF SOMATICS IN FOLK DANCE INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

A somatic approach and experience can lead folk dancers back to the very source of dance, where its forms appear as spontaneous expressions of a natural inner state. According to the dominant paradigm of movement, the body is an organ that performs mechanical processes whose functioning is predictable and causal. In contrast to positivist science, somatics represents a new paradigm in which the body is a sensitive, living organism—a dynamic network of energies—and is in constant dialogue with both its external and internal environments. Confidence in one's own bodily functioning is key; through this, the bodily sensations during movement can lead to a deeper awareness, understanding, acceptance, and possibly even transformation of that functioning. I describe three specific practical applications involving elements of the Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT): becoming aware of energy lines in individual body parts, dancing with different focal points of attention, and preparing for specific technical elements of folk dance using Skinner's body graphics and movement study exercises. SRT leads to a released state, in which deeper body–mind integration, development, and change may take place.

Keywords: somatics, folk dance, Skinner Releasing Technique, dance education

1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how somatics supports folk dancing and how the Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT; Skinner Releasing Network, n.d.) can be applied in folk dance instruction. First, I will briefly discuss somatics—what the term means and what this new approach entails—and then go into more detail about the relaxation technique developed by Joan Skinner. I will explain the reasons and objectives that may justify incorporating a somatic approach, and then offer specific suggestions for possible ways to apply it in folk dance instruction.

I have been folk dancing since childhood, and for nearly 10 years I have been studying various somatic methods and movement systems (such as the Skinner Releasing Technique, contact improvisation, Body-Mind Centering, the Feldenkrais Method, and hatha yoga). A few years ago, I happened to complete both a folk dance instructor training program and a somatic movement education program at

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the Somatic Dialogues Academy, which is accredited by ISMETA (the International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association). Rather than finding these two areas of knowledge and experience separate or incompatible, I discovered that there was considerable potential for them to intersect in beneficial ways (Mikuli, 2025).

What exactly is somatics? Gál (2024) traces the concept to Thomas Hanna's understanding of the body:

> Thomas Hanna was the first to imbue the term 'soma' (Greek for 'body') with a new meaning—that is, to use it as a concept denoting the body as experienced from within, thereby separating the word 'body' from its objectified meaning. In other words, in somatic, first-person singular bodily experience, we are aware of the internal processes taking place within our bodies; we are able to direct our attention to specific bodily sensations and movement, and we understand our body's internal signals (p. 1).

We discover movement and motion through mindfulness and attention directed inward. Gál goes on to state that "when we have an internal experience of our body, the body and mind do not become separate; the experience pertains to a unified whole" (p. 4).

According to the concept of somatic education, learning is an internalized sensorimotor process designed to enable us to perceive and consciously control our physiological processes (Hanna, 1990). Instead of focusing on the expected form of a movement or posture, attention is directed toward body parts, their connections, and bodily sensations, thereby creating opportunities for various processes of self-transformation and reorganization to begin. By recognizing old patterns, we become aware of processes that previously occurred unconsciously, making room for new possibilities in movement control. Thus, the somatic approach can support not only movement but virtually any area of life.

2 THE NECESSITY OF SOMATIC MOVEMENT EDUCATION AND ITS POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

Folk dance has traditionally been woven itself into the events of human life—both celebrations (ritual and ceremonial dances) and everyday life—as dance gatherings were one of the main forms of social interaction for all age groups until the end of the 19th century (Pesovár, 1990).

Once the natural transmission of tradition ceased, the social function of folk dance—which had encompassed and held together all aspects of life—was disrupted in the changing, urbanizing living environments. Folk dance emerged in entirely new ways across different social strata, taking on new roles and significance (see revival movements; Kovács, 2021, pp. 83–87).

Although contemporary forms of folk dance present a very complex picture, an approach that treats the body—and the dancer—as an object is often evident not only in village folk dance, which has been reduced to stage performance, and in artistic folk dance, which has evolved into a competitive sport, but also in folk dancing at dance houses. According to this view, the "machine" (the body) practices, refines, and develops its movements to deliver maximum performance. Body parts are brought into perfect physical condition, and movements are executed with precision. The

goal is to achieve spectacular and flawlessly executed movements. Behind full-length performances featuring breathtaking physical feats—and even behind village processional dances—lie customs that have been almost completely altered and forms and figures that have been transformed. In the long run, there are dancers awaiting knee surgery, limping, and gradually losing their mobility. The relentless execution of required movements (with the will focused on the goal) results in repeated injuries and painful movement, moving dancers ever further away from what is considered "authentic".

Through the experience and practice of physical presence and awareness, dancers can experience this change even during performance. The movements in somatic exercises arise from the body as experienced from within; they develop naturally, almost happening on their own; they are born of letting go rather than an act of will, thereby reducing the risk of injury. Through relaxation, unnecessary bodily tension is released, freeing energy that can then be channeled toward heightened bodily awareness (of bones, muscles, joints, and tissue tone), a deeper experience of the present moment, or free improvisation.

Introducing a somatic approach and awareness into folk dance instruction and practice can lead to a safer, more effortless, and more authentic execution of dance movements, as well as to their rediscovery. In my own experience, connecting with the source of movements through inner experience makes dancing more conscious and, at the same time, more liberated. Through exercises involving focused attention, subtle perception, and mindfulness, "the experience of movement is no longer the sensation of movements, but the movement of sensation" (Gál, 2024, p. 5). The movements of a body traversed by consciousness result in confident, self-affirming movement, that is, authentic dance.

3 SKINNER RELEASING TECHNIQUE

Bridget Davis (as cited in Gál, 2024) describes the Skinner Releasing Technique as follows:

> SRT includes image-guided (imaginative) exercises, partner graphics involving touch to achieve body alignment, and movement studies. Together, these alleviate bodily tension and lead to effortless, clear, and precise movement. This fosters body awareness that encompasses the entire body and our very being (p. 5).

In Skinner's relaxation technique, a guided attentional process aimed at letting go and relaxing, students enter a state of openness conducive to learning. Similar to autogenic training, this process takes practitioners to levels beneath conscious control. This is a simple, tension-free state of inner calm, yet it is also one of alert readiness, conducive for perceiving new stimuli (Skinner et al., 1979). Here, consciousness is focused, and sensation is heightened. Instructions that direct attention to specific parts of the body establish a connection with the qualities of tension experienced there. From there, images of letting go lead further toward development and change, allowing for deeper integration of body and mind (Skura, 1990). These images exert their influence indirectly through the imagination. They are largely poetic images in which basic anatomical principles or images of mechanical balance appear, bringing

the cooperation between the skeletal and nervous systems to the forefront. The state of rest gives way to movement, in which perception, mental imagery during the execution of movements, and creative processes play important roles. Through the repetition of exercises, changes in the neuromuscular system occur gradually (Gál, 2024, p. 3).

4 THE APPLICATION OF SRT IN FOLK DANCE CLASSES

By incorporating exercises, partner work, and imagery from Skinner's relaxation technique into dance instruction, we approach dance from the perspective of inner experience rather than form. I propose three possible approaches to applying SRT. The first is to prepare for folk dance practice using Skinner's movement study exercises; the second is to supplement folk dancing with various points of focus and imagery; the third is to raise awareness of energy flows in individual body parts.

4.1 Preparing for Folk Dance Practice with Skinner's Movement Study Exercises

Skinner's movement study exercises can be used to prepare for and explore specific themes. For example, if we want to prepare somatically for a dance from a specific region in which arm positioning and the hands play a prominent role (such as the Kalocsa march), arm-focused movement study exercises can help the dancer become familiar with the energy lines and anatomy of the arms as well as the roles of the shoulders, shoulder blades, and bones. The practice is preceded by a partner exercise, which SRT pedagogy refers to as "partner graphics". During this exercise, we can experience the arms as limbs that move freely and independently. We begin with relaxation, followed by mobilization, allowing our arms to follow paths of movement that may have never been explored before. This new experience and fresh perspective can help the dancer use their arms more consciously for the remainder of the class. The results may include freer, more effortless movements that originate from deeper within the body, as well as confident, refined arm use. Similar preparation can be applied to the legs, the spine, or various movement techniques, such as jumping, turning, and changing direction.

We can introduce the exercise with the following instructions:

Sit in a comfortable position; you can also sit on a chair! Close your eyes slightly and just let your whole body relax. Relax your shoulders and neck. Let the muscles in your neck and shoulders relax. Then start making small movements with your torso from side to side, and let your head follow the movement loosely, in a wave-like motion. Then move forward and backward as well. Imagine the area between your collarbones as a boat or a pool table, and your head as a ball on it—let it roll and sway from side to side and back and forth (5 minutes).

Next, we'll be working with our arms. Don't be surprised—we won't be practicing the usual movements this time. Today we'll use a different type of warm-up to raise awareness of and mobilize our arms. We'll be working with touch, but not in the usual way.

Please pair up.

Stand next to your partner and cup one of their shoulders with your hands on either side. Lift and lower the shoulder three times in a row.

One of you lifts the other's shoulder, while the other simply relaxes. Try to relax your shoulders and arms as you do this. I'll show you. (If necessary, demonstrate the movement.)

Then trace the energy lines of the shoulders—like this. (Demonstrate the movement.) *Start at the collarbone and go all the way to the tips of the fingers, just once. Then grasp your partner's shoulder again from the front and back, and guide it through a circular movement. This helps you become aware of the connection between the shoulder and shoulder blade, extending all the way down the back to the sacrum. Switch roles.*

Then take your partner's forearm in one hand and keep your other hand on their shoulder. This helps you become aware of the shoulder's position. The arm is completely relaxed. Try to let your partner support the weight of your arm and control its movement. For the person moving the arm: *Gently lift your partner's wrist; you can wiggle their elbow a little. Move the arm by the wrist without creating tension in the shoulder. Hold your partner's forearm with one hand under the wrist and the other under the elbow. With this stable support, move your partner's arm in circles, gently exploring its range of motion at a pace that allows them to consciously follow everything that's happening. If you sense that your partner is trying to support the weight of their arm or control its movement, slow down.*

Then perform a few smooth, sweeping movements from top to bottom. Switch roles (15 minutes).

Once everyone has worked on both arms, let the sensations guide your movements.

Please find a place for yourself in the space and, drawing on your memory of the previous exercise, move your arms however you like. Provide time for this exploratory movement; if participants find it difficult to begin improvisation, provide further guidance (music can also be incorporated):

Imagine threads extending from your fingertips, drawing lines in space. Use these threads to weave the space around you—draw! (7 minutes)

After half an hour of preparation, including a short break, the Kalocsa dance practice can begin, with a focus on various arm positions and movements.

An important part of the work is the introduction and use of various attention-guiding checklists, which guide the dancer's attention through the different parts of the body in the proper order, thereby preparing them for deeper layers of attention and perception. The five pillars of the process are as follows: identifying unnecessary tension by locating overly tensed points (e.g., a clenched jaw, raised shoulders, or curled fingers); freeing the breath (releasing held breath and finding the rhythm of natural, autonomous breathing); "softening" the joints to make movement more efficient and free (especially the hips, knees, and ankles), multidirectional alignment, that is, discovering the body as a system that expands and balances in all directions; and accepting gravity—in other words, a state of "allowing" rather than "doing" (Emslie, 2021).

4.2 Supplementing folk dance with various focal points of attention and imagery

Working with different focal points of attention can be incorporated into a warm-up or cool-down, or even serve as the central focus of a practice session. Focal points of attention established through body alignment can help release ingrained patterns of tension, reveal how they arise, and increase awareness of movements, the positions of individual body parts, and their spatial relationships.

After preparing the body, a more complex focus of attention can be introduced, for example, while practicing a slow Gypsy dance from Palatka:

In the next few minutes, as you dance, direct your attention to the sensation of your body weight. Notice when you are balanced while dancing and when you are off-balance. Notice when and where the majority of your weight is shifting, whether you have points of support, and, if so, how much weight you are transferring to your partner through them…

4.3 Becoming Aware of the Energy Directions of Individual Body Parts

Paying attention to the lines of energy drawn around individual body parts (e.g., the head, chest, pelvis), as well as to the body graphic tracing a figure-eight energy path around the entire body, activates the memory of psychophysical organization (Skura, 1990). I would incorporate these short partner exercises into the standard warm-up of traditionally structured folk dance classes; with consistent practice, the posture or body alignment (that best suits the dancer's body and which we might call "correct posture" here) will become second nature.

Here's a brief example of this part of the class:

Let's stand in a circle. Let's start by tracing the energy line of the head. I'll demonstrate, and then you can practice it on yourself.

Gently move your fingertips from the crown of your head toward your forehead, down across your face, then along your jawline; let your fingers move upward past your ears, continuing all the way up through the crown of your head along you're the axis of your body.

Repeat this a few times. Next, we'll learn the energy lines of the chest and pelvis; first, practice them in the air in front of you, then on your own body. After that, pair up and begin tracing them around each other without touching. Finally, you can trace the energy line around the whole body. If the drawing becomes a continuous, flowing movement, and the person whose energy lines are being traced is encouraged to move gently during the exercise, this can even develop into a full warm-up. Music can also be played during the exercise, and pairs can be given time to continue dancing for a longer period.

5 CONCLUSION

My various academic studies have led to new discoveries and experiences that have had a beneficial effect on my dancing. Experiencing somatic techniques and practicing deep, personal dances has enriched my folk dancing. When dancing the csárdás from Szék, I feel strength in my arms as I turn, notice the movement of my legs, pay attention to the music and my partner, and become aware of how deep and calm my breathing is. I notice which parts of my body are actively participating in the movement and which are not. I now realize that any part of my body that does not need to be tense at that moment can relax completely. While dancing circle dances from Gyimes and Moldva, the question arises in my mind: what is happening to my body's center? I pay attention to my pelvis as it moves, to the tone of the muscles and tissues surrounding it, and to my legs—and suddenly, the connection to the ground becomes clear. While dancing Transylvanian couple dances, I notice the sensation of trunk suspension in my upper body. I notice how my body glides through space, how

I "carry" the space of my ribcage; I realize that perhaps this happens most organically when I dare to surrender to the sensation of being held.

Drawing on my experiences, I began to incorporate certain somatic concepts, expressions, and ideas—and, more broadly, this new approach—into my folk dance classes as well. For my folk dance students, the somatic approach in folk dance classes has become second nature. The combination of these two teaching methods—the established, widely recognized methodology of folk dance instruction and the SRT approach—naturally began to function as a unified whole, proving to be an increasingly suitable tool for the processes of transmission, guidance, and introduction. The discovery and inner experience of sensations that arise during movement, along with the learning and imitation of specific forms and movements, are not mutually exclusive; rather, they coalesce into a unified whole within each individual, enabling dancers to perform in their own independent, authentic way.

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