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PHYSICAL WELL-BEING AS THE EXPERIENCE OF BODILY TRANSFORMATION AMONG LONG-TERM TANGO DANCERS IN BUDAPEST

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Abstract

This study examines how long-term, intensive Argentine tango dancing is connected to experiences of subjective physical well-being among middle-aged adults in Budapest. The research interprets Argentine tango as a complex social, cultural, and bodily practice in which movement, touch, music, improvisation, attunement to a partner, and communal participation are closely intertwined in shaping dancers' relationship to the body. The empirical material consists of 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews with amateur social dancers who have danced tango for many years and on a weekly basis, as well as long-term anthropological fieldwork and participant observation in the Argentine tango milieu of Budapest. The analysis shows that most participants interpreted tango dancing as an important source of their physical well-being. Dancing contributed to the development of body awareness, coordination, posture, balance, vitality, and bodily confidence. At the same time, the narratives also revealed ambivalent experiences: tango was associated with pain, asymmetries, and aesthetic norms concerning the gendered body and the ageing body. The article argues that physical well-being in tango is not simply a positive health outcome, but a continuously retuned, social, and embodied process.

Keywords: physical well-being, Argentine tango, dance anthropology

1 INTRODUCTION

This article investigates how tango dancing, as a complex social practice, shapes and helps articulate experiences of subjective physical well-being among middle-aged individuals in Hungary who have danced tango intensively over a long period. The material presented here forms part of a broader anthropological study of the sociocultural field of Argentine tango in Hungary. One subproject within this research examines the relationship between Argentine tango dancing and well-being. The narratives collected from amateur social tango dancers reveal several important dimensions of well-being; the present article analyses the material related to physical well-being.

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The focus of this study is the physical body of tango dancers: the question is how Argentine tango practices relate to personal experiences of the body's condition, changes, and perception. I interpret physical well-being not merely as a matter of health, physiology, or motor coordination, but as a lived, social, and culturally shaped experience that becomes perceptible in concrete situations of dancing. The research therefore explores how dancers speak about the transformation of their bodies, their capacity for exertion, their limits and tensions, and how they learn to perceive their own movement and that of others in new ways.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Tango in Hungary: Movement convention and a complex sociocultural field

As a starting point, it is worth recalling that since the 1920s, Argentine tango, as a movement practice that has become a global phenomenon, has existed and developed as a partnered social dance in which a leader (typically male) and a follower (typically female) dance in an embrace. Bodily communication and nonverbal dialogue between partners are of central importance, since tango is not a sequence of predetermined steps, but an improvisation built from previously learned movement elements (Kovács, 2025).

Argentine tango is not a standardized ballroom dance; it is also typically a leisure and participatory activity. Although a performative branch also exists in Hungary, the primary purpose of its stage presentation seems to be to display, introduce, and popularize the movement system. The main features, chronological development, and institutional system of the Budapest tango infrastructure are discussed in a separate study (Kovács, 2025); here I summarize a few relevant points. Argentine tango emerged in Budapest in the 1990s as a narrow subcultural initiative. Worldwide, the social tango-dancing population is predominantly composed of highly educated middle-aged people; this is also true of the Hungarian group, with the difference that, compared with Western Europe, more young people have joined this dance activity in Hungary. On the basis of observations at tango events and informed estimates, it is likely that the actively dancing tango population during the research period consisted of a few hundred people. The sociocultural field of Argentine tango in Hungary (see Bourdieu, 1998) is also part of a global system and operates in continuous interaction with it.

Although some basic tango techniques can be practiced alone, most tango-dancing situations require at least two people; thus, tango is fundamentally a community activity. It typically takes place at organized dance occasions. Because of its communal character, intensive tango dancing also has infrastructural preconditions: regular opportunities to dance must be accessible to dancers. The availability of such opportunities varies across the world and within Europe in space and time (Lacarrieu & Maronese, 2014; Morel, 2016), but their detailed presentation lies beyond the scope of this article. It is important to emphasize that local tango institutions and the quality of dance knowledge have undergone enormous development over the past two and a half decades in Hungary. The range of Budapest tango dance nights, or *milongas* in Spanish, now makes it possible for dancers to dance every day of the week. This is remarkable even when compared internationally. In addition, Hungary and the wider region regularly host international weekend events with several hundred participants,

such as tango marathons and tango festivals (Kovács, 2020). The conditions above show that participants in the region have ample opportunities to engage in the intensive practice of Argentine tango (Kovács, 2025).

2.2 Interpretive Framework

2.2.1 Physical well-being in relation to tango dancing

Well-being is a complex and multidimensional concept, the definition and measurement of which pose methodological challenges in the social sciences, health sciences, and psychology alike. In the literature, it is often examined in terms of life satisfaction, health, quality of life, emotional balance, and the sense of belonging of home. Well-being can be understood along both subjective and objective dimensions: the former refers to individuals' self-interpretations concerning their own life, bodily and mental state, and emotional experiences, while the latter is more closely related to measurable factors such as income, living conditions, health status, or social position (Kulcsár, 2020; Lawton, 1984; Zautra & Hempel, 1984).

Research on movement, dance, and bodily practice clearly shows that physical well-being cannot be simply reduced to health indicators or physical performance. The example of yoga draws attention to the fact that regular, long-term, and more intensive practice may be associated with more favorable experiences of physical and mental health, as well as subjective and spiritual well-being (Cseh et al., 2026; Tornóczky et al., 2023). Similar issues are raised by qualitative studies that examine personal stories, motivations, obstacles, and sustaining factors related to physical activity, for example, among people living with chronic illness or young adults facing mental health difficulties (de Boer et al., 2022; Hovland et al., 2023). These approaches are particularly important for tango research, as they make it possible to grasp the subjective, narrative, and relational dimensions of physical well-being.

The effects of tango on health and well-being have been examined in a number of contexts. Research discusses the possible supportive role of tango in relation to Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, dementia and cognitive decline, cancer, as well as depression and anxiety (Bracco et al., 2023; Lötzke et al., 2015; Oei et al., 2023; Pinniger et al., 2012; Schad et al., 2023; Trinchillo et al., 2024). Other studies emphasize the significance of tango for physical and social well-being in older adults, particularly in terms of balance, gait, endurance, functional mobility, social relationships, activity participation, and self-esteem (Foster et al., 2013; Hackney et al., 2015; Lötzke et al., 2015; McKinley et al., 2008).

Among empirical studies on Argentine tango, the study by Witkoś and Hartman-Petrycka (2021) is particularly important, as it analyses tango's role in health maintenance and its effects on physical well-being, as well as emotional, personal, and social life among female dancers. The authors also examine concrete bodily experiences such as sleep, menstruation, and the intensity of physical activity, which shows that the bodily effects of tango dancing may appear in the more subtle bodily rhythms of everyday life.

The study of Quiroga Murcia et al. (2009), by contrast, examined the role of music and the partner in the emotional and neurohumoral effects of Argentine tango, including changes in cortisol and testosterone levels. These examples suggest that

tango can be understood simultaneously as physical activity, social interaction, a musical-emotional experience, and a practice of bodily self-perception.

The present research is connected to these approaches, but focuses primarily on the lived, narrative, and social experiences of physical well-being rather than the measurable effects of tango. The question is not only whether tango improves well-being, but also what bodily changes dancers perceive, how they speak about their bodies, and what meanings they attach to movement, touch, balance, fatigue, pain, liberation, or attunement with a partner. In this sense, tango is not only a research site for studies of well-being, but also a complex social-bodily practice through which the intertwined physical, mental, emotional, and relational dimensions of well-being become empirically accessible.

2.2.2 The tango-dancing body: Models of well-being

To interpret physical well-being, the article draws inspiration from several models of well-being and health that can be brought into dialogue with one another. As a point of departure, I consider especially important those approaches that do not treat well-being exclusively as an objective health status or measurable physiological outcome but rather interpret it in terms of the interrelations between bodily functioning, activity, participation, and environmental conditions. In this respect, the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) and the biopsychosocial model on which it rests are useful starting points (WHO, 2001). This model describes health and well-being as the result of interactions between bodily condition, activity, social participation, and environmental factors. For the study of social tango dancing, this is significant, as physical well-being is manifested not only in the physical condition of the dancing body, but also in the ability to dance, participation in milongas and marathons, navigation on the dance floor, cooperation with a partner, and access to the local tango infrastructure.

Further important perspectives for grasping the dynamic character of physical well-being are offered by salutogenesis and by the interpretation of well-being as a balance between resources and challenges. Aaron Antonovsky's theory of salutogenesis shifts the focus from the causes of disease to the factors that promote and maintain health, emphasizing the role of the sense of coherence (comprising comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness) in preserving health (Antonovsky, 1987). Similarly, Dodge and colleagues define well-being not as a static state but as a changing balance between the challenges that affect the individual and the psychological, social, and physical resources available to them (Dodge et al., 2012). This approach is particularly useful for interpreting the ambivalent bodily experiences of intensive tango dancing: tango may appear as a source of body awareness, endurance, and bodily confidence, while at the same time it may produce pain, injuries, fatigue, asymmetries, and negative feelings related to bodily appearance.

For the present investigation, body- and movement-centered interpretations of well-being are particularly useful, allowing physical well-being to be understood not merely in terms of health status or physical performance, but also as an embodied, sensed, and relational experience. These include the concept of physical literacy, research on body awareness, and the conceptual apparatus of proprioception and interoception, which offer tools for analyzing the embodied experience of well-being from the perspectives of

different disciplinary fields, including sport and movement studies, health psychology, psychophysiology, and neurophysiology. Physical literacy emphasizes motor competence, confidence, motivation, as well as knowledge and understanding related to physical activity; that is, it treats physical activity not simply as movement, but also as a process of learning and self-formation (Whitehead, 2010). Relatedly, research on body awareness (Mehling et al., 2009), as well as concepts of interoception (Craig, 2002) and proprioception (Proske & Gandevia, 2012), draw attention to the fact that physical well-being is also shaped through the perception of the body's internal signals, spatial position, movement, tensions, fatigue, and pain (Horváth et al., 2023).

In the study of Argentine tango, the concepts of proprioception and interoception are particularly useful analytical tools. Proprioception refers to the perception of the body's spatial position, movement, muscle tension, and force exertion; in other words, the capacity to perceive is the position and movement of the body and how it relates to its environment. Interoception, by contrast, denotes the perception of the body's internal physiological states, such as breathing, heartbeat, tension, pain, fatigue, energy level, or sweating. Finding the axis, shifting weight, balance, sensing the bodily impulses of leading and following, attunement to a partner, and navigation in the dance space primarily mobilize proprioceptive capacities, whereas fatigue, pain, capacity for exertion, the changing dynamics of breathing, or the sense of vitality can be better grasped as interoceptive experiences (Craig, 2002; Proske & Gandevia, 2012).

With the help of these concepts, physical well-being in tango can be understood not simply as an outcome of movement but as a changing, learnable capacity of internal and spatial bodily perception that is activated in social situations. In Argentine tango, these sensory processes are strongly linked to bodily cooperation with a partner: axis, embrace, leading and following, weight transfer, balance, musical responsiveness, and navigation on the dance floor are not isolated bodily skills but emerge through continuous attunement with other bodies. These considerations underpin the main anthropological claim of the article: physical well-being in tango is not simply an individual state of health, but an embodied, social, and relational process that is continuously retuned.

One of the main pillars of the interpretive framework is Thomas Csordas's concept of embodiment, developed in the 1980s, which grasps the body not as an object, but as the starting point of presence in the world and of experience (Csordas, 1990). Csordas's concept of embodiment draws on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological understanding of the body, which interprets the body not as an external object but as the basis of perception, action, and being-in-the-world. Csordas, however, further developed this philosophical understanding of the body in an anthropological direction: for him, embodiment is not merely the general ontological condition of the lived body, but a methodological paradigm through which culture and the self can be studied from the perspective of the body. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the bodily basis of perception, while Csordas, drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice and habitus, —argues that bodily experience is always culturally shaped, socially learned, and formed in an intersubjective medium. This paradigm is particularly productive for the analysis of Argentine tango, as dancers' posture, axis, touch, leading or following role, and attunement to a partner are simultaneously lived bodily experiences and practices learned in the sociocultural world of tango.

The resonance theory of the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa (Rosa, 2019) is also relevant to the notions above. Based on his analysis of the accelerating nature of modernity, this theory approaches the question of the good life not through the possession of resources, control, or the maximization of performance, but as a responsive and mutually transformative relationship with the world. In Rosa's theory, resonance denotes a relationship in which the subject feels called by something in the world and responds to it bodily and emotionally, while the relationship itself shapes both sides and never becomes entirely controllable or predictable (Rosa, 2019). This approach can be closely connected to the concept of embodiment insofar as the relationship with the world comes into being not as an abstract mental process but as a lived bodily experience realized through movement, touch, rhythm, and affective responses. Argentine tango is a particularly vivid site of resonance: the dancer responds simultaneously to the music, to the impulses of the partner's body, to the quality of the embrace, to the dynamics of the dance floor, and to their own bodily states. In this context, physical well-being is not simply a state of health or functioning, but the experience that the body is capable of connecting, responding, attuning, and changing in relation to another body, to music, and to communal space. Rosa's theory therefore helps explain why physical well-being in tango cannot be described solely as motor competence or health outcomes: during a positive dance experience, the body does not merely function but enters into a resonant relationship with the world.

3 METHODS AND SAMPLE

On the basis of the discussions above and observations in the field, as well as the extensive literature on tango, it was reasonable to assume that long-term intensive tango dancing affects physical and mental well-being. Several methods, including clinical examinations and measurements, could be used to explore this relationship; however, the literature also shows that individual experiences and perceptions of bodily health can be approached with the tools of cultural anthropology, through qualitative methods, and through the individual narratives of lives shaped by dance (Eli & Kay, 2015; Ganesh, 2025) by exploring subjective well-being. In regard to the research questions and methodology of this study, it is important to note that the author has been a participant in the Hungarian world of Argentine tango for 28 years, albeit with varying intensity and in different roles. This circumstance fundamentally shaped the present investigation, while also enabling long-term participant observation in the sociocultural field of Argentine tango in Budapest.

3.1 Methods

The qualitative methodological approach of the present research can be defined as an interpretive thematic analysis based on anthropological fieldwork, participant observation, and semi-structured qualitative interviews. The study does not aim for representative sampling, statistical generalization, or clinical effect measurement, but at exploring how participants with a long history of intensive tango practice interpret and narrate their own experiences of physical well-being. In this sense, the research treats qualitative interview not simply as a means of collecting data

but as an opportunity for meaning-making, in which interlocutors articulate their personal experiences in relation to their own life histories, bodily memories, and sociocultural milieu (Kvale, 2005).

The main analytical strategy was interpretive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis proved suitable as it provided a sufficiently flexible framework for identifying recurring patterns of meaning emerging from the 20 interviews and from fieldwork experiences, while also allowing the various dimensions of physical well-being (e.g., body awareness, posture, balance, endurance, fatigue, pain, injury, ageing, and bodily attunement to a partner) to be interpreted separately and then in relation to one another. During coding, I identified repeatedly occurring themes, experiential patterns, and interpretive turns in the interview texts, and then organized them into analytical units in light of the research question concerning physical well-being (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This article focuses on narratives from the interview material that concern physical well-being. Although the interviews also touched on several other dimensions of well-being, such as mental, emotional, social, relational, and life-course experiences, their detailed, combined analysis would exceed the scope of a single article. The independent examination of physical well-being, however, is especially justified by the nature of the practice under study: Argentine tango is a partnered, improvisational social dance based on touch, posture, balance, and bodily attunement, in which the body appears as the primary medium of perception, connection, and self-interpretation. The focus on physical well-being therefore does not mean excluding other dimensions of well-being but rather defining an analytical perspective through which the embodied, social, and relational characteristics of tango can be examined particularly well.

The first thematic block of the interview guide focused on personal tango histories. Further question blocks targeted various dimensions of well-being in relation to dancing. To explore physical well-being, I asked participants about their sense of general bodily health, tango dancing habits, participation in other forms of movement practice alongside dance, possible physical injuries, and experiences of bodily development and change over time.

The research sample included middle-aged amateur tango dancers, both men and women, who had danced regularly for at least five years. I sought to include participants representing a range of family backgrounds and circumstances. Twenty interviews were conducted with 10 male and 10 female social tango dancers. Five interviews took place online and 15 in person. Nineteen interviews were conducted in Hungarian and one in English. The recordings amounted to 38 hours in total, and their transcripts comprise more than 1000 pages. The interview texts were coded and analyzed using ATLAS.ti.

At the beginning of each interview, interlocutors gave informed verbal consent to the recording of the interview and the anonymous use of their responses in scholarly publications based on the research material. For smoother readability and to avoid possible identification through their Hungarian names, I assigned Spanish pseudonyms to the interviewees. I also edited the interview excerpts to reduce the identifiability of interviewees through the editing of the text.

3.2 Sample

Of my 20 interlocutors, 18 were in their 50s, while one man and one woman were in their 40s. The average age of the interviewees was 52.6 years for females and 55.6 years for men. The women had danced tango for an average of 15 years, compared to 18.4 years for men. Reviewing the interviews revealed that among both women and men, five had encountered tango when they were young, in their 20s or 30s, while five women and five men started tango dancing as members of the middle-aged cohort, in the second half of their 40s or in their 50s.

With one exception, all participants held higher education degrees and could be classified as belonging to the urban middle class. Given the substantial time commitment involved in tango, certain aspects of the participants' employment circumstances are also important. Four had achieved financial independence, left their previous workplaces, and were not employed. During the research, it emerged that two of them had begun pursuing tango professionally and had started teaching it. Ten worked as employees or entrepreneurs, but with flexible schedules and predominantly from home. Six interlocutors worked fixed hours and commuted to their workplace. Of the 20 interviewees, 15 had no daily caregiving responsibilities lived either alone, with a partner, or in a household with an adult child, while only five lived in family households together with school-age children and/or a partner.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Narrating Physical Well-Being in the Interviews

In this section, I review the key themes that emerged from the interviews in relation to long-term, intensive participation in social tango and physical well-being. Several interviewees shared similar experiences; in discussing these, I do not aim to give voice to every interviewee, but rather to present the recurring themes in their experiences.

4.1.1 Tango as Bodily Life-Course and Intensive Practice

Movement antecedents
Fifteen of the interviewees had engaged in sport or dance before starting tango, mostly in partnered social dances (e.g., salsa, competitive ballroom dance, West Coast swing, Hungarian folk dance, or hobby rock and roll). More men than women had substantial prior experience in movement practices: only one male participant reported that tango was the first movement system he had learned. Interviewees generally reported intensive participation in tango in recent years, dancing several times a week at events in Budapest and abroad. However, their level of participation in the activity varied over time. Some had even taken breaks lasting several years, and this was especially true of those who had been dancing tango the longest.

Regularity and intensity: Milongas and marathons
As noted above, in recent years the tango infrastructure in Budapest has made daily communal tango dancing possible. The amateur social dancers who participated in

the research varied in regard to the amount of time spent dancing tango each week. *Carlos*, who most frequently attended Budapest's weekly milongas, described his routine as follows: "The reason I can dance like this is that I go down every evening. I go every day. In general, over the past seven years, if I add it up, I have spent an average of six hours a day with tango." Most interviewees typically attended two or three evening clubs per week. *Rosana* summarized her own practice, which can be considered typical of the research sample, as follows: "Three milongas a week, plus one West Coast swing, so I dance four evenings. And I also take two private tango lessons a week." There was considerable variation in how much time participants regularly spent on tango-related activities beyond milongas.

In terms of the intensity and transformative role of dance on the body, multi-day international tango marathons held over weekends are especially important. Their number has risen steadily since the 2010s (Kovács, 2020, 2025), and their geographical center of gravity within Europe has shifted eastward in recent years. Tango marathons often welcome several hundred participants; at the most popular events, registration can be competitive, and followers applying individually may be at a disadvantage. Organizers select primarily on the basis of dance skill, community embeddedness, and personal appeal. Over a single weekend, marathons typically provide opportunities for 20 to 30 hours of intensive dancing for participants who generally already have considerable dance experience. They are important sites for the deepening of embodied improvisational capacities that require continuous adaptation to dance partners and for the formation of a tango-specific bodily habitus (Kovács, 2022).

Only five interviewees did not consider regular participation in tango marathons a central element of their tango routine, although they had danced at such events on a few occasions. For these participants, personal circumstances, lifestyle, individual habits, and financial factors all played a role in their choice. The experienced marathon-goer *Juán* initially attended four or five marathons per year, "but then it became very dense; there were years when I went twice a month." *Marta* took up tango in her early 50s, and over the past year or two, tango marathons had come to play a central role in her life. On average, she traveled to two weekend events per month; the only factors limiting her participation were the competitiveness of the events and the financial resources available to her. *Claudia* began dancing tango after the COVID-19 pandemic and described how the relative proportions of her tango-related activities had changed over time: "At first I went to only three or four marathons a year. Recently I have attended more and more marathons, and fewer Hungarian milongas. Actually, if I look at the proportions, how much of my life is taken up by tango (...) only the proportions have changed between learning, foreign marathons, and Hungarian milongas."

Tango-related activities

In addition to participation in milongas and marathons, the experienced social tango dancers interviewed reported regularly engaging in a variety of tango-related activities. With varying frequency, all of them sought to refine their movement in dance classes. The most common practice was participation in workshops given by visiting foreign masters. Several interviewees also studied the movement patterns of *tango nuevo*, a recent stylistic trend in tango, in a weekly course taught by a local Hungarian tango master. Nearly half of the interviewees reported that, either occasionally or

regularly, they had taken private tango lessons in the period immediately preceding our conversation.

In recent years, *Nicolás*'s ability to perform dynamic, controlled, and improvisational tango movements had rapidly and visibly improved. This development was also clearly perceptible to his partners. He emphasized the importance of regular individual practice: "Learning is not when I go to a tango presentation, but when I practice. The school and the tango class are a presentation. They show you what you don't know, or what you could know, and how it could be done, but if you don't do it I don't know how many times, it won't work. To improve, I can't solve that with one partner. That is why I practice every week with several partners." Although not with the same regularity or methodical approach, several of the interviewees practiced weekly with one or more partners in the period preceding their interviews.

Questions about tango-related activities revealed that, in addition to the pastimes mentioned so far, some of the interviewees—typically leaders—regularly spent time listening to tango music, analyzing the musical characteristics of particular tango orchestras from the perspective of the dancer (cf. Stepputat, 2025), as well as watching tango dance videos and often reviewing them frame by frame in order to better understand the dynamics of movement sequences. A few mentioned that they also taught tango regularly in various arrangements. Several participants engaged in focused practice with a partner when preparing for occasional performances or dance demonstrations intended to promote tango, or memorized choreographies from video recordings.

4.2 Sensing the Transformation of the Body

4.2.1 Subjective physical well-being and tango

The middle-aged interviewees unanimously described their own general physical condition and bodily health in positive terms. Most described the bodily condition they experienced as very good or, in several cases, "excellent for their age, spontaneously linking it to tango dancing as in the case of *Rolando*: "I experience this, especially compared with my peers, that tango really helps keep the body healthy in every respect." *Claudia* detailed specific improvements: "If I had not started tango, I would already have a spinal problem. I think this because the lordosis section [the curvature of the lumbar spine] had become very straight because of all the sedentary work (...) and when I started tango, there is this particular tango posture, and because of that the lordosis began to develop again. Earlier it had already caused problems, I had a small hernia, and since then I have had no trouble with my spine."

In the case of the middle-aged tango dancers, the good physical condition they reported had also been shaped by various factors over the course of their lives, including their previous movement experience, social and financial circumstances, family upbringing. At the same time, more than two-thirds of them also practiced some additional form of movement alongside tango, primarily yoga or Pilates. Yoga was more popular among leaders, whereas Pilates was more common among followers. They explained that they practiced these forms of movement partly to improve body awareness and partly to correct bodily asymmetries arising from tango practice and compensate for its lack of stretching.

Their experience of their general physical condition and bodily health was mostly framed positively, as reflected in *Valencia*'s account: "I feel that my quality of life is simply better; I feel better because of it." At the same time, the more detailed narratives provided a more nuanced understanding of the sometimes seemingly contradictory relationship between physical well-being and tango dancing, revealing the specific ways in which the interviewees experienced deterioration or improvements in their physical condition. Due to the characteristics and internal logic of the tango movement system, the responses of leaders and followers differed in several respects, revealing a distinct pattern.

4.2.2 Hip and spine

"It's not such a rosy situation," observed *Romina*, who had danced tango for more than 20 years, "so inside I do struggle with one or two things that tango does not help but worsens. (...) Such things are lower-back pain and the hip-area story. And a few years ago (...) my hip hurt so badly that I could not walk. (...) Then the physiotherapist told me that with tango I was constantly working against myself." Several participants made a distinction between bodily conditions, pain, injuries, or limitations that predated their involvement in tango and those resulting from tango dancing. *Rosana*, for example, described her experience as follows: "I already had a spinal curvature or twist or I don't know what before, and this one-sidedness, because in tango one side is open and the other closed, the two sides do not move in the same way. I think this made it worse." Fewer leaders reported lower back problems, but *Carlos* was among those who did, attributing his symptoms to one of the basic tango movements, the *ocho* accompanied by hip rotation: "Well, my lower back hurts; it sometimes locks up from the ocho."

4.2.3 The foot

The foot was the body part whose changes—both deterioration and improvement, as well as pain—were mentioned most frequently by female dancers in connection with intensive tango dancing. This can only be partly explained by the differences between the leader's and follower's movement systems in tango. More important was the role played by the customary dance attire used by follower's at tango events: stiletto sandals with eight- or nine-centimeter heels. The visually striking and costly phenomenon of women's tango footwear deserves research in its own right, but here I examine the experiences associated with wearing such footwear among the participants in this study. *Maria*, who has danced for more than 20 years, reported an unequivocally positive change: "At the beginning my feet got very tired in high heels; I could hardly wait to take them off after class. Of course, at that time tango shoes did not yet have built-in soft insoles. (...) But over the years my feet got used to the height and became very strong; they became the strongest part of my body! And I think my bunion improved too." *Claudia*, who spoke with the greatest enthusiasm about tango dancing among the interviewees, articulated a similar experience: "When I started wearing high heels five years ago, my feet hurt after two or three hours. Today we dance eight to ten hours straight, and I don't change into flats. (...) I use eight-centimeter heels. I quickly bought three pairs of flats, thinking maybe I would wear them in classes, but I don't use them at all, only

the high heels." Most followers, however, reported regular pain in their feet or soles, as well as a dilemma between conforming to tango's aesthetic ideal and prioritizing comfort. *Rosana* shared her own experiences with this issue: "I brave the high heels, everything for prettiness. I only use flat shoes—now there are these cute, nice-looking little tango boots—when it's already the third or fourth day of the marathon, when everyone is in them anyway, because everyone is struggling with this problem." The foot problems experienced by leaders, that is, by men (mostly affecting the knees and Achilles tendons), were typically linked not to tango but to other supplementary sports activities such as skiing, running, fencing, tennis, or basketball. Several also mentioned that these injuries and physical problems hindered them only in their other sports, but not in tango, or at least to a much lesser degree.

4.2.4 Body awareness, coordination, proprioception

Among positive changes, leaders and followers alike, almost without exception, cited improvements in their posture and body awareness, which they experienced not only while dancing but also in their everyday life. As one participant reported: "The whole body dances. There is already a body awareness. A body awareness that came about through tango. There is a posture through tango; I step differently. My bodily movement has changed, so I walk differently on the street too."

The male interviewees mentioned improvements in bodily coordination and in their capacity for navigation and spatial perception while dancing among the most positive bodily developments they had experienced. According to *Santiago*, "in the milonga, the male role—perhaps in the whole of tango—is most clearly visible in navigation. Because I, for example, lead by using all the movements that happen in tango. So I don't lead in such a way that everything starts from me, (...) but I also channel what starts from my partner, whether intentionally or accidentally, because there are movements that seem intentional to me, a movement intended as a step, and there are movements that come from the space because someone steps there, or because your heel catches in a skirt, or you get tangled up with someone, you have to stop, or keep the distance. For me, leading is made up of this." *Santiago*'s statement about navigation relates to the previously discussed concept of proprioception, or deep sensation. The medical and anatomical term refers to the capacity by which the body senses its own position, movement, and muscle tension in space. Three participants in the follower role mentioned that they enjoyed dancing with their eyes closed; in their case, both this preference and their ability to do so skillfully may be linked to the development of their proprioceptive capacities.

4.2.5 Sport value, endurance, fatigue

During the interviews, the question arose as to whether the middle-aged dancers participating in the study attributed sport value to tango dancing and whether they viewed it as a form of exercise. In their direct responses to this question, a characteristic difference appeared between leaders and followers. Surprisingly, most leaders did not initially regard tango dancing as a form of physical training, whereas most followers did. This was unexpected, since leaders not only move their own bodies in a coordinated way but simultaneously direct the movement of the follower through bodily impulses, that is, they do more physical work.

When the question was explored further, the picture became more nuanced. Those who had previously participated in sports at a serious or even competitive level were less inclined to regard tango as a form of exercise, while those for whom tango was the first movement system they had learned were much more inclined to do so. This was reflected in the statements of *Romina*, a former competitive athlete and a perfectionist in her approach to high-level tango dancing: "Not at all. I mean, not for me. I know there are people for whom it is. But I don't feel its sport value physically." *José*, who had also competed in sports as a child, initially shook his head and waved dismissively before continuing: "Of course it has." For *Rosana*, "this [tango] is physical maintenance, so it is also a good sport. If you only look at step count, how much a person walks at a milonga... (...) Since I have been dancing tango, the other [forms of physical activity] have gradually fallen away, because I more or less felt that tango took over these functions, practically, or that tango could do all of these things too." *Carlos* described a similar experience as follows: "I go down [to dance tango] because, I don't know, now I don't feel like running around Margaret Island, and if I go down to dance, it is a pleasant movement. And then I switch off, and I move, and everything." *Victoria*, for whom tango was also her exclusive form of physical activity, described the pleasure of dancing tango intensively five or six evenings a week, her increased endurance, and her relationship with fatigue: "For me, how shall I put it, my endurance improved. (...) But a person does not experience it as a physical task, a tiring sequence of movements, but as something enjoyable. (...) And especially in the first period it was interesting that even if I went to bed at midnight or one o'clock and had to get up early, somehow the amount of sleep was enough. So the whole thing filled me up so much, gave me energy, that I did not miss the sleep." *Santiago*, who has danced tango for nearly three decades, drew attention to an intriguing temporal change in the bodily experience of the leader's role, closely related to the sensation of fatigue: "For me [tango dancing] absolutely counts as movement; in fact, in the first half of my tango life I specifically sweated. But now I move so economically that I rarely sweat. (...) I think I now step more economically, even though I use it more effectively." In addition to *Santiago*, three other leaders among the interviewees who had been dancing tango the longest articulated this temporal development in the bodily economy of leading in very similar terms.

4.3 Relational and normative dimensions of physical well-being

4.3.1 Physical well-being as relational experience

Santiago's earlier observations about navigation also draw attention to one of the most interesting findings of this research: physical well-being is realized dynamically through interaction and active engagement with other bodies; that is, physical well-being in tango is relational. Hartmut Rosa's concept of resonance, discussed in the introduction, provides a useful framework for interpreting these narratives and experiences. *Nicolás* first experienced a similar sense of bodily recognition during one of his first tango classes with his female teacher: "So what was interesting there in that class was that something happened, and then the teacher stood in front of me, and she connected. And then I said, this is so interesting, she spreads herself

over me with her whole chest, bang! I thought, this too is a way of feeling life." *Claudia* articulated an experience similar to *Santiago*'s: "there is something special, something that grips you (...) I can zoom in on the person to such an extent, and I suppose he on me, that there I feel this very strong experience, as if we really were an animal with four legs moving together, or moving in harmony, well, that we move together. So we are one body. For me the connection is the most important thing, definitely." *Romina* illustrated the relational nature of physical well-being associated with tango dancing and the dynamic attunement that emerges between dance partners by recalling a concrete dance memory: "Perhaps what I am talking about now is such an encounter... I had never in my life met that boy before, a new person with whom I had not danced. He invited me totally at random. Afterwards I saw in his eyes the astonishment and felt it in his body. At a marathon where they expect you to step out of your bubble and sometimes invite someone other than the people you always dance with. And then he invited me. And the way he led was perfect for me, for my body, neither too much nor too little. He left just enough time for the end of the movement, we felt the music in exactly the same way, I would have stopped at exactly the same place, slowed down at exactly the same place, breathed exactly where he breathed, quieted down exactly where he did, and it was like. Oh my God."

4.3.2 Ageing, decline, and the body's future in tango

The age of milonga participants arose in several contexts during the interviews, most often in relation to the age discrimination characteristic of the tango community. *Nicolás*'s remark illustrates this well: "Every girl is disadvantaged once she is over thirty, say, or thirty-five." The frequent negative experiences of age-based discrimination among dancers largely extend beyond questions of physical well-being. At the same time, responses to the question about participants' future in tango included uncertainties concerning the perceived limitations of the ageing body. Tango gives dancers an opportunity to imagine an active ageing body, while also making the body's physical limitations more apparent.

4.3.3 Body weight and body shape

The issue of changes in body weight also arises in broader public discourse on the relationship between movement and the body. Although the interviews did not include specific questions about body weight, nor about body image—which points beyond the scope of this article toward mental well-being—these topics nevertheless came up in several interviews. This also relates to an observation based on my long-term participation in Budapest's social tango scene: over the past few years, several of my interviewees have undergone noticeable physical changes affecting both their body weight and general quality of movement. Although this was also true of a few men, it seemed more common among women. Two leaders and one follower reported significant weight loss of 10 to 20 kilograms in recent years. The leaders associated this primarily with regular participation in other forms of movement and dietary changes rather than with tango dancing. Several women suggested that maintaining their weight was attributable not to increased physical activity, but to the aesthetic norms concerning the female body in the milieu of Argentine tango:

"tango forces you to pay more attention to yourself and it is necessary to maintain this"; or, as *Valencia* stated: "it is a constant..., tango strengthens body awareness, there is this constant attention, that if, say, I gain even just one kilo, which doesn't matter, but, say, I see it immediately in a tango dress."

5 DISCUSSION

The narratives indicate that tango's relationship to physical well-being is not shaped by isolated dance experiences but by longer periods of movement practice, changing changes in the intensity of participation over time, and consciously maintained practice routines. Participants' bodily experiences are shaped jointly by their previous experience in sports and dance, regular participation in Budapest milongas, concentrated periods of dancing at international marathons, and other activities such as classes, workshops, private lessons, individual practice, listening to music, and video analysis. In this context, physical well-being is not simply an effect of tango but the result of accumulated bodily knowledge and a commitment to tango as a way of life. Through regular and intensive participation, the body is not only challenged and trained but also gradually learns tango's distinctive movement world, forms of attention, and ways of adapting to others.

At the same time, the narratives also show that the relationship between tango and physical well-being cannot be described as a simple causal link in which dance automatically improves the condition of the body. In the accounts of the interviewees, tango appears instead as a sustained bodily practice that can simultaneously strengthen, sensitize, transform, and place strain on the body. Alongside improvements in posture, coordination, endurance, and body awareness, experiences of pain, injury, asymmetry, fatigue, and the need for supplementary forms of movement also recur. In the present study, physical well-being therefore denotes the process through which dancers learn to sense, interpret, and manage the changing states of their own bodies.

The narratives of bodily transformation also reveal that physical well-being is experienced simultaneously as proprioception and interoception. Axis, balance, navigation, sensing the partner's impulses, and dancing with closed eyes point to the finer perception of the body's spatial position and movement, while accounts of fatigue, sweating, pain, capacity for exertion, energy level, or pleasure in movement highlight the significance of attending to the body's internal states. Tango therefore not only develops movement skills, but also changes how dancers perceive the signals and limits of their bodies.

The interviews also show, however, that bodily transformation is not a neutral process: tango's movement system, role distribution, material culture, and aesthetic norms affect the bodily experiences of leaders and followers in different ways. In accounts concerning the hip, spine, and feet, the technical characteristics of the dance; the normative use of high-heeled shoes; and aesthetic expectations concerning the female body are directly connected to the ambivalent experience of physical well-being. Tango can thus offer experiences of physical strengthening, vitality, and body awareness while also placing new physical demands on dancers and requiring them to adapt. On this basis, physical well-being as experienced through tango appears not as a final outcome, but as an ongoing process of bodily learning and retuning.

In addition, the data from the participants indicate that physical well-being in tango emerges not simply as an individual bodily state, but in a relational and normative space. Attunement to the partner, the embrace, leading and following, shared rhythm, and coordinated movement to music can generate resonant bodily experiences (Rosa, 2019) in which dancers perceive their own bodies in a dynamic relationship with another body. At the same time, this relational well-being is not independent of tango's social rules, age-based and other hierarchies, and aesthetic expectations. The ageing body, the visibility of the female body, weight, clothing, and attractiveness show how tango can offer the pleasure of a physically active body capable of connecting with others while also reinforcing age- and gender-based limitations. Physical well-being in this respect is therefore an ambivalent experience: it is the possibility of connection, vitality, and bodily self-identity, but also the process of continual bodily adaptation to communal norms.

On the basis of the interview material presented here, it became apparent that the relationship between long-term, intensive Argentine tango dancing and physical well-being is not simply a matter of dance being beneficial to the body. The accounts of the interviewees rather show that tango transforms the relationship to the body: it refines the perception of posture, balance, coordination, fatigue and pain, and spatial awareness, while it can also create new bodily burdens, asymmetries, and demands for adaptation. This can be brought into dialogue with models of well-being that understand physical well-being not as a static state of health, but as an interrelation of activity, participation, environmental conditions, and personal resources (Antonovsky, 1987; Dodge et al., 2012; WHO, 2001).

6 CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

One of the main lessons of the present research is that physical well-being in tango is learned and processual. Participants' bodily experiences are formed not only at milongas but also through their long-term involvement in movement practices, regular practice sessions, marathons, classes, and activities such as the study of dance videos and listening to tango music. In this sense, tango dancing can also be interpreted through the previously mentioned notion of physical literacy: it creates a kind of bodily knowledge in which movement competence, motivation, confidence, and the interpretation of bodily functioning are interconnected (Whitehead, 2010).

The interviews show the sensory dimensions of physical well-being particularly clearly. Axis, navigation, and the perception of a partner's impulses point to the refinement of proprioception, while accounts of fatigue, pain, energy level, or the pleasure of movement highlight the role of interoceptive experiences (Craig, 2002; Mehling et al., 2009; Proske & Gandevia, 2012). Tango therefore not only moves the body, but also changes how dancers perceive the signals and limits of their own bodies.

On the basis of the study's results, intensive social tango dancing can be regarded as a predominantly positive practice in relation to participants' physical well-being. The anthropological concept of embodiment plays an important role in interpreting the research material. Following Csordas, the body here is not merely an instrument of dance, but the starting point of experience, learning, and social connection (Csordas, 1990). One important result of the present study is that physical

well-being in tango is fundamentally relational. The experience of the body's well-being appeared in the research findings as part of a dynamic system of relations: it depended simultaneously on the bodily pleasure of movement, attunement to the partner, the norms of the communal space, and the practical knowledge incorporated into the interviewees' bodies through regular dancing. Rosa's theory of resonance helps explain how, in a positive tango experience, the body not only functions well but enters into a relationship with the world (Rosa, 2019). This relationship, however, is also shaped by social norms: age, gender roles in tango, body weight, footwear, and expectations of attractiveness may contribute to the ambivalence of physical well-being. Tango thus simultaneously offers the possibility of vitality, connection, and bodily self-identity, as well as the experience of the cultural regulation of the body.

A limitation of the present research is that it was based on a small, non-representative sample and analyzed primarily the experiences of middle-aged, middle-class, long-term, intensively dancing tango participants in Budapest. The results therefore cannot be generalized to the tango-dancing population as a whole. At the same time, the results are well suited to revealing lived, narrative, and sociocultural patterns of physical well-being in relation to social dance. The present article focused on physical well-being, but the interview material also highlighted issues related to mental, emotional, social, and life-course well-being. One important direction for future research is the detailed analysis of these additional dimensions of well-being.

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