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What do we study studying body?  
Researcher's attempts to embodiment research.

**Abstract**

The article presents researcher's attempts, methodological problems and queries in embodiment research during a Grounded Theory Methodology based study on social world of ballroom dancers. The research has been conducted among ballroom dancers, flamenco dancers, belly dancers, dance instructors, choreographers and judges. One of the aspects of the research is social construction of embodiment. In the article I will present techniques and methods of research such as autoethnography, interview, observation, photo and video analysis as well as kind of results they may give and what is really studied when using these methods. I will also present how one experiences his/her body in this group. I will try to answer a question: what is the real result of researcher's attempts in embodiment study in sociology; do we really study body, or its social practices, socially constructed individual experience; how deeply can we make the research when our object (somebody else's body) is not entirely intersubjectively available for our recognition.

**Keywords**

Grounded Theory Methodology; Interview; Observation; Visual Data Analysis; Embodiment; Dance.

The aim of this article is to present researcher's attempts and some methodological problems in sociological embodiment research. I will show research techniques which I have used in my Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) based study on social subworld of ballroom dancers. The research has been conducted among ballroom dancers, flamenco dancers, belly dancers, dance instructors, choreographers and judges. My main interest was an ethnographic description of a social sub-world of ballroom dancing, but it has soon turned out, that even more interesting are embodiment changes.

GTM is a research strategy, which bases on a constant and permanent researcher's dialogue with data, more important than theory or existing scientific knowledge. This methodology has been created as a result of doubts in positivist belief in objective cognition, testing of hypotheses by quantitative research methods (Charmaz 2006). The foundations of GTM are the following: parallel data collection and analysis; constructing analytical codes and research categories from data, not from hypotheses; using constant comparative method and comparing data with

theory on each stage of research process; constant theory developing; constructing theoretical memos, relations between categories; sampling based on theory constructing, not on representativeness; using literature after an independent data analysis (Charmaz *ibidem*).

Research course in GTM cannot be precisely planned at the beginning and subsequent stages are rarely specifically predictable, as they are constructed according to previous findings (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

In my GTM based study I have tried to accomplish those aims. That is why I have used various research techniques to get as close to the researched phenomenon as possible. As social construction of embodiment is a very demanding research field, I have chosen GTM research strategy because it gives flexibility and does not force any answer, which is especially important in a fairly new research field. I have also used various techniques including interviews, observations, photo and video analysis, autobiography analysis and autoethnography as a complementary technique. As analytic techniques, I have used open coding, selective coding, then theoretical coding thanks to which I have obtained coherent theoretical memos. I have employed methodological, theoretical and data triangulation.

As a theoretical perspective I have applied concepts inscribing in interactional paradigm. This approach states, that body is a social creation, its awareness, perceiving, but also its physicality are socially constructed. Theories that were helpful for me to explain embodiment are: Merleau-Ponty's (2001) theory concerning phenomenology of own embodiment perception, dramaturgical perspective by Erving Goffman (2000), identity conception by Everett Hughes (1997) and findings of dance researchers like Jane Desmond (1997); Mary Lorenz Dietz (1994); Judith Lynne Hanna (1988); Bryan Turner and Steven Wainwright (2003, 2004); Steven Wainwright, Clare Williams and Bryan Turner (2006) and Susan Leigh Foster (1997).

As I have mentioned earlier, in my research it has soon turned out, that I cannot study social interactions of dancers, if I won't study body, or better expressed *embodiment*, which is their basic tool of almost any action undertaken in this social world. Notion of *embodiment* I understand after The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy as "the bodily aspects of human subjectivity".

In phenomenology, which concepts I have used to explain social construction of embodiment, there are two contrasting approaches. One of them is Alfred Schutz's, the other is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (Coenen 1989). In Alfred Schutz's conception body is only an individual's physicality, through which an interactional partner can perceive our moves. Body is treated as the main obstacle in interactions between social actors (Coenen 1989). Schutz (2008) claims also, that during scientific theorizing a scientist puts his physicality, bodily experiences aside. I must disagree with the statement. Our body is not only a matter of being in the world, or worlds, but as well a part of our cognition of the world, so it cannot be set aside. Especially when it comes to embodiment research, when a scientist is challenged by a partially communicable phenomenon, it is very useful to use one's own bodily experiences to understand it.

Term *embodiment*, as I use it in my research, has been developed mostly by European phenomenology representative Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2001). In his works he distinguishes between the objective body, which is the body regarded as a physiological entity and the phenomenal body, which is not just some body, some particular physiological entity, but one's own body as one experiences it. I define embodiment, as a subjectively experienced phenomenon, that is never objective, taken for granted, unchangeable, which we experience in various ways, transform

and through which we communicate with interactional partners. Embodiment gives off a sense, which it got during socialization, experience, to influence other “embodied subjects” (Merleau- Ponty 2001:218).

As many researchers claim (Goffman 2006; Hanna 1988 and Merleau-Ponty 2001) body is social actor’s vehicle, tool, instrument of “being” in the world. In dancers’ case, it is the first and the most important one. Dancers *incorporate* certain dance knowledge and experiences, learn how to use their bodies, change them in order to have the best tool possible. They use their bodies to constantly become dancers, to build their identities, to construct their position inside the group. Body is crucial in this social role, as this is the only way, through which a dancer may be judged. That is why embodiment research is so important. Without understanding what body is and what it becomes for dancers, we cannot understand social processes in this social world.

### Body experienced by dancers

One of the outcomes of my research, concerning bodily issues, is that a dancer may experience his/her own body as a tool, as an interactional partner and as a material, which needs to be changed according to the needs of the social group. Each type of embodiment experience<sup>53</sup> may be perceived at the same time, at different times, one may dominate, none may dominate, all may appear, not all may appear. Here are some examples of how dancers talk about their bodies in each category mentioned:

#### Body as a tool:

It’s well known, that dancer’s face and body are an instrument, on which she plays (Barbara Bittnerowna, a prima ballerina in her autobiography, 2004:44)

#### Body as an actor, interactional partner:

And the worst thing for my organism, my mind, when it knows<sup>54</sup> that I’m a workaholic, because it has already **got used** to that and it knows, that the body starts to go flat, doesn’t it? That it is already overtired, that it has too much toxins, that it needs to rest (...) Then my body invents a forty degree fever. I’m unconscious, doctors don’t know what’s going on, maybe an inflammation, maybe something. And with my body, it is simply like this, that it invents forty degree fever, these forty degrees knock me down. **Because if he gives me** thirty eight degree fever, I will go to work anyway. I will take an anti fever injection and go anyway, cause I’m not normal in this case (...) I think it is a lack of **respect**, isn’t it? For the body (interview with a belly dancer, choreographer, dance pedagogue, judge, jazz dance student, age 26, originally in Polish)

#### Body as a material, that needs to be changed:

Those girls get a little makeup (12-13 year old), they get tanned, other things (...) yes, that’s when it starts, on Polish Championships, when I

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<sup>53</sup> Other, very useful, typology of embodiment experience may be found in “Dancing bodies” (Leigh 1997).

<sup>54</sup> Words in bold are words accented by me, during analysis, words underlined, are those accented by my interviewees.

watch yyy those kids, actually the face, if you would wipe the makeup, no, not that strong, that's a fact, but still a makeup, then I would really see they're twelve, thirteen. (interview with an ex female ballroom dancer, age 19, originally in Polish)

What is also very interesting about own body perception among ballroom dancers, is that they incorporate their partners' body into the notion of "my body". This could be very well observed when I have asked my interviewees if they had any serious contusion. Almost all ballroom dancers have answered that yes, they had, or no, they didn't have but/and their partner had a serious injury and they had to stop dancing for a while. A quote from one of my interviews explains why it is perceived so:

It's (dancer's body) also my partner's possession, it's not only my body, because we have to be like one body, when we dance. (interview with an ex female ballroom dancer, age 19, originally in Polish)

This is one of the reasons why I claim, that a physical body is not the same as the body perceived and experienced by a certain dancer. What we incorporate into our bodies is another case. We incorporate moves, but also other objects. If a dancer practices a lot with a gadget, like a fan or a veil, she or he uses certain type of shoes, dress, they become a part of the dancer's embodiment, as he or she learns to use them like they use their own body. Dancers claim, that before you perform with something on stage, you have to learn to use it outside from your mind, the object has to be incorporated into your body, it has to become a part of it (Merleau-Ponty 2001). This is one of the examples of this perspective, a way of experiencing a dance with a gadget:

And when you master this, as it gives you certain inspiration, energy mmm and if you put it down, then you lose suddenly one hand, and you don't know how to behave. (interview with a female flamenco, belly dance, tribal dancer, teacher, choreographer and owner of a dance school, age 31, originally in Polish)

### **Incommunicable body**

As I have mentioned earlier, bodily issues are only partly available for our cognition, studying them is a challenge for a researcher so it is very useful to use one's own experiences. It is mostly so because of our inability to communicate embodiment only by speech. It is then, not fully intersubjectively communicable, which poses a methodological question: how can one study something, that is not intesubjectively communicable? This was a problem yet before I decided to study embodiment from interactionist perspective. Even during an ethnographic part of my study, when I conducted interviews, my interviewees would try to make me know what they meant by showing a certain posture, gesture, movement, by asking me to dance. Speech proved not to be a way of communication flexible enough to transmit knowledge that was set *in the body*. My interviewees (dancers of various dance genres, but also trainers, judges, choreographers) sometimes were not able to say what they meant, as they had this certain knowledge, experience *inside* the body. The question that needs to be asked when studying a non- verbally communicable phenomenon, is how to do research, when words cannot explain experiences of persons under study.

Difficulties in embodiment communication is not only a case of dancer - researcher relation. It may be also well observed in dance teacher- student relations during lessons. Teachers use various methods to get to the student, they try to communicate what they mean using verbal and non- verbal expression. This is a difficult task, as anyone's body has their own, private experiences *incorporated*. These are just a few examples of the techniques used by teachers:

Dominika Byczkowska.: and how do you teach your/

Interviewee: truly? One-two-three (laughs), first of all, I stand in front of them, we stand in front of a mirror, I slowly show them the steps, I count it for them, I observe them, if they all get it.

D.B.: what does it mean "I count it for them"?

I: well, each dance has a rhythm, you must count it loudly, so that everyone knew, that somehow on "one" always, for example, leg is put, on "two" joining legs. (...) rhythm, music, dance. (...) and somehow, somehow they succeed (interview with an ex male ballroom dancer, ballroom dance instructor, age 22, originally in Polish)

First you learn, to do it like your teacher does (...) it's obvious, not everybody already knows, on what they should pay attention, but after a while, you get to notice it. (interview with a female flamenco, belly dance, tribal dancer, teacher, choreographer and owner of a dance school, age 31, originally in Polish)

I show, I explain, I touch, I correct. I do it with them, I do it alone, it depends, some people like to dance together, to some, you first have to show it, mm if I don't know somebody, I use everything (...) when I know a girl, then I know how to explain it to her, so I don't have to wonder, but if you come, and I don't know you, I take all the ways, because I hope, that one of them may get into you, one more, the other less, them all together, I hope, that you will do the move and that you will understand it.(interview with a belly dancer, choreographer, dance pedagogue, judge, jazz dance student, age 26, originally in Polish)

This proves, that embodiment experience is a very difficult problem to study, but at the same time very demanding. To explain this phenomenon I have used some research techniques, which gave diverse data. I present them underneath.

### ***Techniques of embodiment research***

As not a fully communicable phenomenon, when it comes to studying embodiment, it is not possible to do research only with use of narration (see: Konecki 2005; Turner and Wainwright 2003). In my research I have used various research techniques, that have given me different points of view. One of them is triangulation, a strategy inscribed in GTM logic. Generated categories are verified by new data and use of various techniques makes the gathered data more diverse (Charmaz 2006). It is also a test, that enables us to check, whether different kinds of data give similar findings (Hammersley and Atkinson 2000). I have applied three kinds of triangulation: theoretical, methodological and data triangulation. As this is a methodological article, I will describe the last two.

**Methodological triangulation** lets us not only diminish weaknesses of research techniques, but also makes gathered information more understandable, as data deriving from different techniques may give different points of view on the studied problem. This is very important in embodiment research, as a partly incommunicable issue. What is more, kind of used methods influences kinds of gathered data and sense given to them, which is vital for entire understanding (Charmaz 2006).

**Data triangulation** gives us an opportunity to verify information from different sources, like interviewees, research stages, as all data has its strengths and weaknesses (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Data triangulation may be also obtained by sampling from comparative groups (Konecki 2000). This I have received interviewing and observing dancers of various dance genres: flamenco dancers, ballroom dancers, belly dancers, analyzing prima ballerina's autobiography. This was really rewarding, as showing differences may lead us to understanding a typical character of a certain phenomenon.

In this part of the article I will present some techniques of data collection that were useful for me as they gave different information. I am presenting them one by one, as I want to compare them and show their strengths and weaknesses.

**Interview** is a type of professional talk, which has a set of rules and techniques and during which a certain knowledge is created (Kvale 2004). The main way of recognition is through talking, knowledge is understood as giving accounts for one's statements, not a precise world representation. It is a technique, with which I have started my research. It has given me hints and descriptions of interviewees' experiences of their own bodies.

Just as one of the basic GTM rules says, that a theory is generated during data analysis, I have first conducted non structured interviews, then, after getting more knowledge about studied phenomena, I have used more structured interviews. However, as a researcher should always stay sensitive and open for new problems, I found it useful for phenomena explanation and theory constructing (Konecki 2000).

According to researchers, if one wants the interview to bring new information and be full of data and so that researcher's influence was the smallest, we should ask the most general, non suggesting questions (Hammersley and Atkinson 2000; Charmaz 2006).

Researcher's role is to listen and observe his/her interviewee with sensitivity, that is why, it is good to ask in the beginning of the interview some broad, open and non- judging questions. Thanks to this, some unpredicted and important issues may come up (Charmaz 2006).

Being open and not judging is especially important, when we talk about body, sexuality, particularly, that dancers are very sensitive about their bodies. They are their basic tool for constructing identity and group position.

The problem with this technique is that it is never enough to say, interviewees often want to show what they mean, by certain gestures, dance moves. The knowledge and experience that are gathered inside the body, make it impossible to express them verbally. That is why I made photos during interviews and I showed photos made on dance contests to my interviewees asking them what they could see and how they interpreted presented situations. Here you have an example of two different perspectives: a laymen and an insider.

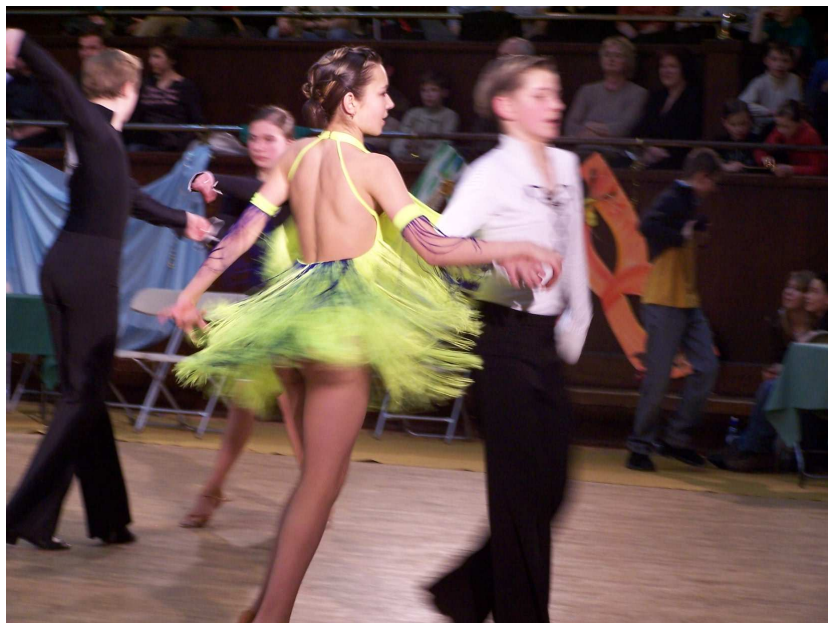


Photo 1: Made on Mazovia Grand Prix 5 February 2006 in Warsaw.

I have made this photograph (Photo 1) on one of dance contests. In everyday conversations with my colleagues about this photograph I have mainly received answers concerning naked body, visible backside. Also I paid attention to the length of the dress and naked body parts. And these are some comments from a dancer and a dance judge and teacher. They, as socialized in this group pay attention and see different aspects of the image, for me impossible to notice:

Dancer in fan development. Probably. Such a figure. (dancer, 16 years old, originally in Polish)

This is rumba or cha-cha because this is a way in which they dance the basic step. So it must be rumba or cha-cha. It's hard to say which of them, cause they in the basic figures, basic elements and not only are very similar when it comes to the way we dance, way we hold each other. In some things I could say, that it could even be samba, but the guy here stands in such a way that it's not samba, for sure (laughs). Rumba or cha-cha, I'm sure. I would even say, except this dynamic pair in the front that it's rather rumba. Rather, rather rumba then cha-cha, but I only have this feeling, looking at the pair from the back. Yes, but not necessarily, as I say, it looks like this but it may as well be cha-cha. (dance judge, dance teacher, ex male dancer, 55 years old, originally in Polish)

Technique that I have used to get data from other sources than interviews was **observation**. It is a very useful technique, as it operates with pictures and gives comments. I have done several observations on ballroom dance competitions and about 300 photos. During those observations, I have tried to receive comments on what was actually happening from dancers or viewers. I have also done observation with video recording on belly dance classes in which I took part.

A minus of this method is that we rarely know, what is really happening on the dance floor, unless we are dancers. Some situations turned out to be interpreted differently from what I could have expected. For example, situations of harsh competition on dance floor, when dancers would kick, push or bump on each other I have interpreted as hard competition, not fair play. Dancers with whom I have spoken would say, that it was rather a result of lack of space on the dance floor. If not for the

commentaries, I would have drawn wrong conclusions, influenced by interview outcomes.

Underneath I present a part of a conversation during an observation on one of dance contests. I was watching pairs dancing and talking to a dance teacher at the same time. In this part there participated dancers with high dance class (A<sup>55</sup>):

The second pair, as he said could take their position, when they (the first pair) enter an older group, but the trainer said that it would cost them a lot of work, that the girl needs to lose weight. I said that the girl is not fat and asked why should she lose weight. He answered that if you put an engine from a small car into a Mercedes- it will ride, but how long, how fast? I said that the girl is thin, he agreed and said that losing weight would be good for her, because she will have the same muscles, same strength but she will have less to carry. He said also, that this probably won't be easy, as the girl has genetic tendencies, but if she would lose about 8 kilos, "she would have less on her stomach, legs and arms" and she would move easier. I asked why this was so important. He told me that it would be also better for her, because she's ashamed during classes, that she hides especially her stomach, on which she has fat and she should lose it to be quicker, more energetic. The trainer made me look at the girl's dress. It was very sexy and short, but it did cover her stomach. (Observation on Łódź Championships 2007).

This part of an observation gave me some ideas on how dancers treat their bodies: notions of engine and car refer to "body as a material" perspective. This citation shows as well how deeply internalized is idea of beautiful ballroom dancing body. Even a thin, sexy and skillful dancer would hide some parts of her body, probably partly to get better notes from the judges, partly because of her own complex.

**Photo and video analysis** has given me information about embodiment and space relations. Certain embodiment techniques are used in each type of space (official, partly official and unofficial presented at the end of this part). This is also a method, that enables us to read meanings without verbal communication. Photos and video recordings give a possibility to see how people use their bodies, how act through them and let us suppose, what kind of meaning people give to their bodies. This does not mean, of course, that we will read the meanings properly. In each dance gestures and moves depend on the style of the dance (e.g. belly dance, modern jazz, ballet), because every dance has a certain philosophy deriving from culture (e.g. ballet dance should be very delicate and light, as heaven is a great value in Western society, as African folk dances are very much on the ground, as those societies cherish Mother Earth) (see also: Grau 2005). This may cause a problem of understanding moves and gestures and that is why we should ask people from inside the dance world to comment and explain.

A minus of this method is that photo and video analysis bases on description of phenomena by a researcher. This means, that each photography is first described and only then coded and analyzed (Suchar 1997; Konecki 2005). This may cause a problem with reading meanings, especially when it comes to embodiment.

It seems, that a good method, which enables us to interpret photographed phenomena is a photo or video elicited interview. This technique gives a possibility to

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<sup>55</sup> In Polish ballroom dance there are six classes: E, D, C, B, A and an international, highest class S.



obtain sometimes even astonishing knowledge (Konecki 2005) also about body or dance.

As an example of this technique I will present three photographs. I have analyzed them and presented them during interviews. The photographs show three kinds of space: official, unofficial and partly official.



Photo 2: Official space

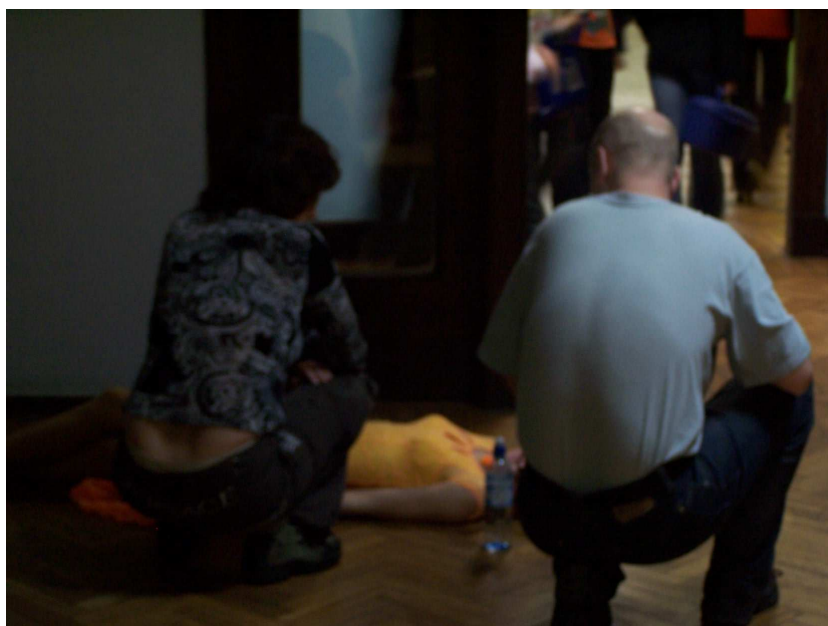


Photo 3: Unofficial space

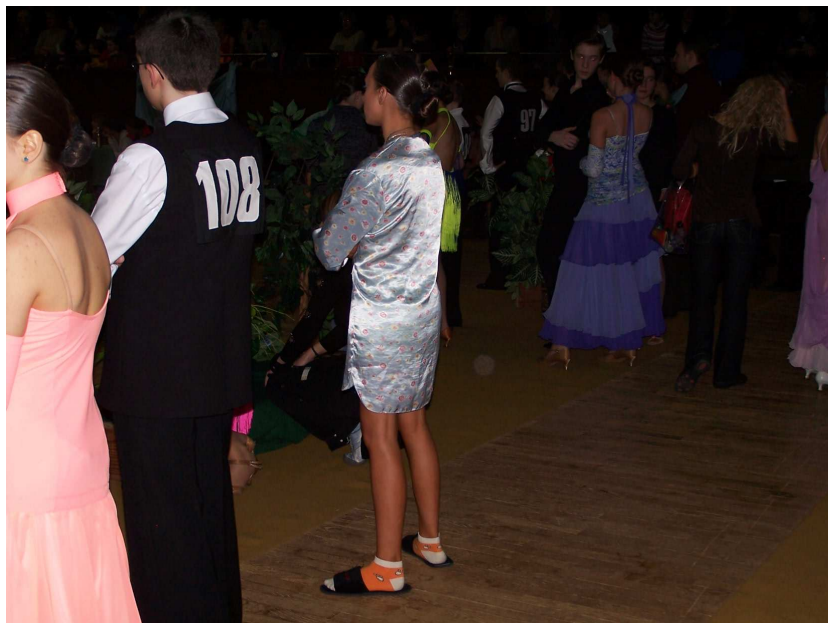


Photo 4: Partly official space

In each of the situations shown on the Photos 2, 3 and 4 there are accepted and expected different types of social action: in official space dancers present themselves on a dance floor, show the best of their skills, get judges' notes. In partly official space they make last preparations for the dance, drink, talk, exercise, while in unofficial space all things that could influence judges' notes are possible and accepted: screaming at one another (dancer at his/her pair, parents at children etc.) taking one's clothes off, eating. We could say, using Goffman's (2000) terms, that official space is a frontstage, unofficial and partly official spaces are two kinds of backstage, where social actors prepare to give their performance in front of an audience (judges).

Underneath, you can see another example of visual data: **a video recording transcript**. An analysis of verbal teacher's expressions and moves have led me to a conclusion, that certain moves are very often announced by the same word expression. This is probably because these sounds are to express an inner feeling during the movement or gesture. That was interesting, as it seems to be another method of body communication.

Second	Students' moves	Teacher's moves	Teacher's moves	Teacher's verbal expression
1.	They repeat after the teacher with about 1 second delay	She lifts her head		Pum <u>pa</u>
2.	„	She lifts her hands up, to the level of her arms		Ta tiki,
3.	„	Camel down		<u>ta</u>
4.	„	Single drops, front to the mirror		
5.	„	Chest pulled in		Ta pum, pum <u>pa</u>
6.	„	Arm shimmie	Camel down	Taka taka
7.	„	Left arm toward the mirror	Step forward with a right leg	taka taka <u>tam</u>

8.	”			Ta tiki
9.	”	Camel down		ta
10.	”		Arm shimmie	Ta tum tum, ta
11.	”	Hips’ shimmie, side to the mirror		

Belly dance classes, October 2007

**Autoethnography** I have used as a complementary method. I have been taking belly dance classes for three years and this has helped me to understand some of my interviewees’ experiences. Autoethnography is a method, that may be used by a person, who becomes a part (sometimes main) of the studied phenomenon (Wall 2008). This technique has appeared spontaneously in my research, during a certain lesson, when our teacher tried to explain a certain move. It has become useful for me in matters of understanding how one may change a way of experiencing his/her body, how one may receive knowledge that is set inside somebody else’s embodiment.

## Conclusion

GTM research strategy has been very useful in my research, which I have tried to prove in the article. In the beginning of my study, I did not expect, that this kind of category: social construction of embodiment, would ever appear. This methodology has given me a very broad way of studying this problem and, what is crucial, a set of techniques and a perspective, that does not force any answer. I could say, that in such a sensitive and difficult topic as embodiment, where intersubjectivity is put into test, GTM leaves us free to choose, but at the same time gives a set of rules to follow, so that our study stays methodologically and scientifically clear.

I have used many research techniques and I have tried to combine them in a way, that they could help me get to know the process of social construction of embodiment. The most important was getting diverse data, especially visual ones like photos and video recordings. They have given me information that were impossible to communicate verbally, dance knowledge set in the body like certain body posture, relations in space, corporal communication between partners etc.

Narrative techniques, like interview, but also analysis of prima ballerina’s autobiography have also been important. They have given a set of data about body changes perceived by a dancer, as well as basic information on institutional expectations in dancer’s body shape, size and skills. Combination of the techniques made the research phenomenon accessible and intersubjectively communicable at least at some levels.

Embodiment as a socially constructed phenomenon cannot be studied “as it is”, but only “as it is experienced” by individuals in a certain group of people. We are also not able to experience somebody else’s body. That is why, the real effect of embodiment research are social body practices, perspectives of bodily perception gained during socialization, different approaches to body (as an actor, as a tool, as a material and other). As other outcomes of my study show, social context of bodily oriented actions is very important. I have compared some aspects of embodiment construction in few dance genres: belly dancing, ballroom dancing and flamenco. All of these dancing activities take place in different social settings. Some of them are just a way of earning money, like belly dancing, where a dancers body must adjust to market needs. This may cause serious health problems, like bulimia or anorexia, when a dancer tries to meet those needs. It is different in flamenco, which is treated

mostly as art. There are also no popular flamenco contests in Poland, unlike in ballroom dance, so competition between dancers is less intensive. This is just an example of how social phenomena like market or institutionalized competition influence embodiment changes.

## Discussion

Another technique, that has not yet been used in this research is an analysis of video recordings of professional ballroom dancers performing done by another professional dancer or dance teacher. This would enable me to know techniques of body change. Of “right” and “wrong” body moves, postures, gestures and how they are defined as such.

What else may be interesting is combining sociological and medical research on body change in different social groups, in which body use is vital. Some of this has already been done in research on injuries or contusions characteristic to some professions.

For sure, embodiment studies in social sciences are very interesting, developing but challenging as well, which demands adjusting to occurring research situations. That is why I would say, that GTM, as a non- preconceptualizing methodology is very useful in this kind of study.

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