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Research report: Male Ballet Dancers' Gender Identity Construction: Sexuality and Body

Abstract

Male ballet dancers are often constructed as being feminine or homosexual (Bailey & Obershneider, 1997; Phillips, 2008), attributes that do not conform to the broader social ideas of what it means to be a masculine male in South Africa. Therefore, the space occupied by male ballet dancers in South Africa is one that contradicts the patriarchal ideas of masculinity and provides further insights into constructions of masculinity that do not conform to essentialist understandings. Therefore, the aim of this research report was to investigate the ways in which male ballet dancers construct their gender identities, sexualities and bodies within this contradictory space. A purposeful sample of four classically trained male ballet dancers over the age of 18 from Johannesburg, South Africa, was invited to participate in the study by means of snowball sampling. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and were examined using narrative analysis. It was found that male ballet dancers construct their gender identities through their bodies by virtue of their performances. They believe that by linking ballet to other masculine activities, such as sport, they can better negotiate their gender identities in a context where their profession is viewed as inferior, feminine and homosexual. The findings of this research have contributed to a better understanding of gender in an alternative domain, where the ways in which male ballet dancers construct their gender identities are challenged.

Key words: Ballet, body, gender, identity, masculinity, sexuality, social constructionism and stereotypes