

Article

Almost Drowning: Data as a Troubling Anchor in an Arts/Social Science Collaboration

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Abstract

This article highlights fissures between the disciplines of dance and social sciences in approaching and valuing data and offers creative solutions for dancers and choreographers working collaboratively with scholars and artists in other disciplines. We locate our challenges in our divergent relationships with social science data, using the divergence as a framework for exploring discipline-specific practices as unintended roadblocks in collaborative, transdisciplinary research. We propose that the structure of our collaboration, particularly our unique pairing of dance and social science, and our emergent discoveries have implications beyond our home disciplines and promise to advance the growing enterprise of transdisciplinary collaboration.

Keywords: performative social science, transdisciplinary research, dance, social science, methodology

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In the last several decades, there has been increasing interest in performative social science—broadly defined as “... social science researchers who are exploring with the use of tools from the arts in research itself and/or using them to enhance or move beyond ... traditional dissemination efforts” (Guiney Yallop, Lopez de Vallejo, & Wright, 2008, p. 1). Performative social science is considered an innovative way to affect change in communities, offers exciting methodological innovations, and compels scholars to closely examine their disciplinary practices and ideologies (Jones et al., 2008). Inspired by said possibilities, the authors (the first author is a choreographer and the second author is a social scientist) embarked on a collaborative, transdisciplinary project between dance (arts) and human development and family studies (social sciences). In our project, the choreographer engaged in a kinesthetic analysis of the social scientist’s data, then she and the social scientist further analyzed the choreographer’s dances and dialogues (findings) in order to collaboratively design how they would be re-presented to audiences.

Neither the choreographer nor the social scientist came to the project with substantial experience in transdisciplinary collaboration, though both of us had worked collaboratively in our own fields. In order to prepare for what we understood would likely be a long and challenging process, we read literature on performative social science, paying particular attention to descriptions of other researchers’ roadblocks and impasses (e.g., Bagley 2008). What we found lacking, though, were nuanced and sustained descriptions of the ways researchers moved through (or around, or away from) their conflicts. In family studies literature, for example, Piercy and Benson (2005) offered a descriptive article providing models of what they called “aesthetic methods” and identified important tensions of using such methods, but did not get inside the tensions. Also pointing to tensions, Donald Blumenfeld-Jones (2002), in his compelling essay “If I Could Have Said It, I Would Have”, indicated that dance was being made “second class” in a particular project involving dance and education (p. 91). But, Blumenfeld-Jones did not elaborate on the manifestation of the complaint or how it was addressed and/or resolved (p. 91–94). As we embarked on our own project, we committed to expose our tensions, hesitations, and responses in the hopes of illuminating messy methodological considerations of transdisciplinary research (Sharp & Durham-DeCesaro, 2013).

In this spirit, in the present article, we delineate three substantial challenges we encountered after we were more fully immersed in the collaborative project. We would suggest that the challenges, metaphorically, made us feel (at times) like we were nearly drowning. Similar to other transdisciplinary collaborators, as we grew more involved in the project and more aware of the deep dilemmas involved, we felt desires to terminate the project and/or to avoid working together in the future (Bagley, 2008). We pushed through the tensions, producing a successful dance concert and affording us incisive insights that may be useful to other scholars participating in other collaborative teams across disciplines. Although our insights may be most relevant to dance and social sciences, our reflections have broader implications for other transdisciplinary engagements, including individuals working in devised performance

We initially wrote the present article having worked together for 15 months, and after a pilot performance (August 2012) and two evening-length dance concerts (March 23 and 27, 2013). The concerts occurred two months prior to this writing—enough time for us to have adequate distance from the performances. Throughout our work together, we have kept separate journals reflecting on our experiences of the collaboration, have audio recorded our exchanges, and have a series of emails with iterative questions and responses to each other. We have more than 25 hour-long audio recorded exchanges, hundreds of emails, and more than 50 pages of written reflections.

Background of the Project

The original objective of the project was to make public, by re-analyzing and re-presenting social science data through live dance performance, traditionally privatized negotiations of women's ideologies and experiences of singlehood, marriage, and motherhood. Our collaborative project emphasized bodily knowledge and lived experience as lenses through which to view, interpret, and re-present data, and sought to identify new analytical possibilities with a view to developing an emergent methodological too (Sharp & Durham-DeCesearo, 2013).

Our decision to work toward a goal of re-presenting data of women's experiences in "ordinary" (largely overlooked, daily) conditions (e.g., transitioning to marriage, thinking about being single, thinking about motherhood) in an evening-length theatrical concert was deliberate. We observed that the issues described by research participants in our project included the following: (a) commonly left out of community dialogues; (b) underrepresented in dance practice and theory; and (c) given attention by researchers primarily in the academy, making such attention largely insular and inaccessible to women themselves and their home communities.

We had four primary goals in our collaboration: (a) use a transdisciplinary approach to discover new analytic possibilities; (b) introduce dialogues and re-presentations of data to audiences external to the academy; (c) produce an evening-length dance concert for public presentation based on social science qualitative data sets (see link to the hour-long performance: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/05/30/live-dance-performance-as-a-means-to-re-analyze-and-re-present-social-science/>); and (d) carefully monitor our collaboration in order to offer recommendations to the growing field of performative social science. The present article, as well as our forthcoming book (Sharp & Durham-DeCesearo, in press) directly responds to the latter goal.

A Unique Collaboration

Our project offered two distinct features that effectively positioned it as unique from the majority of previous performative social science collaborations. The features included the following: (a) using two separate data sets and (b) giving the choreographer raw data (not findings). To our knowledge, earlier performative social science collaborations, in general, and a majority of the dance/social science projects, in particular, were based primarily on one discrete data set. Although both data sets in our project are part of the scientist's programmatic line of research on women's identities, romance, and femininity, the focus and particular features of the studies differed considerably.

An additional layer of complexity resulted from our decision to provide the choreographer with raw data instead of research findings. Most of the published literature showcases collaborations based on the researcher's findings. Instead, in our project, the social scientist provided the original transcripts and audio recordings to the choreographer and the choreographer analyzed/read/encountered the data herself and created dances based on her impressions. The choreographer was given 48 verbatim transcripts and audio recordings of the oral interviews, totaling more than 1000 double-spaced pages of data. It goes without saying that this is a large amount of data; the choreographer has detailed the ways she set parameters for the data in another manuscript (Sharp & Durham-DeCesearo, 2013).

Description of the Data Sets and Dance Concert

One data set focused on 18 young (aged 18–32) women's reflections on their wedding days and their first year of marriage. Using two focus groups and 11 individual interviews, women in the study were asked to discuss their weddings and transitions to being wives (to be eligible for the study, participants had to marry within the past year of their participation in the study). The other

study was based on individual interviews exploring the experiences of 35 single women (aged 25–39) who did not want to marry and/or have children (or who were seriously questioning these issues). Data were collected in the United States. The wedding study was based in a mid-size town in Texas and the single women study was conducted in seven U.S. cities.

The two data sets were an impetus for the dance concert, titled *Ordinary Wars*. The collaborators worked with a professional dance company and hired professional actors, and had a total rehearsal period of 8 months. The concert lasted 75 minutes (including an intermission with interactive audience engagement: cupcakes and factoids on napkins) and consisted of six separate dances inspired by the data. In addition, actors performed the data (text from the transcripts) in between dances. We collected survey data from the audiences and invited audience members to feedback/focus group sessions immediately after the performances.

Points of Departure: Rough Waters

Our process of getting to the point where we could offer a thought-provoking and engaging performance was bumpy, arduous, and trying. As the performance grew closer, we had many days where we felt like we were barely treading water. We worked to move out of our stuck places by carefully examining our positions and proposing creative compromises. Similar to our previous manuscript reflecting on our collaboration, in this article we also work to offer readers a realistic flavor of the challenges accompanying a transdisciplinary project. We expose our “messiness” in the hopes of helping other scholars in the future.

As identified below in Table 1, we focus on three formidable challenges in this manuscript.

Table 1 *Formidable Challenges*

Challenge	Lead choreographer	Social scientist
Vision of the project	Feminist, encourage thought	Feminist, experiment, and message
Relationship with the data	Distant, used as a stimulus	Close, privileged, contextualized
Re-presentation of the data	No obligation to represent	Avoid contradicting the data

We offer a brief description of each challenge and then provide a concrete example of the pilot performance to illustrate the ways in which broad, disciplinary practices influenced our thinking and decisions. Although the chart suggests that our challenges were discrete, mutually exclusive entities, this was not the case and our descriptions below showcase how the challenges overlapped.

Vision of the Project

Although we agreed on the overriding goals of the project, we had difficulties with deciding whether to privilege artistic choices or data based directives and/or how we could avoid privileging one over the other. Although we both compromised throughout the project, we engaged in heated debate over key aspects of the project, which mapped onto broader ideas about the vision of the project. For the social scientist, these debates propelled her to deeply consider what her “bottom-line” standards were in a project like this. At the crux of one particular crisis, she wrote a “clarity statement” to help her more fully articulate why she was unwilling to accept some of the choreographer’s suggestions. Writing the statement was a response to her learning that she was unable to adequately verbally articulate her position (sometimes becoming emotional) as well as not fully attending to her assumptions carried with her from studying and

working in the social sciences for the past 17 years. The exercise of writing the statement was invaluable for her, helping to clarify her assumptions and how deeply sacred she held social science data.

For the choreographer, the debates were seismic in terms of their importance to her working relationship with the social scientist. The choreographer, particularly after reading the social scientist's clarity statement, understood the social scientist's perspective. However, that understanding did not make the process of working, negotiating, or dialoguing easier. The choreographer continues to write about how understanding and respecting a collaborator's choices, training, and needs does not eradicate conflict; a collaboration like ours demands a willingness to "unlearn" (Wink, 2011, p. 12).

Relationship with the Data

For the social scientist, her relationship to the data can be characterized as close, privileged, and contextualized. In her analysis for her social science publications, she closely read the data, engaging in line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2000). It is typical for her to read transcripts more than five times each. She writes summaries about each participant, reflecting on what is shared in the interview and conditions of the interview. Moreover, she highly values data and it has a privileged position for her. The extent to which she depends on and privileges data was made evident in her work with this project and has helped her become aware of how such dependence can be a hindrance in an interdisciplinary project.

Many times, but not always, choreographers use data and other stimuli (text, visual images, and political situations) as jumping off points. For her role in this project, the choreographer presumed she could read the transcripts once, pull what she wanted to use from the transcripts, and begin to make dance. The choreographer did not anticipate that the social scientist would be so familiar with the data that she would question when the choreographer made artistic decisions that did not accurately re-present the environment or the context of the original interview.

Both the choreographer and the social scientist thought they were addressing conflicts that emerged from their different relationships with the data when they discussed the ethics of artistic license with respect to re-presentation of data; however, a more complex issue underlying the conflicts is actually one of identity related to discipline: both collaborators continued to work safely within their discipline-specific boundaries during the first year of their collaboration. They privileged their learned ways of knowing and doing rather than working to creatively and collaboratively devise new methodologies for their transdisciplinary project.

Re-presentation of the Data

Although the social scientist had initially thought that she would be able to gauge whether the performance accurately reflected her data, she learned that a more realistic standard was her ability to judge whether the performance representations were in opposition to the data. At a crisis moment in the collaboration, she argued that her major concern was that the data not be misrepresented and this was the standard she would hold. In her clarity statement (referenced above) she wrote to the dance choreographer:

The standard that I feel I can have in a project like this is that I need to have some control that the performance does not contradict the data. Of course, I cannot control how the audience interprets abstract dance and, for the most part, I do not want to do so. I agree with you that the abstractness allows a multiplicity of interpretations and I think that is good; it is especially good to have feminist space for women to reflect on diversity of interpretations related to their identities. At the same time, I do want to make sure that the literal representations of the data (that is, titles, choreographers'

statements, text, and images, songs with lyrics, etc.) and the data itself (text excerpts) are not being used in a way that clearly distorts the data.

The issue of distorting the data returns to the discipline-specific practices used by the social scientist and the choreographer. The choreographer was concerned that she was being asked to understand or value the data according to the social scientist's analysis of it. She wrote, in response to the choreographer's clarity statement:

You value different things than I value in this project. That is one of the reasons our work is truly groundbreaking. Our different values, though, cannot be placed in opposition to each other or in a hierarchical structure. There has to be room for me not to value the data the way that you do and for me to question its role. I will make room for you to value certain parts of the performance more or less than I do and question their inclusion. We have to legitimately support each other to move forward.

Valuing "different things" also included the ways in which the collaborators provided feedback to each other. In an unreflexive manner, at one point, the social scientist had operated using the social science dominant mode of criticism (Schneider, 2005). The choreographer, in her role, expected the social scientist to fully understand and value prevalent modes of dance criticism (Lavender, 1996; Lerman & Borstel, 2003).

As evidenced in this article, the collaborators are just now beginning to understand that legitimately supporting each other means being willing to question the standards of their respective disciplines. As trained academics, who are both successful in our respective disciplines, this is incredibly challenging and can feel like a rejection and betrayal of what we know.

Piloting: Learning From Our Assumptions

We agreed to stage a pilot performance of the concert several months before the final concert; the purpose of which was to collect data from the audience in order to make modifications to the final concert. However, we did not clarify the parameters of the pilot performance or specify the extent to which we would rely on the audience data (we collected survey data from 44 audience members; Sharp & Durham-DeCesaro, in press) for the final concert. For the social scientist, the pilot performance and the data collected were crucial to her agreement to be part of the project. Because she highly values data and looks to data to inform her professional decisions, the data from the audience engendered confidence and allowed her understand how the audience was interpreting the concert. In this way, she could make modifications if the concert was not adequately representing her two studies.

The choreographer had a different understanding of the pilot performance. She understood it as a works-in-progress showing of concert excerpts (meaning only a few dances) without theatrical lighting or final costumes. Pilot performances, in the choreographer's field, are often used as viewing opportunities for choreographers and preparation opportunities for dancers. The choreographer did not consider that the social scientist was counting on the pilot performance to affirm her participation in the project; the choreographer took for granted her own familiarity with dance and did not pause to question what the social scientist needed in order to feel like she was part of the project.

The social scientist thought that the pilot performance would be as close to complete as possible, though she did know that the choreographer was going to add another dance. She also thought that the decisions she and the choreographer made about the final concert would be based on the data collected from audience responses to the pilot performance. The choreographer, as previously noted, conceived of the pilot as a rough showing of parts of the final concert. The

choreographer also fully expected that she could make artistic decisions about the concert independent of any data from the pilot audience.

While this confusion might seem superficial, they resulted in deep fissures in the collaborators' working relationship. The social scientist perceived that the choreographer was rejecting not only some agreed-upon components of the project but also the role of the data in general. Because the social scientist, as she noted in previous sections, highly values data, this perceived rejection actually called into question whether she wanted to continue working with the choreographer. The choreographer, in turn, perceived that she was being asked to privilege the data over her own artistic choices. This perception translated into the choreographer feeling that she had to defend her decisions, thus creating an oppositional relationship with the social scientist. These misunderstandings illuminate the ways in which we were slowly drowning, wearing goggles clouded by the familiarity and safety of our discipline-specific practices and expectations.

Offering Each Other a Life Vest

In this section, we offer three creative compromises—piloting dances, writing introductory notes, and creating joint statements—that helped us start swimming. As evidenced in our descriptions below, we are not arguing that we have figured it all out or that we are offering a panacea for transdisciplinary projects. Instead, we believe our suggestions may help others move out of “stuck” places.

Piloting Dances via Video Clips

After it became clear that not everything included in the final concert was going to be piloted in front of a live audience, we agreed to videotape rehearsals of the new dances and to send the videos to 20 people via email. In the email, we asked viewers to answer a series of questions similar to questions from the pilot performance survey. The social scientist selected 20 people—some social scientists, some dancers and choreographers, and some nonacademics, individuals in the positions of the women in the study and individuals removed from the positions of the women in the study.

The feedback from the video viewing allowed the social scientist to gauge the ways in which new dances were being interpreted. Some viewers interpreted the dances in the ways the researcher was concerned about; other viewers interpreted the dances more broadly and in ways that supported the choreographer's expectations. What the choreographer has realized is that piloting works is not only about data collection. It is also about giving value to different disciplinary expectations and standards. Piloting, in our project, confirmed that the social scientist had a valued voice in the creation and execution of the choreography.

Introductory Notes: Responding to Ethical Dilemmas about the Performance

One dilemma the collaborators dealt with early in the project was the ethical issue of how to label the performance. This issue first came to our attention when the choreographer was in the throes of the analysis and reading the data and wanted to use portions of the transcripts to be read by actors. Although the choreographer had specific questions about the ethical representation of the participants, her questions pointed to a wider debate about how to accurately frame our project to the public. Would it be ethical to advertise the concert as a “research-based” or a “research-informed” dance performance? Could we tell audiences that the concert was based on two focus groups and 46 interviews from women when the choreographer discarded many of the transcripts in their entirety?

As we got closer to the performance, the dilemma became more pronounced. The choreographer wanted to use a concert format of performed dialogues (transcript excerpts) interspersed with

dances. The social scientist was concerned this would lead audiences to connect specific dialogues to dances with which they might have no relationship. The choreographer thought audiences would benefit from this structure because it might lead to more engagement with the concert as a whole. In the end, we used the social scientist's concerns as a springboard to create a joint statement that we included as a program insert, an excerpt of which follows:

Notes from the Social Science Researcher and the Artistic Director: As you view the performance, you are encouraged to engage with its structure in a way that is most meaningful to you; *it is your decision how to interpret the connection between the individual dialogues and dances and the organization of the concert as a whole*. Some questions to think about: Is this performance fact or fiction or somewhere in between? Is it a tragedy, comedy, or romance? Is it to be taken literally and/or is it open for interpretation? Are these coherent stories and/or disjointed ideas and concepts? As you experience the performance, we encourage you to think in broad terms. What are the dialogues and dances communicating to you about larger social structures (that is, cultural ideas about heterosexual, middle-class, white-identified women and femininity, marriage, weddings, wives, motherhood, singlehood, and single women)? How are these social structures exclusionary, liberating and/or constraining? How do individuals and social structures interface?

Joint Statements

Another creative compromise was to offer a series of "joint statements" on posters in the lobby. For each of the six dances, we offered a layered account of the process and end product. We included a choreographer's statement that provided a description of the dance and how she was inspired by the data to create the dance. We also offered the researcher's comments on the dance and its process of creation. And we offered a joint statement where we were forthright about our dilemmas with the dances. This gave the researcher a chance to raise questions based on her social science training, provided the choreographer the opportunity to illustrate responses to the social scientist, and offered the public a viewing of the messiness of the collaboration.

In Figure 1 below, we share one of the six statements offered in the lobby before each performance. The statement is from *I Was Happy in the Pictures*, the opening dance of the concert.

Choreographer's statement. "This trio used as its stimulus six statements excerpted from the data. They are:

- It's a lot harder than what I thought it was going to be.
- The yellow roses were gorgeous.
- So I wasn't like giddy or blissful or anything like that and I'm not sure why exactly I just wasn't.
- You can tell that I was happy in the pictures, you know it's not a fake smile.
- As soon as we were married my love for him increased greatly and I don't know why I guess.
- And I kinda felt like I had an identity crisis a little bit (laughing). I mean not really by any means but it kinda felt like I got lost in what he (my husband) wanted.

The dancers contributed to creating movement motifs using the statements as prompts; parts of those motifs are all used within the frame of the larger dance. Taken as a whole, this particular work represents, abstractly, different ideas about a wedding day, none of them particularly joyful. I would suggest that this trio questions commonly publicized ideas about the way a woman 'should' be on her wedding day."

Researcher's statement. "This was the first dance I viewed from the concert. I found it intense and moving. At first, I struggled with abstract movement as I kept trying to figure out what the choreographer wanted to convey to the audience. The tension and bewilderment

conveyed in the dance was consistent with many of the participants' descriptions of weddings and their ensuing transition to being wives."

Joint statement from choreographer and researcher. "We discovered, after the dance was in construction that the six text excerpts used as stimuli were all from one participant (out of 18) in the research. The researcher raised questions about the representation of this single perspective as a trio of dancers, asking questions like: are these all the same woman at different stages or are these three separate women? The choreographer had not considered these questions prior to selecting the excerpts, as they contained particular imagery that she found striking in terms of communicative potential and were not selected to literally represent a participant or participants. The choreographer and researcher had ensuing discussions about representation, ethics, the use of abstract movement to represent literal concepts, and the role of narrative in this dance."

Figure 1. The Joint statement from the opening dance of the concert titled *I Was Happy in the Pictures*.

Don't Tread: Swim

As we enjoy a period of reflection after the presentations of our concert (and accompanying colloquia, workshops, focus groups, and panel discussions), we were able to stop treading water and start swimming. The effort required to move forward is gained from being willing to accept our collaboration as volatile and uncertain; if it was not such, we likely would have been content to tread forever. As the choreographer recently wrote to the social scientist:

I think that our low points have ... resulted in some of our most groundbreaking and inspiring moments. Part of this is because when we feel like we have to explain our perspectives to each other in detailed writing, we end up exposing our own patterns, preferences, and (for lack of a better word) biases. This process of self-discovery has been one of the very best things about working on this project. I do not know that I'd have made these discoveries otherwise.

Conclusion

In sum, it is our hope that by exposing our conflicts and divergent understandings in both abstract and concrete ways, we add to the small but growing literature examining complicated backstage processes of collaboration among qualitative researchers in the same discipline (e.g., Ritchie & Rigano, 2007; Woods, Boyle, Jeffery, & Troman, 2000), among interdisciplinary teams (e.g., Nancarrow et al., 2013), and within transdisciplinary work (e.g., Bagley, 2008). As with all projects involving multiple scholars and artists, and especially with transdisciplinary projects, we continue to expect to encounter challenges as we embark on an extension of the project. We have been invited to stage more live performances of *Ordinary Wars* and have been awarded grant funding to create an interactive website and develop a curriculum to accompany the video. We are also in the process of writing a book documenting the full scope of the research. We now have an established record of devising creative solutions to difficult problems and we have a firm understanding of the overriding disciplinary values and solutions we both bring to the project. While our low points might have been marked by a tendency to grip too tightly to our discipline-informed ways of knowing and doing, our solutions demonstrate a collaboration not only of ideas, but also of practices, values, and ways in which information is shared and understood. Knowing that there is a dearth of literature dealing with the messiness of transdisciplinary projects, we offer this case study as a way to stimulate thinking for other collaborators and to emphasize the use of creative solutions to bridge what might seem like insurmountable gaps in perspective, experience, and values.

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