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## A Dancer's Image

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A Dancer's Image: The Effects of the Mirror

Sydney Baker

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## **I. Abstract**

Dancers are amazingly dedicated athletes who train for hours a day to try and perfect their craft. In doing so, they can become hyper focused on the details, picking apart every aspect of themselves and their technique. With so much time spent training, it can be difficult to take a step back and analyze the role the mirror plays in a dancer's training and everyday life. There are many factors that can affect a dancer's body image, including the social environment between educators and peers, social standards and social media, dance clothing, and so much more. This report and creative project will look specifically at how the mirrors can be a hindrance to female collegiate dancers by paving a way for mirror gazing and body checking.

With this project, it will aim to show what mirror gazing and body checking can look like in a dance environment. This project can also provide instructors with the knowledge and awareness of the effects of mirror gazing and body checking in students. Instructors will then be able to use this report to determine new methods of using the mirror as a more positive tool to better help their students. This project will also encourage dancers to have conversations with each other about the importance of mental, emotional health, and body image to create change in the dance community. In making mental health a priority, dancers will be able to continue making art and sharing their passion with others.

## II. Introduction

In dance, the mirror can be used to teach proper alignment, as well as help visual learners see what is happening in their body when learning specific techniques. It is also said that mirrors help dancers remember the choreography better as opposed to not having them (Dearborn & Ross 115). With that said, mirrors can also cause dancers to notice things like weight and appearance and can cause dancers to strive for perfection. This perfectionism is not limited to the studio, but follows the dancers into their daily lives. Dancers may become hyper-focused on wearing the perfect outfit, eating a certain way, being exceptional students, and so much more. When being in front of a mirror for so long in a competitive environment, dancers begin to compare themselves to each other and the ideals that teachers, peers, and society have created for a dancer's body. All of that pressure continues to build as they strive to be seen as the 'perfect' dancer.

This leaves lasting effects on the dancers, causing many to lose the passion they once had for dance. Although there are many things that can contribute to a dancer losing their love for dance, the relationship the dancer has with the mirror and all of the effects that can come from constant mirror gazing, is a topic that is not talked about enough. The focus of this project revolves around mirrors and how they contribute to the way dancers feel and behave regarding their body image. This project will use the research found on mirrors, to provide information to studio owners and dance educators. This information will also allow new ways to approach the mirror in the classroom and how to recognise when one needs a break from the mirror. In using a topic like this, the goal is to promote positive change within the dance community by encouraging dancers to prioritize their mental health.

In this project, mirror gazing and body checking are frequently discussed. Both mirror gazing and body checking are components of the inappropriate mirror usage that can occur in dance classes. Mirror gazing is defined as the act of having the compulsive tendency to look and criticize oneself in the mirror. Body checking is the act of seeking out information about one's body such as body shape, size, appearance, and or weight. With mirrors taking part in our everyday lives and dancers spending most of their training in front of the mirror, mirror gazing, body checking, and perfectionism can not only occur, but lead to more serious issues such as negative body image, negative self talk, and eating disorders.

### **III. Question and Purpose**

With the topic of this project being how mirrors can trigger mirror gazing and body checking within dancers, it is important to understand how this happens. For dancers, they spend many hours being corrected and offered visual cues in the mirror. As a dancer becomes more advanced in their practice, they begin to self correct and catch mistakes within themselves. Depending on the manner, tone, and language used when receiving feedback, dancers can begin to associate the mirror with dissatisfaction within themselves, their technique, and their appearance. The question then becomes how can dance educators better introduce and use the mirror as a tool rather than a hindrance? With so much time spent in front of the mirror, dance educators should focus on kinesthetic awareness and feedback to limit the exposure of mirror gazing and body checking. In doing so, the overall wellness of the dancer will improve and the amount of time criticizing oneself in the mirror will be limited.

Changing the way dancers learn and utilize the mirror is so important to the overall experience of the dancer. Some dancers end up quitting and hating dance due to the emotional strain they are put under. This can come from years of mirror gazing and body checking during dance classes. This is why finding alternatives in the lesson plans of the instructor is pivotal, as they should adapt to the students needs. The continuation of research on mirrors in the dance studio can help instructors look for key signs or characteristics within their students--this will help the instructor identify, for example, when students are feeling overwhelmed or being too hard on themselves in class. This project can also help instructors navigate a conversation with the dancers and find out what they need or want from the class. This can be helpful for both the student and teacher because it offers feedback on teaching style and manner, as well as the student's goals in dance. The sources within this project can also guide instructors on how to run

their classes and how to make their dance lessons a more positive experience when incorporating the mirror. For example, the research can offer ways of introducing the mirror, ways of moving class to another location (outside), or simply turning the studio lights off, facing away from the mirrors and just dancing without judgment. Teachers can also find completely new ways of teaching that focus on the kinesthetic experience of the dancer to reduce mirror gazing and body checking.

The topic of how mirrors affect dancers' emotional health is really important to look into because many dancers face mental health issues on their own, rather than seeking support. It can be difficult reaching out for support when it possibly affects one's dance career. This means that dancer's have a fear of being taken out of shows or different routines that they have worked hard for. Through this project, dancers will be encouraged to advocate for their mental health and not have the fear of being replaced put onto them. Another reason this topic is so important is because it can also be difficult to get help when you feel as though you are the problem and when you look in the mirror, all you see is flaws. This is when perfectionism kicks in and the dancer will then feel like they constantly have to fix themselves or self correct and they will never be good enough. Mental health in general is so important, but being in a competitive environment, surrounded by critiques and the mirror makes mental health that much more necessary to be focused on.

This project is also essential because it gives teachers and dancers in the dance community a new, creative way of looking at how the mirror affects the quality of dance and the overall wellness of the dancer. Through the creative video, viewers are shown multiple clips of a dancer being so stuck in their own head and going through mirror gazing and body checking. The dancer also goes through self correcting and frustration throughout the video, until there is a

small moment of relief where it is about the joy of dancing when having the mirror behind the dancer. This project can explain to others how the mirror can be helpful in the classroom if used properly, but it can also be something that can negatively affect a student and their dance experience. Research on this topic should continue because it is important to recognise some of the factors contributing to dancers' body image struggles and find ways to overcome them to be able to dance freely. With continued efforts and research, this project will be able to change the dance community for the better by making mental health the primary concern.



## IV. Creative Elements

### A. Video

With this project, it was important to include the visual aspect of dance and the mirror, which is the reason for the video modality. With this creative expression, the topic of the project was able to be expressed in a different way and allowed more emotion to be put into this work. The video also offers more insight for those who are not familiar with dance by displaying the mirror in both a home environment and in a dance environment.

### B. Dance

Being that this project is about dance, it was important to incorporate the storytelling aspect that comes with dance and the sense of joy that comes from being able to dance freely. This was done through having a moment to turn from the mirror and just dance.

It was also important to show the side of dance that isn't so glamorous.

Displaying the frustration and hyperfocus one may have when training in front of the mirror was essential to this video, as it demonstrates the strive for the perfect ideal and how one can be consumed by what they see in the mirror.

### C. Poem

The poem *Reflections* by Harshita Solanki talks about the image of ourselves that we make up in our head. This person in our head is not who we see in the mirror because they are better, stronger, prettier, smarter, etc. This poem added to the creative expression by providing insight into what is going on when we are critical of ourselves in the mirror. The poem also adds to the humanistic feeling

within the video as it conveys a raw and relatable truthfulness to how people see themselves in a mirror, compared to the ideal in their head.

#### **D. Music**

The Song “This Place Was A Shelter” by Ólafur Arnalds added a specific intensity to the video with its soft piano and musical effects. It set the tone for the movements performed in the video and evoked certain emotions to flow throughout the creative process.

#### **E. Clothing**

The clothing in the video represents trying to hide or cover the body. In dance, there is a certain standard for the attire you wear to class. It is usually tighter fitting clothing that allows an instructor to see the body when moving. When body checking, it is common to notice one's shape, size, and appearance so putting on the clothes represents hiding the imperfections and covering the body with baggier clothing.

## V. Literature Review

Since the mental health of dancers is so important to this project, author Sally Radell has conducted many studies and has written many scholarly works about dancers mental health. One literary work is titled, “Comparison Study of Body Image Satisfaction Between Beginning- and Advanced-Level Female Ballet Students.” This journal article focuses on how a mirror in a studio environment negatively affects all ages and levels of dancers in one way or another (Radell 139). A common example of this is how a young dancer might talk negatively to themselves, saying ‘I can’t do it, I am no good, etc.’ and an older dancer will translate this into comparing themselves to others and developing severe mental and emotional issues.

Sally Radell has also written the articles “Effect of Teaching with Mirrors on Body Image and Locus of Control in Women College Ballet Dancers” and “My Body and Its Reflection: a Case Study of Eight Dance Students and the Mirror in the Ballet Classroom.” The first article follows a study between two groups of women. The first group was taught a ballet combination in front of mirrors, while the second group was taught the same combination without the mirrors present. It was found that women were more satisfied with their body when there were no mirrors present (Radell 1241). The second article, “My Body and Its Reflection: A Case Study of Eight Dance Students and the Mirror in the Ballet Classroom,” follows how mirrors affect the dancer's body image and leaves lasting damage on the dancer's psyche. A quote from this source states,

Most students felt that the mirror is a necessary tool to facilitate their technical growth in a ballet class. However, further analysis of the interviews suggested that the student dancers experienced body objectification as they compared their physical selves to the

images they saw in the mirror.... Researchers concluded that the mirror in the dance classroom can be an instigator of poor body image. (Radell 161 & 178)

Sally Radell has been at the forefront of research regarding the mirror and how it affects dancer's body image. These sources have given a deeper insight to what the dancers go through as the data has been collected through personal interviews and testimonials.

Although mirrors can be seen in a negative light, mirrors can actually help visual learners pick up choreography as well as memorize the sequence of movements. This can be found within the article "More Than Just a Mirror Image: The Visual System and Other Modes of Learning and Performing Dance" by Julie Brodie and Elm Lobel and "Dance Learning and the Mirror: Comparison Study of Dance Phrase Learning with and without Mirrors" by Karen Dearborn and Racheal Ross. These articles explain how there is a fine line when it comes to the mirror being a tool or a hindrance to the student, but also how important the mirror is to studio environments. More specifically, in "More Than Just a Mirror Image: The Visual System and Other Modes of Learning and Performing Dance," it states that the mirror "assists educators with addressing the role of vision in learning material, detecting and correcting errors, and enhancing performance" (Brodie & Lobel 23). In "Dance Learning and the Mirror: Comparison Study of Dance Phrase Learning with and without Mirrors," it states that dancers who practiced in front of a mirror were more likely to remember and correctly perform movement combinations compared to those who did not use a mirror" (Dearborn & Ross 114-115). These sources provide insight into why mirrors were initially placed in dance studios and why they are so essential to the learning environment for the students. This is a difficult balance that instructors must navigate-- how can dance educators and dancers use the mirror as a tool to better their craft?

The article “Sources of Disordered Eating Patterns Between Ballet Dancers and Non-dancers” by Mark H. Anshel shows a comparison between dancers and non-dancers. This source is very important to this report because it demonstrates how dancers are more dissatisfied with their body image and are more likely to develop eating disorders compared to those who do not dance. This source also goes into detail on how there are many factors that can contribute to this behavior such as perfectionism and the mirror (Anshel). Being that dancers are in front of mirrors for a prolonged period of time compared to those who do not dance, dancers are at a greater risk for body image issues and dissatisfaction. In the article “Tiny Dancer: Body Image and Dancer Identity in Female Modern Dancers,” the authors compare how ballet dancers and modern dancers both feel a need to have an ideal body type, but ballet dancers feel an extra pressure from their teachers and peers (Langdon & Petracca 362). Ballet is a very strict and structured dance form. There is a lot of partnering and lifting that goes on in ballet and many of the ballet dancers are weighed before rehearsals or performances to make sure they are the right size for the role. There is added pressure due to instructors criticizing the dancer in the mirror and having to wear leotards, tights, and pointe shoes, which make the dancer's body feel highly exposed. Ballet dancers are under constant pressure and are always striving to be the best, which can be dangerous if taken too far.

The article “Factors Dancers Associate With Their Body Dissatisfaction,” follows how not only the mirror can affect dancers mental health, but how the dance attire, the mirror, and how the teacher speaks to the student all contribute to the negative experience of the dancer (Dantas, et al.). In dance, there are so many factors that can cause a dancer to feel as though they are not enough and this source highlights just a few reasons for dancers to feel this way. Students are all striving to receive praise and approval from their peers, instructors, and audiences that

they feel extreme pressure in the dance studio. This pressure causes negative self-talk and body image issues for the dancer. Another source is “The Role of Puberty in the Making and Breaking of Young Ballet Dancers: Perspectives of Dance Teachers” by Cumming, Haase, Malina, and Mitchell. This article explains how many young ballet dancers try to avoid puberty and ultimately see puberty as a negative thing. Puberty can be the deciding factor in whether a dancer will quit or become a professional dancer. Educator influence is so important to young dancers and the way they handle difficult topics such as puberty, affects their experience with dance and their bodies. This article is very important to this report as it highlights body dissatisfaction within dancers and how it can prompt mirror gazing, negative self talk, and disordered eating (Cumming, et al.).

The article “Relations Among Exercise Type, Self-Objectification, and Body Image in the Fitness Centre Environment: The Role of Reasons for Exercise” explains that environment can be a factor in the way females compare their bodies to others and have a negative body image. The author states that females who exercise in areas with

[M]irrors, posters that depict the ideal body, and other women’s bodies (often in tight, revealing clothing) compare themselves... Exercising in mirrored environments has been shown to produce negative feeling states in sedentary women and may serve to increase body image concern and self-objectification in some women due to increased surveillance of their own body. (Prichard and Tiggemann 856-857)

Relating this to the dance studio environment, dancers are in front of mirrors for hours on end and may find it easy to look at others through the mirror to compare themselves. It is easy to feel like you are always being watched as a dancer because you are constantly under surveillance by the mirror, yourself, your peers, and the instructor.

In the article “Body Image in the Dance Class” by Wendy Oliver, she talks about how body image is not just about body weight, but about specific perceived imperfections of one's body. She states “In more than twenty years of teaching, I have watched either the expressions of doubt, fear, despair and self-disgust or alternatively, of contempt and self-righteous smugness in supposedly bodily superiority move across the faces of my female students when the issue of the dancer's body arose, or when they faced the studio mirror” (Oliver 18). Dancers are looking to achieve these high valued physical traits set by the dance industry, but at what cost? Many dancers struggle with their mental health and can come to fear looking at themselves in the mirror. It is imperative that dance instructors limit the amount of time in front of the mirror and focus on the feeling of movement instead.

In the article “Experimental Induction of Self-Focused Attention via Mirror Gazing: Effects on Body Image, Appraisals, Body-Focused Shame, and Self-Esteem,” it explains how mirror gazing plays a role in the maintenance of body dysmorphic disorder. The authors state, “activities like mirror gazing, excessive grooming, compulsive skin-picking, reassurance seeking, and the application of cosmetic procedures ironically serve to maintain appearance preoccupations by increasing attention to one's perceived flaws” (Barnier and Collison 150). Mirror gazing shows up in a dancer's life when they are staring in the mirror for extended periods of time and focused on a specific part of their body or an area the person sees as a flaw. This also plays into the idea of perfectionism within the dancer. As the dancer strives for this ideal, they can begin compulsory behaviors such as repetitive body checking, skin picking, and excessive grooming. When they are working towards this ideal, they can feel anxiety and pressure, which can make them fixate on the parts of themselves that are underdeveloped and overwork and obsess on improving that part of themselves. For example, if an instructor says that a student

needs to work on straightening her legs when working on battements, a beating action of the extended leg, the dancer will be so focused on their legs in the mirror and will be so fixated on making this better. Overall, the sources demonstrate an understanding of how mirrors have affected dancers and how there are many issues, along with the mirror, that can negatively affect a dancer's overall wellness.



## **VI. Conclusion**

Mirror gazing is the action of looking into a mirror at oneself and hyperfocusing on the perceived flaws that one may have. Body checking is the action of obsessively seeking information about one's appearance including body weight, shape, and size. In the dance studio, female dancers run the risk of dangerous behaviors and body image issues. With dance teachers holding a great influence over the students, teachers should be more accepting of different body types and they should find new ways to provide feedback to students. Emphasizing the kinesthetic experience of the student is important in making sure the student feels and memorizes the movement in their own body. This also allows one to mimic a performance, as when you are in front of an audience, you will not have the mirrors to rely on to make sure you are performing the correct technique.

Ultimately, there needs to be a change within the dance community. There is no one size fits all for dance and it is important to realize that dance educators and the dance world have driven many dancers to such dangerous and extreme measures to try to meet the 'perfect' dance body and technical standards. There needs to be a shift in the perception and aesthetic that educators, peers, and audiences have when they think of a dancer. This needs to begin in the classroom with young dancers. It is important that educators encourage all students to be who they are and not try to follow the ideal. It is also important for instructors to properly use the mirror for feedback and limit the exposure dancers have when necessary. The instructor will have to balance this within the classroom and try to support their students in this process of navigating the mirror.

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## VIII. Video Credits

Video/Editing Credits: Baker, Sydney & Tello, Jonathan.

Dancer/Choreographer: Baker, Sydney.

Poem: Solanki, Harshita. *Reflections*. *Youtube*. [youtube.com/watch?v=0251XPnP\\_vo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0251XPnP_vo)

Read by Sydney Baker.

Music: Arnalds, Ólafur. "This Place Was A Shelter." 0:06-0:33 Seconds. *Youtube*.

[youtube.com/watch?v=8eo1xMC7VbU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eo1xMC7VbU).