

DANCE AS A TOOL FOR IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND SELF-PERCEPTION: A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract. Dance as an embodied and expressive practice has come to be seen more and more as a useful psychological tool for developing identity and self-perception. In this article, I approach dance not as a unitary act, but as a complex process incorporating bodily awareness, emotional processing, cognitive meaning-making, and a single practice for self-construction. Based on contemporary research in embodiment, interoception, emotion regulation, and dance movement therapy, the research claims that movement-based practices allow people the ability to access deeply embedded self-concepts and transform them. To achieve this, the Heart Crystal Method is primarily used in this paper as an original methodology developed by the author who identifies dance as an ordered experience of identity change as progressing through nervous system regulation, emotional release, embodiment, integration, and identity reconstruction stages. The findings indicate that dance strengthens body awareness, encourages emotional integration, and offers a safe landscape where individuals can confront internal struggles, enhancing self-acceptance and personal resilience. Thus, through the integration of somatic and cognitive disciplines, dance-centered activities facilitate the creation of a holistic and adaptive identity. The research adds to the burgeoning fields of embodied psychology by framing dance as more than just artistic expression — it serves as a scientific intervention in promoting personal development and identity.

Keywords: dance, identity development, self-perception, embodiment, interoception, emotional regulation, dance movement therapy, somatic practices, Heart Crystal Method.

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Introduction

Identity can now be more and more commonly recognised in modern psychology as a dynamic, embodied process rather than a cognitive construct. Conventional theories of identity formation have focused on narrative, social roles, and cognitive evaluation, but the body plays a vital role in self-identities, and the body thus has come to play a crucial role in determining self-conceptualization and psychological experience [3; 21].

Dance becomes the perfect vehicle to experience these attributes as a special medium within this paradigm integrating body language, body movement, emotional enactment and cognitive meaning-making into a joint experience. Dance offers the potential for both a formalized (but variable) experience allowing individuals to simultaneously engage with self-bodily sensations, emotional states and internal narratives.

Movement exposes individuals to interoceptive and proprioceptive signals necessary for self-awareness and identity-building [10; 15]. Such embodied engagement frees the individual from the limitations of verbal or cognitive self-knowledge and leads to the exploration and transformation of self-perception.

Dance supports affect regulation and expression of nonverbal and experiential emotions [4; 6], while acting to be more expressive and modulating the affective states through the medium of dance, thereby fostering emotional regulation. Studies of dance movement therapy show that movement-based approaches can improve psychological well-being, reduce depressive symptoms, and promote emotional integration [5; 11].

The results indicate that the practice of dance can not only serve its own artistic function but also serve as a therapeutic approach significantly affecting identity formation. This article suggests that dance serves as a psychological aid to identity change. It allows the melding together of bodily experiences, emotion and cognitive thought.

This process is conceptualized in the paper with the Heart Crystal Method—an original integrative approach that positions dance as a structured path for inner transformation. By analyzing this new knowledge in the light of methods, it is hoped the paper will show how dance helps to construct a coherent and versatile way of being as individuals.

Literature Review

Embodiment and the Role of the Body in Identity Formation

Embodiment is considered to be inextricably linked to cognition and identity in modern psychological theory. We believe that embodied experience involves active participation of the body rather than a passive vessel [2]. Movement and posture-based changes can affect mental function, showing that bodily states impact cognitive processing more directly.

Interoception, defined as the perception of internal bodily signals, is foundational for self-awareness and identity formation [3; 10]. Individuals with a higher level of interoceptive awareness have better emotional regulation, and a more coherent sense of self. Mindfulness-infused somatic modalities promote this association, promoting awareness of bodily sensations and connecting physical and psychological spheres [12; 21].

Dance as an embodied activity magnifies these processes by intentionally and symbolically engaging the body in movement. Dance brings about a person's connection to his or her embodied self, and its contributions to the development of self in one's conscious and unconscious sense of self/image.

Dance and Emotional Integration

Emotional regulation is a key skill which is essential to psychological development and identity and is the hallmark of healthy functioning. Good regulation of emotion is based on the monitoring, assessing and adapting response to the emotion [4]. Dance can offer a different context for this (rather than just speaking) in that people will use movement to show emotion.

Studies in dance movement therapy indicate that dance can play a pivotal role in aiding emotional health, through both the expression and processing of challenging emotional states

[5; 6]. Movement allows people to express feelings that may be challenging to express verbally, increasing emotional release and acceptance.

We've seen neurocognitive research supporting this view of dance, showing how the dance moves to target brain regions that handle emotions, memory, and how we see ourselves [11]. The synchronization between movement and music increases emotion and shares dynamic structure that allows universal emotive communication [17; 20].

Furthermore, thoughtful movement activities such as those incorporated in the Soma emotion program lead to emotional regulation and psychological resilience [7]. These results suggest that movement can bridge the gap between physiological processes and emotional experience helping in the process of the individual's identity formation (See Figure 1).

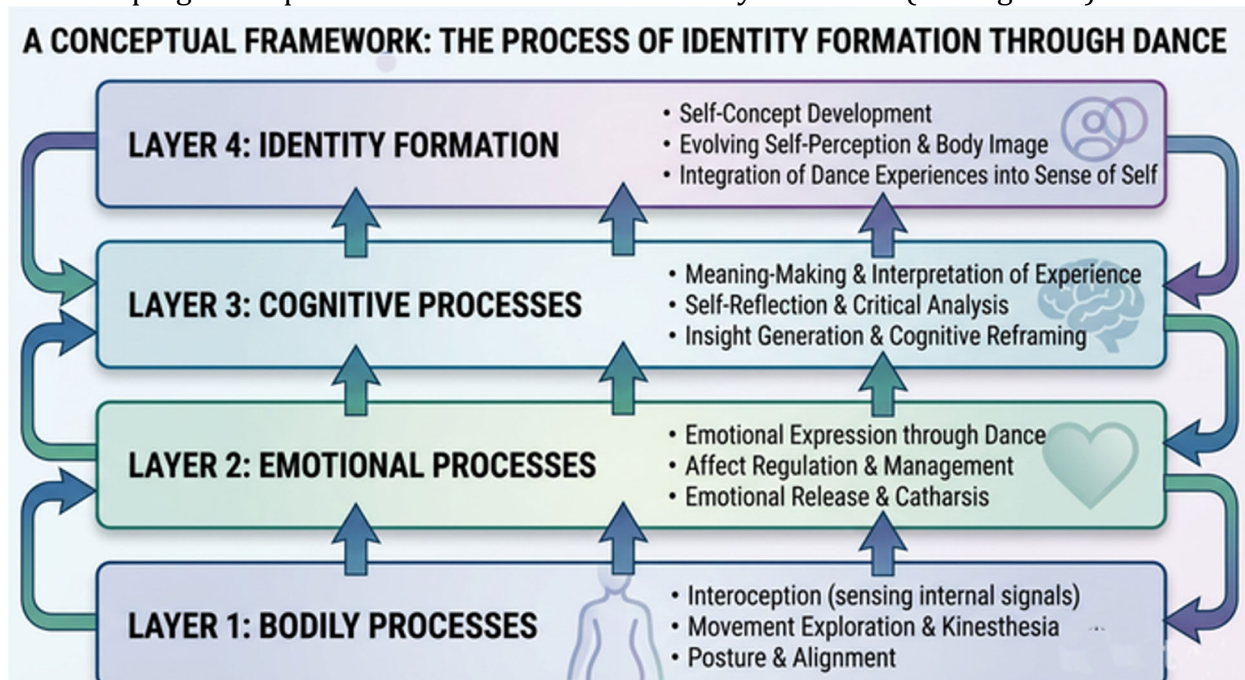


Figure 1. Mechanism of Identity Formation through Dance

Somatic Practices and Trauma Integration

A somatic approach to psychological practice emphasizes the importance of bodily awareness—that is how a traumatic situation is processed and integrated. Trauma is often stored in the body as dysregulated physiological patterns, which influence self-perception and identity [13; 15].

Dance and movement-based practices offer a safe way to access and release these embodied experiences. Movement can provide internal journeys toward exploring core divisions that may lead to maladaptive habits of self-identity that must be broken [9]. This process is aided by a trauma-sensitive somatic mindfulness process that can provide the safety and regulation necessary [12].

Somatic-psychological integration is crucial in reclaiming identity, for unresolved trauma can rupture selfhood. With a non-invasive and experiential way to integrate the two, dance opens the door.

Dance, Motivation, and Identity Construction

Identity development is linked to motivation in particular in a self-determination perspective. Intrinsic motivation is important to personal growth and self-actualization [16]. Dance, as a self-expressive and intrinsic motivator, is in accordance with these values in promoting autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Oyserman's (2024) identity-based motivation theory also implies that individuals tend to engage in behaviors that are consistent with their self-view in a broader sense [14]. The influence dance can have in this process is to change self-perception and to reinforce positive identity narratives.

The health and wellness coaching literature supports the use of movement-based practice in promoting sustained changes to behavior as well [1; 8]. Dance incorporated into structured intervention can increase long-term engagement and performance.

Mindful Movement and Psychological Well-Being

Mindful movement practices stress awareness, presence, and intentionality in exercise. Studies have shown that such practices boost mental well-being and self-awareness and reduce stress [18; 19].

Dance-based interventions—especially of a mindfulness approach—correlated to exercise often yield evidence of remarkable benefits [22]. These are the type of interventions that support mind and body integration that is necessary for a sound sense of self (See Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of Key Studies on Dance, Embodiment, and Psychological Outcomes

Study	Focus Area	Method	Key Findings	Relevance to Identity
Karkou et al. (2019)	Dance Movement Therapy	Meta-analysis	Reduced depression symptoms	Emotional regulation supports identity stability
Koch et al. (2019)	Dance & mental health	Meta-analysis	Improved well-being and affect	Positive self-perception
Millman et al. (2021)	Neurocognitive effects	Systematic review	Activation of emotion & self-processing systems	Identity integration
Mehling et al. (2012)	Interoception	Scale development	Body awareness linked to emotional regulation	Foundation of self-perception
Gibson (2019)	Embodiment	Theoretical	Body awareness shapes cognition	Identity grounded in bodily experience
Payne et al. (2015)	Somatic therapy	Theoretical/clinical	Trauma stored in body	Movement enables identity reconstruction
Zafeiroudi et al. (2025)	Dance interventions	Scoping review	Improved mental well-being	Supports adaptive identity formation
Ryan & Deci (2020)	Motivation	Theoretical	Intrinsic motivation drives growth	Identity aligned with internal values

Methodology

Design: This study uses a conceptual-analytical research design integrating established empirical literature with an original author-developed framework—the Heart Crystal Method—for exploring dance as a psychological intervention in shaping identity and self-perception. Instead of doing primary empirical data collection, a theoretically based model of identity transformation through movement emerges from a pool of interdisciplinary strands of research in the field of embodiment, interoception research, dance movement therapy, and somatic psychology.

The core methodological contribution of this paper is the use of the Heart Crystal Method proposed by Oksana Ponomarenko as an integrative interpretive framework. This approach considers the process of personal transformation as a sequence that is structured and multi-phase and includes (1) nervous system regulation (N); (2) emotional release, (3) embodiment, (4) emotional integration; and (5) identity reconstruction.

In this context, dance is viewed not only as an expressive performance but as an intervention practice, helping the participant to develop into each phase. The analysis was conducted using the mapping of emotional regulation [4], interoceptive awareness [10], and somatic integration [15] mentioned in the literature on phases of the Heart Crystal Method.

This facilitated a systematic investigation of how dance-based practices enable transitions through phases of identity transformation. It emphasized improvisational movement and mindful dance practices as catalysts for accessing implicit emotional material and reshaping maladaptive self-perception patterns.

The study includes visual and structural elements to promote the concept's clarity. The Heart Crystal Method is depicted in Figure 2 where we propose the cyclical and progressive nature of each phase, whilst keeping dance as the critical element that helps illustrate the steps.

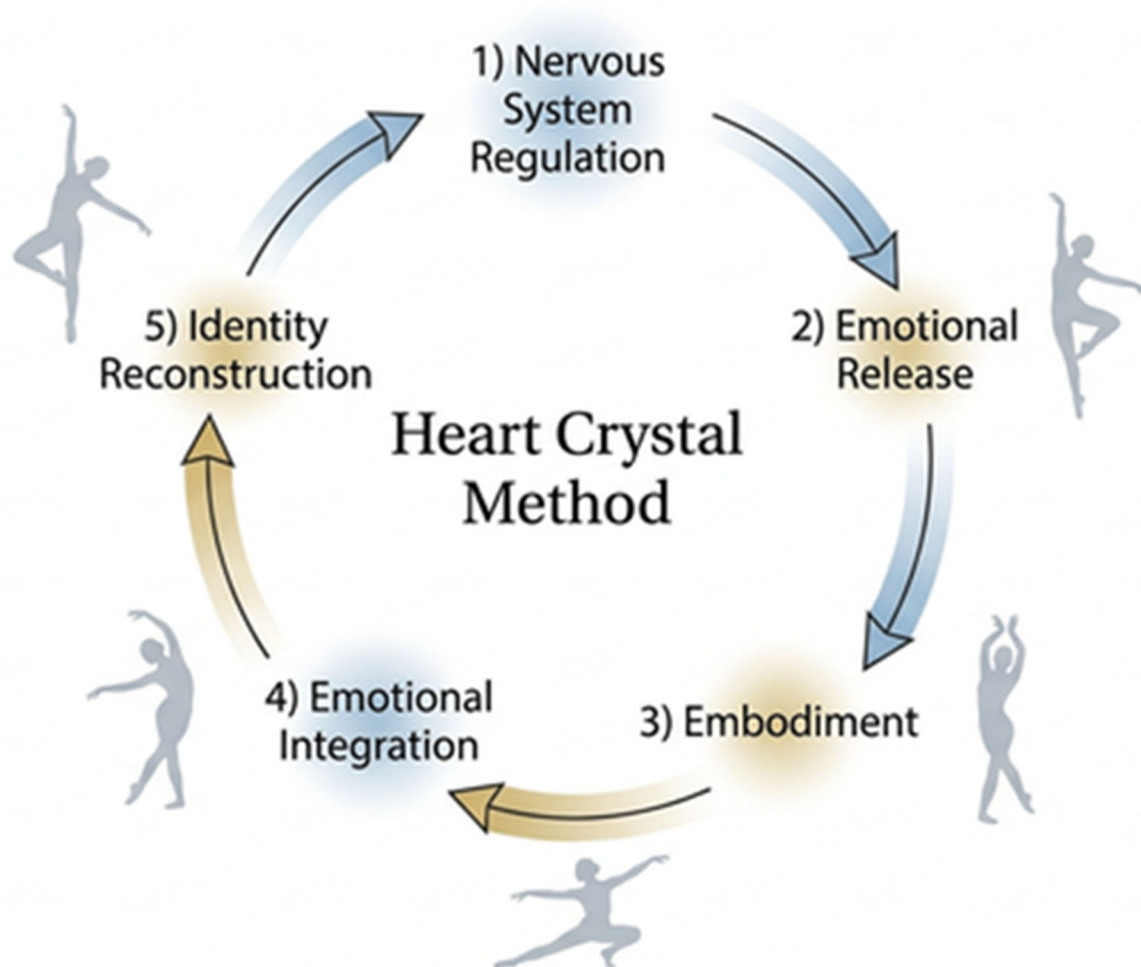


Figure 2. Core Conceptual Model

This methodological orientation allows us to see dance as a multifaceted process that involves more than one facet: a materiality, and as much else, it draws from bodily, emotional, and cognitive domains. Integrating the empirical research into its original theoretical model, the article offers a novel framework for examining identity development in embodied experiences, and adds to integrative approaches in contemporary psychology.

Findings

This analysis revealed dance as a multidimensional psychological mechanism that mediates the development and transformation of identity through these closely inter-related somatic, emotional, and cognitive pathways. When analyzed using the Heart Crystal Method, these mechanisms demonstrate a structured unfolding of internal change (See Table 2).

Table 2. Psychological Mechanisms of Dance Across the Heart Crystal Method

Phase	Dance-Based Mechanism	Underlying Psychological Process	Outcome for Identity
Nervous System Regulation	Rhythmic movement, grounding	Physiological stabilization, interoception	Sense of safety, body awareness
Emotional Release	Expressive movement, affective discharge	Emotion regulation, release of suppressed affect	Reduced emotional tension
Embodiment	Conscious movement, body awareness	Integration of bodily and cognitive processes	Strengthened self-perception
Emotional Integration	Reflective movement, repetition	Meaning-making, emotional processing	Coherent emotional identity
Identity Reconstruction	Improvisation, expressive exploration	Behavioral restructuring, identity alignment	Stable and adaptive self-concept

First of all, dance improves interoceptive awareness and the personal self-perception of bodies to a great extent, fundamental to the self-concept. Movement-based practices sensitise to internal bodily signals so that persons can perceive emotional states and physiological reactions [3; 10]. This additional awareness allows for the early regulated nervous system work of creating a feeling of internal safety and groundedness.

The second reason is that dance is used to express and manage emotions in a nonverbal manner. Movements allow for externalization of emotions that is otherwise hard to describe mentally, with a positive influence on emotional inhibition and adaptive regulation [4]. There is empirical support on the effects of dance movement therapy practices on psychological well-being and reduction in depressive symptoms [5; 6]. From the Heart Crystal perspective, the movement process itself, this is equivalent to emotional release, the emotional release phase where stored affective data is processed to be transmuted.

Third of all, improvisational dance becomes a safe room to explore and express in an unstructured place for reflecting on internal conflicts while rebuilding self awareness. And with an intuitive movement to respond to new body emotions, people can try out or learn new behaviors and response strategies that make the breaking of more static thoughts and behaviors and identity patterns less likely.

This corresponds in time to somatic perspectives, which position the body in the work of accessing and integrating implicitly expressed emotional material [13; 15]. Dancer's actions support embodiment and integration — that is to say the ability to transcend 'self' and progress from conceptual thoughts toward embodied identity.

Movement, emotional states and cognition are all synchronized, resulting in the process of becoming cognisant and coherent with the self-narrative that is described in the process of making sense of what we refer to as the self [11]. Mentoring mindful movement practices in a mindful manner of movement are also conducive to this work and practice of mindful movement increase the awareness of things as today and psychological equilibrium in a sense [18; 22].

Last but not least, continued participation in dance-based techniques has also been linked to enhanced self-esteem, self-acceptance and engagement with intrinsic motivation. Through an integrated, positive experience with their bodies, the more positively and in a

more positive manner, individuals are more apt to construct adaptive identity structures and behaviors [14; 16]. Taken together, these results imply that dance is not just an expressive expression but a systematic process of identity transformation, working at several psychological levels.

Discussion

The results of this study serve as a basis for the notion of dance as a multi-faceted psychological device for identity development facilitated by the convergence of physical awareness, affective processing, and cognitive reorganization. If viewed under the Heart Crystal Method, it suggests a hierarchical manner of transformation based on widely known psychological models of embodiment, emotion control, and motivation.

One of the main takeaways of the results is the significance of perception of interoception for identity development. Dance increases sensitivity to internal bodily states, the basis of self-perception and emotional awareness, as the results showed. It is also in line with research showing that interoception is necessary to create a cohesive sense of self [3; 10; 21].

In the Heart Crystal Method, this corresponds to the component of nervous system regulation which allows greater psychological engagement through inner safety restoration. It follows that the methodological emphasis on starting with physiological stabilization is empirically defensible, since dysregulated states may inhibit the ability to explore introspection and change in the individual.

These results further emphasize the position of dance as an expressive and cognitive therapy and the use of dance as a non-verbal therapy. Movement enables people to tap into a range of emotions that they may not be able to access through mental function alone and externalize it.

Consistent with the process model of emotion regulation—which holds that adaptive strategies for managing affective responses are critical [4] — this observation corroborates existing research. These findings are supported by clinical data from dance movement therapy, which has shown higher-than-expected improvements in emotional well-being and reduced depressive symptoms [5; 6].

This stage in the Heart Crystal model aligns with emotional release, where movement acts to process and recreate embodied affective material. Crucially, the results also highlight improvisational movement as a site in which to examine identity.

Unsystematic and in-the-moment dance can help individuals process internal conflicts, explore different means of expression, and overcome fixed categories of self. This is supported by somatic theories of trauma and identity that believe that unresolved traumatic experiences are inscribed into patterns of the body and can be accessed through movement [12; 13; 15].

The Heart Crystal Method includes this process specifically within the embodiment phase and focuses on movement from cognitive awareness to lived, experiential understanding of the self.

The integration of bodily, emotional, and cognitive domains highlighted in the findings may also be regarded as part of the understanding of embodied cognition that suggests that psychological processes cannot be divorced from physical experience [2]. Dance, as a practice that synchronizes physical action, emotion, and perception, is the best laboratory for achieving that integration.

Neuroscience research also strengthens this thesis, showing that dance activates brain systems related to emotion, memory, and self-representation [11]. Moreover, the dynamic relationship between movement and emotional expression observed in music and dance contexts indicates a shared structural basis for affective communication [17; 20].



Figure 3. Improvisation as Identity Transformation Space

Self-esteem and identity reconstruction results reinforce the role of dance in long-term psychological change. To develop a positive relationship with their bodies, people develop more tolerance and acceptance of the emotions to become healthy. This process is consistent with identity-based motivation theory that suggests that behavior is impacted by alignment between behaviour and identity [14]. Likewise there is an emphasis on intrinsic motivation through self-determination theory to foster development [16].

Dance, as an inherently rewarding pursuit, serves these mechanisms by promoting autonomy and competence and self-expression. Additionally, incorporating dance into structured interventions is consistent with wider principles in the field of health coaching and mindful movement as seen on its current trajectory of health coaching: such approaches to well-being are holistic [1; 8; 19].

In addition, activities based on contemplative movement have shown promising evidence of gains in emotional regulation and psychological resilience [7; 18; 22] as well as in the acceptance of the Heart Crystal Method as an integrated framework, reinforcing its relevance.

Methodologically, Heart Crystal Method can enable a systematic compilation of intricate psyche mechanisms into a linear model of change. The framework offers explanatory precision and practical relevance through the mapping of empirical findings onto different phases. A study that connects theory and intervention through a coherent approach to how dance facilitates aspects of identity formation!

Nevertheless, the current study is of a conceptual nature. Although it contains a significant amount of prior empirical evidence, future investigations could be considered as a valuable way for experimenting empirically in terms of the proposed framework, especially with longitudinal and experimental designs. Moreover, differences in cultural background, movement history, and psychological preparedness of individuals might affect the impact of dance-based interventions.

This discussion validates that dance is not just art or play but is science based at creating a transformation of identity. Through bodily input as a vital driver of psychological experience, dance allows one to access, metabolize, and incorporate dimensions of a self that are often outside the human realm of purely cognitive processes. The Heart Crystal Method is a useful framework through which to view and utilise these processes both in research and practice.

Conclusions

This research confirms that dance is a powerful and scientifically solid tool for developing the self. Through its merging of bodily awareness, emotional processing, and cognitive meaning-making, dance provides a coherent and adaptive sense of self by which an individual tries to establish meaning.

The Heart Crystal Method puts forward a structured scheme for understanding this process which emphasizes the importance of sequential phases in achieving sustainable transformation. Through nervous system regulation, emotional release, embodiment, integration, and identity reconstruction, dance enables deep, permanent transformation.

The results of the study indicate that we need to go beyond purely cognitive approaches to psychology and embrace embodied practices as essential components of personal development. Dance is a beautiful creative medium, it is both artistic and therapeutic, a means of self-exploration, healing and growth as its very own type of therapy.

This research should involve empirical validation of the proposed framework and future research into real-world applications of the proposed framework in clinical and non-clinical settings.

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