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Tap Dance as a Nonverbal Language for Autism Spectrum Disorder

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**Abstract**

Through elements of sound and movement, tap dance employs rhythm as a universal language for nonverbal communication through the medium of music.  Through three distinct but related elements, (a literature review, an artist’s statement, and a performance piece), this thesis will explore tap dance as a form of nonverbal language.  For individuals with autism spectrum disorder, tap dance may help to achieve further attunement with themselves and the outside world.  Due to autistic people’s impaired communicative, interactional, and skilled abilities, experiencing the relationships formed through tap dance may facilitate improvement.  The literature review begins with a brief definition of nonverbal communication, followed by a history of tap dance as nonverbal communication used in African slave culture.  Following, I explore how tap dance and tap dance therapy can create synchronicity in an autistic person through the study of full body attunement, where music and movement can be used as tools for personal excavation.  By digging deeper into my past and present selves, the process of personal excavation has helped me take off layers that have restricted me my whole life.  My work showcases how within the synonymous relationship of sound and movement, communication can grow past prior limitations, thereby creating more therapeutic outlets for the autistic community.  Studying communication in interpersonal relationships, rhythm in life, and the mind, body, and soul of neurodivergence generates broader ways of discussing tap dance as a nonverbal language for autism spectrum disorder.

Keywords: tap dance, autism, nonverbal communication, therapy, language

<https://animoto.com/play/DE33B0HeBmdXJgW6R1CEoQ>

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**Introduction**

At just about a year old, I was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder making everyday motor skills, communication, and social interaction difficult.  Every day, I hid my autistic tendencies from the world, as if I were wearing a mask meant to shade my actions.  My parents arranged for traditional therapies including speech therapy, occupation therapy, and sensory integration therapy, but they did not want me to be stigmatized at school and  made the decision not to give me accommodations in school.  Still, they sought out spaces in which I could interact with peers. While ballet class led to a sensory overload, tap dance changed my whole little world, making a greater impact than any of the traditional therapies of my younger years.  The rhythmical patterns, foot-to-floor impact, and nonverbal teacher-student conversations encompassed the aspects of basic life skills, social interactions, and synchronicity practiced in therapeutic spaces.  Tap dance gave me my voice when I never thought I would have one, and this is what spawned my interest in how tap dance can be used as a form of nonverbal communication.  As a student pursuing a Communication Studies degree and also a professional career in tap dance, interdisciplinary work has become the core of my education.  I feel the most like myself when I am moving and making music, and I am determined to explore what has made this connection possible.

For people with Autism Spectrum Disorder, everyday processes such as social interaction, motor skills, and communication are generally impaired, making them experiences that are endured rather than enjoyed.  Although it is a spectrum, meaning everyone with autism is unique and may have different presentations of their autism than others, each autistic person has some form of difficulty with social communication, everyday tasks and/or emotional regulation that for others without autism may come naturally.

Because social communication can be difficult for people on the autism spectrum, the nonverbal communication that develops in tap dance may be a method for helping to increase confidence and skill in communication. For example, in a tap jam, which is the term for a gathering of two or more tap dancers, where each dancer improvises within tap dance vocabulary, either with music or acapella, there is an opportunity to engage in nonverbal communication occurs, as it allows the dancers to both express ideas and to reply to one another without using spoken word.  The rhythmic synchronization that two tap dancers are able to have within a tap jam is similar to the common understanding that occurs in dyadic conversation. When multiple dancers are present in the tap dance, it is a form of non-verbal small group communication. Through sound, varying musical patterns of differing tonality and structure are used to make musical choices that reflect elements of communication.  Through movement, body language supports the rhythm from below, as stories are told through gestural phrases and facial expressions.  Together, a cohesive construction of nonverbal communication is formed, as sound and movement work in synchrony and harmony to relay a thematic feeling to another individual or mass.

The rhythm in tap dance may also serve as a significant tool for helping people with autism to feel connected and synchronized both internally and with those around them.  The shockwave tap dance carries throughout the body may be an incredibly useful source of sensory integration therapy for people diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.  With tap dance encompassing many therapeutic features such as sensory integration, body synchronicity, motor movement, interpersonal communication, and more, this art form may be a strong source of therapy for children on the spectrum.  The internal understanding of rhythm may help to create a safe environment for autistic people to grow and explore.

Thinking about how tap dance can fit into a therapy umbrella as well as a nonverbal message medium leads to the research questions of this thesis project: What are the characteristics of tap dance as a form of nonverbal communication?  Based on my own experience, as well as studies of music and dance therapies, how might tap dance be used as a therapeutic tool for individuals with autism?  And, how can this relationship be explored through a performance project?

**Literature Review**

**Nonverbal Messaging**

Nonverbal communication is a transfer of messages in a wordless medium (APA Dictionary of Psychology). These mediums may include proxemics, haptics, and kinesic.  Proxemics refers to the ways distance and space can influence communication (2021). Haptics refers to “the nonverbal code dealing with communication through touch and physical contact” (Bowman, 2021, p. 193). Kinesics refers to movements within nonverbal communication, which include but are not limited to facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact (2021). Nonverbal communication is at the core of our daily interaction, as we use it both intentionally and unintentionally (Bowman, 2021, p. 9). Nonverbal language never stops, as we use it throughout our entire body to convey ideas and send messages, as well as immediately understand others’ before spoken word.

Watzlawick, Beavin, Jackson, 1967, noted that, “one cannot not communicate. This phrase helps us understand the immediacy and authenticity of nonverbal communication.  They expand, “Activity or inactivity, words or silence all have message value: they influence others and these others, in turn, cannot not respond to these communications and are thus themselves communicating” (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1967, p. 1). Therefore, nonverbal communication is the most natural form of expressing and sharing, as there is no wrong meaning, and it brings us deeper into understanding verbal behaviors and social cues.

When discussing nonverbal language in accordance with dance, kinesics quickly comes to mind.  As defined in *Nonverbal Communication: An Applied Approach*, “kinesics is the nonverbal code that focuses on movement and motion-based behaviors” (Bowman, 2021, p. 52). Therefore, the movement found within dance proves to be a perfect example of this concept at work.  The way emotion is displayed through movement becomes a full body experience where the artist can articulate what message they are trying to send.  The meaning becomes up to the interpretation of the audience member if it is not explicitly stated, which can be more impactful than spoken word.  The most commonly used tool to create a specific kinesic message within dance is gesturing, which is the way we use our hands and bodies within interaction (Bowman, 2021, p. 60).  The way we use our hands and arms to communicate something so simply can make the idea clearer than if other techniques are used.  When used in tap dance, this creates a beautiful blend of music and movement.

**Rhythm as Communication**

Tap dance was born out of a need for nonverbal communication.  In the 1600s, Africans were taken as slaves by boat to the United States.  Because African “traditional drums'' were taken away by slave owners, they would create music using buckets and dance as a community, leading to the evolution of an “African-American style of dance” (Hill, 2012). Slave owners saw how the beat of their traditional drums could be used as a hidden source of communication and messaging, so they removed them from the premises.  However, the body could not be taken, which made it the only available possibility for nonverbal messaging.  Because of their lack of resources, African dancing involved an “intimate understanding of nature,” (Stearns and Stearns, 1994) where their relationship with the earth was heavily rooted in a symbiotic connection to the air surrounding them and the dirt beneath them.  These qualities found in the earliest forms of African dancing have connected greatly with what we see in tap dance’s connection with the floor today, and how we are constantly grounded, holding the highest respect for everyone who came before us.

Constance Valis Hill (2012) discusses how a couple of centuries later, tap dance grew from the outside conversational and listening aspects of communication via dancing in the streets, restaurants, and more, where technique was copied and embodied by other dancers.  The properties she stresses still exist today, as dancers gather in wood studios, outside jazz jams, and zoom rooms to exchange rhythmical ideas that add to their creative communication. Nevertheless, with dancer creativity signifying freedom of mind, body, and soul, an individual’s unique sense of self can soar through nonverbal communication.

“Rhythm is the language of life,” as stated by Ted Louis Levy, with the feeling expressed through music being recognized internationally without the need of spoken word.  Music has the ability to connect both internally and externally, as it can touch upon a thought or feeling, as well as a storyline.  As Judith Lynne Hanna (1987) describes, when one adds intention onto a rhythmical structure, there becomes an added element of organization that creates a greater flow and release of well thought out and timed movement (p. 72).  Through this addition, rhythm as a language grows to include the specificity of thought and mind, which is further influenced by outside forces.  Summarizing these points, Hanna (1987) describes a strong connection between rhythm and the mind, as organization of thought in a musical sense is best seen through clear intention.  An example of this can be seen through improvisation: a spontaneous creation of rhythm that is musical and abstract, as well as intentional and conversational (1994, p.4).  One way in which this clear intention occurs is in synchronicity in improvisation with another musician/tap dancer.  Such synchronicity does not necessarily mean that rhythms are occurring at the same time, rather it represents the pair communicating nonverbally through music.  Seeing rhythm as a property of clear conversation and engagement, the music can only be executed if one body works as a whole in relation to another body.

**Synchronicity**

Coordination, communication, rhythm, social interaction, attunement: these are all separate entities equally related through synchronicity.  (Markova et al., 2019) Synchronicity is the synonymous relationship of multiple elements without clear intention, almost as if everything naturally happens at once.  For neurotypical individuals, body attunement is experienced as full synchronization.  Dvir (2020) explains that “full synchronization of the frequency and intensity of muscle contractions, creates the foundation for empathy and communication in the first year of life” (p.3-4).  People with autism often lack a sense of synchronicity; separation exists between parts of the mind and body that should work as one unit.  William Condon (2013) found that the processes of self-synchrony and interactional synchrony proved to be difficult for people on the spectrum, as the disconnect of understanding sound created overwhelming reactions that were not in tune with their personal rhythm (Amos, 2013, p.6). He stated that “echoing” sometimes occurred in the mind, almost as if ideas went in one ear and out of the other, rather than hearing something synonymously (Amos, 2013, p.6). Moreover, this dyssynchrony may keep people on the spectrum from having a clear understanding and calmness towards many kinds of interaction, whether interpersonal or on a larger scale.  Becoming in tune with personal frequencies within the body will allow the individual to completely connect with the world surrounding them, therefore making basic life skills easier.  Body attunement is difficult for people with autism to achieve, causing social interaction impairment.

One outlet that has been helpful in increasing synchronicity and body attunement is music.  With there being multiple working parts occurring at once, rhythmic and melodic structures assist in bringing the body and mind to one singular place.  To understand this relationship, these elements must be broken down.  Through “visual mapping,” main subjects display key, emotional points of music to help people on the spectrum gain awareness of how to follow a story (Hourigan and Hammel, 2017, p. 3).  Processing the storyline for a piece connects directly to an emotional value, which helps autistic people see through a new lens.  This lens gives value to the perspective of not only the individual, but also to the people around them, assisting with social interaction.  Hourigan and Hammel’s (2017) idea of task analysis - the process of breaking down a task into more manageable and understandable chunks - is beneficial in understanding how breaking down important points of information assists students with gaining greater synchronicity, while taking the pieces apart before fitting them back together (p. 3).  A deeper relationship with thematic elements will exist when you can separate and dig into each little idea, which is something we can bring into a therapeutic experience.

Tying this concept back into tap dance, we can look at a communication theory known as Media Richness Theory.  This concept explains how the more cues you combine, the richer the communication is. (Morris, 2018) For example, face to face communication is richer than written and information based communication, as the rate of receiving and understanding the information is quicker, and both visual and auditory channels are being used. (Bergin, p. 3).  Synchronicity is therefore increased and improved upon when synonymous and immediate discussion is in session.  Because these channels and modes are three-dimensional, one can connect this idea to tap dance’s auditory and visual properties.  Since tap dance involves both sound and movement, when you put the two together, you are creating an even richer version of art that you can also feel and internalize.  This form of communication and expression therefore enhances the therapeutic elements which may improve synchronicity for autistic individuals.

**Bring it to the People**

There is a great deal of research on music therapy for autistic individuals.  In Markworth’s (2014) study on the communicative aspects of music as it pertains to nonverbal children with autism finds that “clinicians in the field of music therapy working with individuals with limited or nonverbal communication often refer to a sense of connecting with a client through the music, an experience that is difficult to quantify” (p. 3).  The sense of connecting is a result of the synchrony that occurs in the creation of music.  In addition to this, Markworth (2014) describes the “music child” that exists within all of us, as we all have an innate source of creativity within our souls that makes us each unique (p. 5).  Furthermore, music therapy is imperative to unlocking this quality within ourselves, as it leads to increased synchronicity overall.  But what happens when sound/music and movement are combined?

Tap dance can be used as an all-encompassing realm of therapy, as it not only includes all parts of music therapy, but also connects our bodies to rhythm, creating full body attunement.  Dance Music Therapy, or DMT, intersects sound and movement as tap dance would, as it is the “psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive and physical integration of the individual, for the purpose of improving health and well-being” (Morris, 2021, p. 2).  One program that currently exists and uses tap dance to strengthen familial bonds for children with disabilities is Tap to Togetherness.  Tap to Togetherness (Pentz, 2017) enhances many varying regions of “childhood development” that help parents be better for their children.  Some of these areas include building family bonds, boosting self-esteem and self-belief, highlighting joyous views of behavior in the home life, synchronizing body and movement choices, accepting personal sensory requirements, and discussing ways to help the child overall through tap dance (Pentz, 2017, p. 3).  Looking at tap dance from a therapeutic lens rather than a technical or artistic lens gives a different perspective as to how the art form can be used to grow relationships versus artistic capabilities.  Furthermore, the therapeutic work of Julie Pentz (2017) could help to create a more accepting outlet for children on the spectrum, as it would include pattern-like phrases that would help with synchrony and copying.  While it is extremely important to note the incredible abilities of autistic people, as they should not be seen as less worthy than allistic (not autistic) people, adding tap dance to their lives could promote positive results overall to support communication and synchronicity.

**Conclusion**

From before tap dance even had its name, nonverbal communication had a prominence in the art form, as messages were relayed without words.  As the skeleton of the dance formed over hundreds of years, social interaction, music, body language, expression, and communication were all at the forefront of what tap dance represented.  Knowing that people with autism have a lack of synchrony, especially in the areas listed above, tap dance can be used as an inclusive form of therapy that can embody every aspect that is impaired neurologically, therefore increasing synchrony in the long run.  Through programs, sessions, and more, we can bring this one-of-a-kind therapeutic experience to people with ASD, so they can feel the magic that lives within tap dance.  Sound and movement are two properties that must be synonymous in order to achieve full body attunement, and with the help of tap dance, people on the spectrum can grow that much closer to that goal.

**Artist’s Process**

         Throughout this choreographic work, I am aiming to express how tap dance can be used as a form of nonverbal communication for Autism Spectrum Disorder.  Some elements of nonverbal communication that are going to be prevalent in my piece include Media Richness Theory, vocalics, kinesics, and auditory message systems.  Because rhythm is known as a universal language (Ted Levy) rooted in nonverbal communication, tap dance fully encompasses multiple elements of communication, keeping it richer than most forms of art.  Vocalics refer to audible sensibilities existing apart from words, with some of those qualities including volume, pitch, and tone.  Through kinesics, my movement will be studied and analyzed to help show how emotion through tap dance can help autistic individuals understand how to outwardly express emotion.  Auditory message systems will also be at the core of my choreography through avenues such as tap dance, music, and rhythm.  As a tap dancer, it is my job to create variants of those qualities to convey my message.  Therefore, the communication elements described will be key to telling my story and exploring how tap dance is a nonverbal language.

         My intention for this piece is to explore the communicative aspects of tap dance through the combination of sound and movement.  My inspiration stems from my childhood as a young dancer with autism.  Experiencing the healing powers of tap dance through its foot to floor impact, symmetrical/asymmetrical patterns, and rhythmic avenues has made me into the expressive human I am today.  At just four years old, tap dance proved to be the greatest form of therapy for me, as I was able to find my voice through nonverbal pathways.  Interaction increased through the comfort that came out of rhythmical expression.  With these personal experiences in mind, the therapy of tap dance will represent the spine of my work.  I am also planning on using the history of tap dance as additional information and inspiration, because it gave me my first understanding of the importance of tap dance from a wider lens.  Nonverbal plays an even bigger role in my work because of tap dance’s history.

         Overall, the theme of my work will be telling my story in depth as an autistic tap dancer in society and how I have grown over time.  Various ideas that will be explored in this piece will include but are not limited to an improvised tap jam and a personal account of my neurodivergent mind.  The improvised tap jam will showcase the interaction between tap dancers as a conversational tool used to spread thoughts and ideas.  Nonverbal communication will be at the center of this portion of the work.  The personal account will provide insight into how an autistic person may feel throughout these encounters, as well as what growth may arise.  This account will be expressed through spoken word and choreographed tap dance.  Each of these entities will come together to form a cohesive set of choreography that will discuss tap dance as a nonverbal language, and what influence it can have on the autistic community.

My creative process began with a notebook and pen, jotting down words, phrases, and ideas that come to mind when exploring this topic.  Writing myself questions as new information came to fruition brought about additional research and curiosity.  Once I wrote multiple pages of ideas and notes, I asked a few of my classmates who tap dance at Pace University to be a part of my thesis.  With their portion of the project mainly being based on structured improvisation, their knowledge and comfortability with communicating through tap dance was most important.  We began the process by sitting all together and discussing the purpose of this work.  What we are creating for the group of us is a standard tap jam which we do for fun most often.  However, in this project, we are digging deeper into the importance of having a voice in tap dance, and what can happen when these voices converge to create dyadic conversation.  A collaboration of ideas is necessary to create a safe environment for all of the artists involved.  We watched many masters improvise as a collective to gain extra inspiration for personal choices and communal conversations.  For my choreography, this process went a little differently.  I had to write a script that I would be able to speak and choreograph to.  This process was extremely emotional for me, as it is my life story in its deepest and rawest form.  However, as I was writing it out, I was reminded how important this work is to the bigger picture.  When I began choreographing the piece, I had to think very intentionally in regards to gesturing to specific phrases and ideas.  With the combination of sound and movement being at the forefront of my being, elements of contemporary dance were also implemented in my project.  This work is around 10 minutes in total, between the tap jam and the solo choreography.  Collectively, we were able to film this in a safe and supportive environment that felt celebratory of tap dance and life in itself.  In the end, I hope the final product is able to encourage change for how therapy can be executed for autistic people and inspire those questioning their abilities that anything is possible.

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