
Motivational Climates: What They Are, and Why They Matter

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Introduction

For dancers, a motivational climate is the psychological atmosphere in which they are training, rehearsing and performing.¹ While everyone involved in the class contributes to the motivational climate, teachers have the major responsibility in creating a healthy environment. Not only do teachers have a significant influence on climates, but they also impact greatly on dancers' well- and ill-being through the climate they create.^{2,3} Note that studies of the motivational climate are typically based on student perceptions, rather than the perspective of some objective outsider. This is valuable because we all respond to what we perceive to be happening, even if our perceptions differ somewhat from those of others.

Research has affirmed two major motivational climates can exist either separately or in combination: these are known as task- and ego-involving climates (see Table 1).^{1,4} As illustrated, a climate is task-involving when students perceive an emphasis on self-improvement, learning, cooperation and individual effort. A climate is said to be ego-involving when students perceive an emphasis on objective success and competition, which tends to be accompanied by punishment for mistakes, rivalry, social comparison and favoritism.

Motivational Climate Research in Dance

One of the earliest studies investigating dancers' perceptions of the motivational climate showed that students who perceived their environment as emphasizing punishment for mistakes (a characteristic of ego-involving climates) were also more worried about performances, and had a harder time concentrating on their dancing.⁵ This could indicate that while some teachers may feel they are helping dancers improve by creating an atmosphere in which mistakes are not accepted, they are actually contributing to fear, worry, and lack of focus. Findings from this study also showed that punishment for mistakes was associated with aspects of perfectionism, such as dwelling on mistakes.⁵

More recently, one study explored motivational climates

Table 1 Task-Involving and Ego-Involving Climate Characteristics

Task-Involving	Ego-Involving
Encourages self-improvement	Encourages being the best
Supports all students	Supports star students
Mistakes help dancers learn	Mistakes are not acceptable
Dance and learn with peers	Compare and compete with peers
Reward effort	Reward success

and dancers' psychological needs satisfaction.³ Findings showed that vocational dancers who perceived their environment as being more ego-involving also felt less competent and less accepted in the dance setting. On the other hand, when dancers perceived a task-involving climate they felt more autonomous, and more healthy overall.³ Likewise, research in sport has found that task-involving climates contribute to healthier athletes and greater overall enjoyment.⁴

The studies reviewed thus far clearly indicate that motivational climates matter, and can play a significant role in dancers' well-being. Four recent studies examining motivational climates in dance are summarized in the next section.

Recent Studies Exploring Motivational Climate

Several recent studies have included motivational climate as one of their variables. These form part of the larger Centre for Advanced Training (CAT) project in the UK, which aims to better understand the development of talented young people in dance. All studies used a dance-specific version of a motivational climate questionnaire.³ Participants were between 10 and 18 years old, and trained at one of eight CATs around the UK, regional training centers for talented youth. Most CATs focus on contemporary dance, but there are CATs for ballet, urban dance, and South Asian dance, too. In addition to the dance training at a CAT, many dancers participated in classes at a "home" studio

(private dance schools or ongoing dance classes within an academic setting). Throughout the CAT studies, dancers viewed their environments as having significantly more task- than ego-involving characteristics. Participants also perceived more task-involving features within their CAT training than at home dance schools.

Study 1: Do dancers of varying ages differ in how they perceive the motivational climate? This was the first study to explore motivational climate in relation to dancers' age.⁶ Three age groups were specified for the CAT dancers: early adolescence (10-12 years), mid-adolescence (13-15 years) and late adolescence (16-18 years).

Findings revealed that mid- and late-adolescent groups reported significantly more ego-involving climate features than did younger dancers. This could indicate that as students' training advances, their learning environments put more emphasis on ego-involving characteristics, such as competition, punishment for mistakes, and unequal recognition. However, whereas the older dancers perceived more ego-involving components than the younger dancers, they still viewed their environments as more task- than ego-involving overall. Combined with findings from other research,⁷ we suggest that even as students' aim for higher levels of recognition and competition becomes more intense (e.g., for places in schools, companies, or leading roles), a task-involving climate is still ideal for dancers' growth. In other words, an optimal learning environment emphasizes personal improvement, rewards effort, and encourages dancers to learn together, whatever their age.

Study 2: Is the motivational climate related to dancers' perfectionism? A second study examined the psychology of motivational climates further, exploring links it may have with perfectionism.⁸ Findings showed that the less ego- and more task-involving the dancers perceived their training climate to be, the less likely they were to report perfectionistic tendencies such as concern over mistakes, need for approval, and rumination. Results regarding what are sometimes seen as the more positive aspects of perfectionism (e.g., striving for excellence, planfulness) were less clear, but higher task-involving climate perceptions were associated with striving for excellence to a greater extent. While striving for excellence sounds positive, it can be unhealthy when one feels pressured to be perfect or the very best. Indeed, results showed that dancers who reported striving for excellence in this way also ran an increased risk of experiencing the "other side" of perfectionism: for instance, they were more likely to ruminate and worry excessively about their mistakes. Thus, encouraging excellence rather than perfection, or the notion that whatever one does is never good enough, is likely to be more beneficial for dancers.

Study 3: Does the motivational climate change over time, and do changes make a difference to dancers? The third study aimed to look beyond motivational climate at a single point in time, monitoring whether dancers' perceptions of the climate changed over a six- month period, and if so, how.² It investigated not only changes in the motivational climate, but also changes in dancers' self-reported anxiety,

and how the two interacted. Questionnaires were administered at two different points in time, six months apart.

Results showed that dancers perceived fewer ego- than task-involving climate features at all times. However, they perceived significantly more ego-involving climate features at the second time point, which was close to the dancers' final performance. This could suggest that teachers' attitudes and methods shift slightly as performances near. Being less tolerant of mistakes, paying more attention to dancers with leading roles, and encouraging students to outperform their peers are all plausible responses to the stress an approaching performance date could cause teachers. Although this may be an understandable reaction, teachers need to be aware that such changes in behavior and tolerance levels are likely to impact how nervous their dancers feel. In fact, results showed that the change in the perceived motivational climate also predicted an increase in dancers' anxiety. If teachers want their dancers to feel calm, in control, and able to focus, this is most likely best achieved by giving equal attention and recognition to all dancers at all times, and avoiding punishment for mistakes, even if it is close to crunch time for a show.

Study 4: Is the motivational climate related to dancers' creativity? Continuing to look at dancers of different ages and levels, a fourth study was conducted with a sample of professional dancers.⁹ Specifically, this study sought to investigate the relationship that motivational climates might have with dancers' perceived creativity. Findings suggested yet another positive aspect of task-involving climates: when dancers felt that they were dancing in an environment with more task-involving features, they reported feeling more creative. Conversely, the dancers who viewed their environment as more ego-involving felt less creative. This result concurred with previous dance research in indicating the significant impact that the motivational climate may have in nurturing dancers' creativity.¹⁰ This lends further support for the encouragement of task-involving climates in dance in order to help dancers feel creative and, ultimately, perform better.

Recommendations for Teachers/Conclusion

Based on these four studies of motivational climates, along with previous research, it seems that the distinct advantages of a task-involving climate continue to be demonstrated. Teachers, choreographers and directors can emphasize individual milestones for their dancers, effort (even if technique is not perfect), and a passion for the entire learning process rather than just the end result. In doing so, they are likely to be nourishing dancers' feelings of creativity and lessening anxiety. These recent findings also offer support and rationale for continuing to create task-involving climates even as dancers become older and more serious about their training, and as performances near. This information may be useful for influencing teaching models in dance. Being patient if someone is slow to learn new choreography, making sure everyone in class has optimal engagement regardless of ability level, or encour-

aging students to reach their own personal best are not always the most traditional ways of teaching dance. These methods could, however, be beneficial for everyone, nurturing artists who are more calm, creative, and self-assured.

As teachers we all have a similar goal: to help our dancers flourish. With accumulating research pointing to the benefits of a task-involving climate, it seems it is our job to do what we can to influence the climate in this way. We suggest trying the recommendations on the handout that follows for a few weeks. Notice if your students fully apply themselves to the material, both technically and creatively. Do they seem to feel better about themselves? Perhaps they are more willing to take risks with their dancing and inspired to try new things? As a result of this new research we believe that students in a task-involving climate will experience these beneficial changes.

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