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Tango and Enactivism: First Steps in Exploring the Dynamics and Experience of Interaction

Floor van Alphen

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Abstract Tango dancing is not just ethnographically interesting, but might actually provide a way to study interaction as such. An orientation to this improvisational dance as an embodied practice and experience is given. Enactivism is proposed as an adequate framework for further study. It is argued that approaching tango in terms of participatory sense-making, mutual incorporation and consensually coordinated action helps in clarifying its possible contributions to (cultural) psychology. Possible contributions such as facilitating the study of the dynamics of interaction, of intersubjectivity and of culture as joint activity.

Keywords Argentine Tango · Enactivism · Participatory Sense-making. Consensual Coordination · Embodied Interaction · Cultural Practice

Introduction

Tango has spread out over the world the last couple of decades and has also come to the attention of psychological research (e.g. Rosa 2007; Luckmann 2008; Olsewski 2008; Kimmel 2012). Not only because it is interesting as a research subject, but also because it might provide methodological and theoretical aid. In his recent contribution Tateo (2014) has given an elaborate introduction to tango's history, music and dance. He presents tango as a 'dialogical social object' and argues that studying it might help dialogical theorizing and methodology. In a mixed ethnographic-idiographic approach tango arises as a 'third volume' that a dancer interacts with while also interacting with a dance partner. Tango, as the traditional gaze of the audience enabled by the social-

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historical setting of the tango salon, dialogues with the dancers on the dance floor. Interviews illustrate how the dancer's identity is constructed in dialogue with the tango discipline and the tango community. However, the dialogue with the dance partner, that is, the tango dancing itself, is hardly elaborated. Tateo describes the dance as dialogical, but does not seize the chance to explore this embodied interaction and its dynamics. Nevertheless a more detailed consideration of how tango dancing is practiced and experienced, is both as essential to understanding tango as it is to exploring its contribution to a wider (cultural) psychological field. Tango might actually contribute to theorizing and studying the interactive process as such.

This article proposes to approach tango as an embodied practice. That is, a way of doing that encompasses its history, music, and tradition, but in addition as actual coordinated movement and the experience of this activity. First an orientation to this embodied practice is given from a tango teachers point of view. Thus a concrete idea about how a tango dialogue is initiated and developed might be formed, ready to be investigated. Second, how studying this practical aspect of tango is possible and relevant to (cultural) psychological investigation is elaborated by taking an enactive point of view. The conceptual toolkit of enactivism helps to clarify tango dancing, relating it to other human activities, framing its empirical investigation and contribution to a psychology beyond the classical dichotomies. Approaching tango dancing as 'participatory sense-making' allows for studying the social interaction or dialogue as such. Approaching tango dancing as 'mutual incorporation' allows for investigating the experiential aspect of this enactive intersubjectivity. And tango as 'consensually coordinated action' helps accounting for how cultural practice is inherently normative, for the autonomy that agents nevertheless have, and the learning process that connects them. These three enactive processes are involved in, or underlie, many other human activities, but they seem particularly evident and accessible in tango dancing. The empirical explorations of the constitutive role of culture in psychological processes might therefore greatly benefit from investigating tango. However, culture is in the case of tango dancing not just a mediating tool, constraint or dialogical partner, but also the joint activity itself.

Tango as Embodied Practice

Tango is practiced and developed by its practitioners not just declaratively, but in the very act of communication and coordination between two bodies: the improvisational dancing itself. To properly understand tango as an embodied practice, and make this accessible for non tango practitioners, is to explain the first steps into the learning and dancing process. Let us consider therefore the question of how a tango-dialogue is initiated. In contrast with other couple dances this is not just a matter of learning the steps or following a visual example. The mirrors often found in dance studios might actually interfere with the exercises that aim at establishing contact between the beginners. This contact is not a matter of visually observing the other body, but of embracing and perceiving the movement of the other body in the tactile and kinesthetic modalities. Looking at the own body or at the body of the dance partner and controlling the movement visually does not help much in training kinesthetic perception and coordination. Especially when the beginners need to learn how to improvise together. Improvisation in couples, at the essence of tango dancing, requires strong bodily

connection (see also Täteo 2014). Teachers aim at showing how to improvise by providing the beginner with the rules and boundaries needed for the mutual coordination of this improvisation. The principal boundary is the embrace: remaining together throughout the dance limits the possibilities of individual movement. The main rule is to follow or lead the movement of the other body (something that ultimately comes down to a bodily conversation between dance partners; see also Olsewski 2008). This enables an activity that individually would not be possible: walking in an embrace. Now, what does this walking in an embrace imply from the learner's perspective?

The embrace is matter of role: as a leader you put your right arm around the waist of the follower and lift the followers right hand up to shoulder height with your left hand; as a follower your left arm is around the leaders shoulder. With the upper bodies together you cannot look at your feet, so you practice the coordination of the lower body through proprioception. The movement itself will organize the body, and the dance partner's body, if you let it. That is to say, attempting to be too controlling of your movement often interferes with the self-organization of the bodies. Now, accommodated in an embrace the beginner starts practicing with shifting weight from one leg to another. Without talking the leader should give the follower sufficient bodily cues, and the follower should sufficiently perceive these, to balance from one side to another together. But in a closed embrace it is actually hard for the two bodies to not shift weight together. This would require an active resistance to the movement, or an accidental loss of balance. To practice improvisation is to play with the timing and intensity of moving from one leg to another and see whether either the follower is with you in these shifts, or the leader perceives you to be on one leg or the other. There should be no pulling or pushing, just a gentle embrace perceiving and communicating body positions.

The improvisation of a step to the front or to the back is a simple matter of having shifted the weight of both bodies to one side, liberating the legs on the other side. If you follow me standing on my left leg, then you are on your right leg. If I were to move forward my free leg would logically make a step, and if your body perceives this movement then you will quite automatically take a left step back. This is schematically illustrated in Fig. 1. The body organizes itself: taking a step is the obvious way of moving the entire body in a certain direction and not to lose balance. Taking steps together, without looking at your feet or communicating verbally or any predetermined choreography, is basically a matter of perceiving the weight of the other body on one leg or the other, perceiving the movement of this weight to the front or to the back, and finally to hold on to each other. It should be clear who leads and who follows the movement, but in terms of perception of the other body's weight or position these two roles are not that different. Moreover, taking the lead, or demonstrating the intention to move, can also be communicated through bodily activation: it doesn't even need to be explicitly declared.

On paper these exercises might seem more complicated than in reality. As long as no reflexive awareness interferes too much with straightforward bodily organization and communication the first attempts to walk in an embrace need not fail. Most often breakdowns in the attempts to establish contact and move together are a matter of focusing too exclusively on the self or on the other or of excessive tension in the body. Yet, the experience need not be contaminated by fear to step on each other's toes or anger with a clumsy dance partner. It can also involve the fun of practicing this embodied non-verbal communication, being surprised and amused by sudden

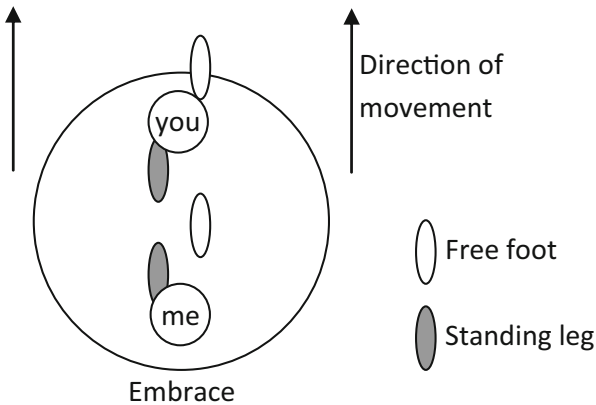


Fig. 1 First tango cues schematically represented

breakdowns or synchronizations, and discovering the endless possibilities of improvising movement together. Indeed the shifting of weight and the mutually coordinated first steps alone already combine in many different ways, and the possible movements exponentially grow with further practice. Practicing tango for a leader is mostly exploring these first few cues, or the possibilities given by the teacher to coordinate different movements together with the dance partner. For a follower practicing is mostly dancing and literally incorporating as many different embraces and tango experiences, embodied in as many dance partners, as possible. The ‘infinite possibility’ the famous Argentine poet Leopoldo Marechal (1970) was talking about when describing tango, is most likely this discovering of the indefinite amount of possible steps, embraces, musical interpretations, intensities and shared emotions that a few improvisational cues enable. Or, in a more phenomenological sense, it might be the boundless feeling of effortlessly moving together as one, as a result of a successful bodily coordination and communication.

The practical aspect of tango emphasized here involves dancing as very concrete shared movement, with a few basic and accessible principles that enable improvisation and the experience this involves. The tango music plays a significant role in the improvisation. The 2×4 tango rhythm and dialogues between the instrumental sections of the orchestras guide the dancing couple’s walking tour. Yet musicality is often interwoven in the learning process at a later stage, as was also affirmed by Olsewski (2008). During the beginner’s first steps the beat might overdetermine the movement and prevent that it is bodily coordinated between leader and follower. Musicality in tango is, however, too vast a topic to discuss here. It makes for a whole body of literature on its own. Theory and research on music and intersubjectivity is already quite advanced (e.g. Malloch and Trevarthen 2009; Español 2011). In the embodied improvisational aspect of tango we can see how constraints, such as the embrace and the music, that have been handed down by tradition, make a creative activity and development of a personal tango style possible. As many dance teachers know, improvisation exercises without a set of concrete criteria (such as ‘in this class we will explore the articulations of the arms one by one’) are bound to fail. At the same time, the results of improvisation exercises are different for every dancer, so that they develop their own dance. The individual styles developed through improvisation in turn make

the tradition possible. The music and history of tango accumulated and embodied in the teacher's dancing is handed down to the learner through metaphors, exercises, and moreover concrete bodily cues.

This practical aspect of tango is in the first place an addition to the aspects elaborated by Tateo (2014). He presents tango as a historically dynamic culture, as 'dialogical', but at the same time throughout the paper it emerges as an ethnographic object, a dance discipline, a group culture. That is to say, tango is principally a third volume in the dialogue, something the dancing couple interacts with. The emphasis is not on the dance, as a dialogue or interaction, itself. Now, in agreement with Tateo, tango as a tradition can be quite dogmatic. This also depends on who preaches it. However, it is not only a constraint. The activity and experience enabled by the many traditional constraints is also tango. Dialogical theory and methodology seem to aim at studying the interactivity of tango dancing too, but how can it be both a third volume in the dialogue and the dialogue itself? To clarify the embodied practice of tango another developing theoretical framework is available. Instead of introducing tango as a third volume, enactivism allows for introducing tango as the interactive movement in which dancers participate. Also it frames the further empirical investigation that the observations made in this paper, based on tango teaching experience and conversations with fellow teachers¹ in Buenos Aires, need.

An Enactive Point of View

The enactive approach has been developing outlooks on social cognition (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007), cultural psychology (BaerVELdt and Verheggen 2012) and psychology in general (McGann, De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2013). This naturalist but nonreductive framework, emerging in cognitive science (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991), examines the coupling between agent and environment as such. The focus is on the dynamics of this interaction between an autonomous living organism and the inherently valuable or meaningful world around it. The process central to enactivism is sense-making, that is a "relational and affect-laden process grounded in biological organization" (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007, p. 488), an "embodied and situated activity" (BaerVELdt and Verheggen 2012, p. 165), or the "coordinating and adapting to various constraints on our actions" (McGann, De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2013, p. 204). Enactivism thus presents a continuum between living and cognition, between perception and action. Importantly, the framework gives phenomenological experience a significant role. For an in depth explanation I refer to the elaborate theoretical and conceptual work done elsewhere (Di Paolo 2005; Varela 1997; Thompson 2007). In relation to tango, the attempts to extend sense-making into the social domain (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007) and cultural meaning making (BaerVELdt and Verheggen 2012) are most relevant. The extended conceptual apparatus of enactivism mentioning 'participatory sense-making' (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007); 'mutual incorporation' (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009) and 'consensually coordinated action' (BaerVELdt and Verheggen 2012) seems particularly useful. These processes help clarifying the

¹ For example, an interview with Olga Besio published in the Dutch Tango Magazine 'La Cadena' in June 2011. <http://enflor.nl/besio/>.

essentials of tango dancing, while at the same time these ideas can be clearly illustrated by tango dancing experiences. Moreover, they give us a clear sense of what needs to be further investigated in tango.

Tango as Participatory Sense-Making

In a tango embrace two agents are quite literally coupled. While improvising the dancers coordinate their action to a varying degree. De Jaegher and Di Paolo define coordination as “the non-accidental correlation between the behaviours of two or more systems that are in sustained coupling, or have been coupled in the past, or have been coupled to another, common system.” (2007, p. 490). Different kinds and amounts of coordination occur in tango begging further study. Beginners often imitate the teachers’ movement and mirror or anticipate the movement of the dance partner. The coordination ultimately aimed at is synchronization. However, fluidly walking in an embrace as if the partners have merged into one organism is not that common. The coordination ebbs and flows. Dancers can become increasingly sensitive to breakdowns with practice. For example, if a leader suddenly encounters a difficult situation on the dance floor, the follower can perceive this even with the eyes closed. Or when a follower interprets the music with a particular embellishing movement, the leader is aware. However, not only the dancers determine the coordination. As De Jaegher and Di Paolo propose, the social interaction is itself autonomous. Tango dancing would not be a social interaction as such if there were no two autonomous agents involved, but the act of dancing is not reducible to individual behaviors. The coordination itself can break down, without either of the two dancers being responsible. Surely, when the music ends both dancers stop dancing. However, it often happens that the synchronization itself can surprise both dancers at the same time. For example, both dance partners suddenly smile because they know they just shared a moment of perfect interpretation of the music, or just made a weird new move together without having explicitly intended to do so. Somehow they entered into each other’s sense making with respect to the music and the spontaneous movement. Or rather, participatory sense-making occurs: “the coordination of intentional activity in interaction, whereby individual sense-making processes are affected and new domains of social sense-making can be generated that were not available to each individual on her own.” (2007, p. 497). The improvisation, framed by the music, the dance floor, and the embrace, can lead both dance partners beyond themselves. This autonomous interaction can, and should be, studied. There is also a particular phenomenological aspect to this interaction, explained next.

Tango as Mutual Incorporation

Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009) conceive of social understanding as a process of participatory sense-making and mutual incorporation at a phenomenological level. That is, taking agents not only as autonomous systems but also as lived bodies that not merely couple but also reach out to embody each other in reciprocal interaction. Tango dance partners can thus “experience the holistic development of the situation which is co-constituted by their bodily movements” (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009, p. 474). Mutual incorporation, like participatory sense making, is a matter of degree. With near perfect synchronization the experience can be that of expanding into the other body.

Often with practice a very precise kinesthetic perception develops that allows the leader to know exactly where the weight or axis of the follower is. For example on the inner side of the front part of the ball of the left foot. The tiniest movements can thus be coordinated. The follower's perception can be as precise up to the point of perceiving the leader's intended direction before the leader is even aware of where the movement is going. In the ongoing process the difference between the roles can evaporate. Rather "the in-between becomes the source of operative intentionality of both partners" (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009, p. 476). Of course experiencing the other body as if it were your own is not possible. There is always a component of otherness in mutual incorporation, if only the thrill of not exactly knowing where you are going because this not only depends on you. In tango it depends on the dance-partner, the other couples on the dance floor, the music, and the relational autonomy of the interaction itself. On an experiential level all these constraints nevertheless can feed into feeling expanded or open-ended. This is all the more exhilarating when the dance partner, right after the dance has ended, affirms to have felt something similar. Such observations greatly welcome additional research, for example systematizing introspective data on the experience of both dancers by comparing them in retrospect. According to Fuchs and De Jaegher mutual incorporation involves mutual affection and truly joint creation of meaning. Correspondingly, the phenomenological 'merging of horizons' in tango is not possible without engagement with and dedication to one another. If the interaction is not reciprocal, then unidirectional incorporation occurs: the other is then an instrument in individual sense-making. When asked, many followers will probably affirm that bad leaders unidirectionally delimit their autonomy and experience.

Tango as Consensually Coordinated Action

In terms of perception and coordination tango thus far resembles a kind of social skill. Indeed, the perception of one another and coordination with each other needs to be practiced. The coordination of movement in tango, however, does not often arise spontaneously between two practicing beginners. Rather, these beginners engage with an already existing practice that provides improvisational cues and traditional codes. Also, they engage with music that has been playing for decades. Tateo (2014) describes very well how tango like so many other social activities is inherently normative. The embrace is more than just a physiological constraint on our individual action, it is a tradition. The spectator's gaze penetrates into the dancer's experience, increasing his or her self-awareness. Our action is not only valuable for our self-maintenance, in the way that enactivism understands meaningfulness, but also valuable with respect to the existing tradition, a historically accumulated meaningfulness. To account for tango as a historical practice from an enactive point of view, is to further build upon the structural coupling between two sense-makers, or the social interaction, as we've just seen. Between two dancers an autonomously meaningful activity develops: they dance tango. Through shared activity and mutual incorporation the individual dancers add to their experience and a history of tango dances accumulates in the dancer's body. Also, the tangos danced add to a history of participatory sense-making. The structural coupling between sense-makers results in a consensual domain, and we become "mutually adapted to others in a history of consensually coordinated action" (BaerVELdt and Verheggen 2012, p. 171). Tango is the exemplary consensual domain,

as it literally is developed by ‘sensing together’. That is, tuning into each other. This can happen between two dancers, between different couples circulating on the dance floor, between the dancers and the music, and between the dancers and the setting of the tango salon. There is a consensual coordination of actions (Baerveldt and Verheggen 2012), an agreement on tango codes, or rather these are ‘enacted’. The historically accumulated participatory sense-making influences new participatory and individual sense making. Full cultural determination from the enactive point of view, one that stresses the autonomy of living systems, is not possible. However the consensual domain does orient individual sense-making. The tango dancers attune to the ongoing practice of tango dancing, in a same way that we engage in Wittgensteinian language games (Baerveldt and Verheggen 2012). As was illustrated above, this is very clear in learning tango. The tango teacher orients the beginner, and this happens in an embodied way. Dancing tango with the teacher is really a shortcut to entering into this consensual domain, embodied by the teacher. However, tango practice is not just a matter of adaptation. As we’ve seen it is also a matter of developing improvisational skills that enable the dancer to develop his or her tango. In the words of Baerveldt and Verheggen (2012) there is both cultural training and personal stylization. In this cultural enactive framework we can account for tango dancing as embodied interaction and tradition. No third volume of tango is necessary here: the normative character of tango is in the dancing itself. In turn, studying how people learn to improvise in tango can make the practice, as both stylization and training, particularly clear.

Conclusion

As we have seen dancing, or at this point maybe enacting, tango involves an improvised coordinated movement between two people, and the likelihood of experiencing an open-endedness or ‘infinite possibility’, that is constrained and enabled by an inherently normative practice. This is of course a mere orientation, in need of further study.

Considering tango dancing from an enactive perspective allows for studying the interaction, the experience involved and the practice or skill. In tango it is impossible to disregard the embodied being. This is fundamental to the entire practice. At the same time, like other human activities, tango cannot be reduced to individual organization. Participatory sense-making and mutual incorporation give tango a generalizability: these processes describe the social interaction and understanding that also happens in carrying on a conversation or when children engage in ‘playing out’ a story with their dolls. However, tango dancing is more than an appropriate example of these enactive processes. It is also a way of approaching intersubjectivity, as “a process of embodied interaction and generating common meaning through it.” (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009). It allows looking closely at the interaction itself. A very precise analysis of tango’s ‘intersubjectivity at close quarters’ has been developed by Kimmel (2012), inviting more empirical work on the dynamics and experience of interaction. Because the intersubjectivity is ‘simplified’ into body-language and at the same time suspended over the duration of a tango, it might provide good empirical access to the interaction as such. Through tango we “might examine how quickly and easily a person can couple with their environment (particularly a social one), and explore the dynamics of such

coupling.” (McGann et al. 2013, p. 205). If the proper question for future research is indeed “how we acquire the embodied dispositions that allow us to act competently within human consensual domains and language” (BaerVELdt and Verheggen 2012, p.182) and cultural psychology should study embodied normative practice involving conversation, ritualization and stylization, then investigating tango dancing and learning becomes all the more interesting. It might very well contribute to the development of this framework.

I do not want to suggest that tango should not be studied from a dialogical framework, as Tateo (2014) has made an important contribution. Yet, on the dance floor tango is a practice engaged with, rather than a third volume dialogued with. This dialogue typically happens when dancers reflect on what tango is, on themselves and others as tango dancers. That is, when they are talking about tango instead of doing the dancing. And it is essential that tango is studied as the dialogue itself. I’m aware of the discussion between enactive cultural psychology and the social representations approach involving dialogical theory (Verheggen and BaerVELdt 2007; Chryssides, Dashtipour, Keshet, Righi, Sammut, and Sartawi 2009; Verheggen and BaerVELdt 2012), suggesting that the theoretical differences are insurmountable. Both approaches blame each other of ‘cartesianism’. However, the enactive approach to social cognition and enactive cultural psychology can hardly be called solipsistic, as has hopefully become clear in the application of these ideas to tango. Neither does Tateo’s contribution (2014) suggest that tango is merely ‘in the head’ or ‘out there’. Importantly, both approaches abhor mainstream cognitive science focusing on individual representation and taking culture as a mere context factor. Nevertheless, work explicitly looking at dialogical theory and enactivism is necessary to provide clarification about how they differ in approaching interaction. The focus on interaction in dialogical theory (e.g. Grossen 2010) seems similar to the enactive emphasis on studying interaction as such. Also, from an enactive point of view the empirical work on discourse and narrative in cultural psychology is greatly welcomed (e.g. McGann and De Jaegher 2009). Further studying tango, both an embodied dialogue and consensual practice, might provide additional clarification. As an activity it is but a basic version of complex intersubjective processes and higher order (cultural) psychological processes. It does, however, provide a concrete outlook on studying social skill and cultural training, and as a practice it most definitely dissolves the dichotomy between cultural context and individual cognition. So if you still have some (contemporary) version of a mind-body problem, then try walking in an embrace.

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