

PSYRGGU 2019

Psychology of subculture: Phenomenology and Contemporary Tendencies of Development

PSYCHOLOGICAL POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL LATIN DANCES: RUSSIAN SALSA DANCERS EXAMPLE

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Abstract

The possibility of using the psychological potential of the social Latin dance (salsa) for personality development is discussed in the article. The salsa community is considered as a subculture with its social, linguistic and psychological characteristics, identified on the basis of a theoretical analysis of the literature and few previous empirical studies. The research problem is determined by the lack of psychological study on the salsa phenomenon, especially in Russian psychology. The main objectives of the present study were: (1) to identify the main reasons for practicing salsa in Russian dancers ("salseros"); (2) to describe the most distinctive psychological features of salsa dancers; (3) to reveal the most significant changes in the lifestyle and in the psychological characteristics of the personality, under the practicing salsa. The data was obtained using semi-structured interviews with experts (7 people who involved in promotion and development of the Russian salsa movement not less than 10-15 years) and with salsa dancers (36 peoples with salsa experience from 1 year to 15 years). The results of the study showed that the main reasons for join to the salsa community among Russian salseros are associated with the desire to maintain and develop the interpersonal communication, the sociability, the communicative skills and traits. Accordingly, practicing salsa had the greatest impact on leisure activities and interpersonal communication, as well as on communication skills and communicative personality traits of salseros.

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Keywords: Social Latin dances, salsa, subculture, interpersonal communication, personality.



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1. Introduction

Social Latin American dances, commonly called *salsa*, are very popular among contemporary young people all over the world. There is every reason to talk about the salsa community as a subculture, that is, as “a group that appears to share some kind of common culture, such as music or pop culture tastes or fashion choices, which is in some way different to what would commonly be deemed ‘mainstream’ culture” (Crawford, 2017, p. 1).

Salsa is very popular in Russia. In total there are more than 300 schools of salsa in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Rostov-on-Don, Krasnodar, Yekaterinburg, Kazan, Krasnoyarsk, Tyumen, etc. Lots of salsa congresses and festivals are held annually in Russia, such as Salsa Night Awards, Mambo Love Festival, and Teacher Party in Moscow, The 3rd Front and Rostov-For-Fun Fest in Rostov-on-Don, and many others. Summarizing the data from various sources (www.facebook.com/mambo.loves.me/, <https://vk.com/3frontrostov>, <https://salsacongress.ru>, https://vk.com/respublika_danceclub, <https://vk.com/rostovforfunfest>, https://vk.com/salsa_night_awards, <https://vk.com/prepodparty>, https://vk.com/fair_dance etc.), we can assume that about 10,000 people are constantly involved in the Russian salsa community, not counting those who periodically attend salsa parties, take trial lessons, etc.

At the same time, the phenomenon of salsa and salsa community as a subculture in particular, from a psychological point of view, is still poorly understood. Since the 90s of the 20th century, Western scientist have been actively studying salsa music (Berrios-Miranda, 2002; Boggs, 1992; Rondon, 2008; Santos Febres, 1997; Steward, 1999), the specifics of salsa as a dance style (Washburne, 2002), the position of Latin American culture and dance in the entertainment of modern youth (Fraser Delgado & Muñoz, 1997; Calvo Ospina, 1997), etc. At this time, even the term *Salsiology* appears, meaning the science of salsa (Boggs, 1992). Slovenian scientists Pusnik and Sicherl (2010), who conducted one of the most detailed study of the salsa phenomenon as a culture of dance and music, believe that it can function both as a kind of interpersonal communication between people, and as a global cultural phenomenon. In addition to the communicative functions of salsa (with the focus on non-verbal communication and opportunities for physical contacts), the authors also describe the emotional, informational, socializing (salsa as a social space and meeting place), recreational, therapeutic (psychotherapeutic) functions of salsa.

Russian science still does not have such detailed research of social Latin dances. Russian scientists have studied ritual-psychological and ontological issues of social dances (Lisina, 2012; Mochalova, 2014), their importance in the system of intercultural communication (Tkachuk, 2012), certain aspects of salsa music (Platonova, 2011), some psychological characteristics of the social Latin dancers (Novikova & Tolstova, 2013). For example, the purpose of our quantitative research was to identify and compare the features of sociability, aggressiveness and styles of handling conflict in young Russian people involved and not involved with salsa (“salseros” and “not salseros”), both samples included 100 people each (62% female). The sociability and aggressiveness level were measured by the Questionnaire developed by Krupnov in accordance with the System-Functional Model of the personality traits (Krupnov, Novikova, & Kozhukhova, 2013). The Russian adaptation of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) was used to define the features of handling conflict styles: Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Accommodating, and Avoiding (Thomas & Kilman, 1974). The results of the study using ANOVA, correlation analysis, and factor analysis revealed that there are more differences in the structure of

aggressiveness than in the structure of sociability between salseros and not salseros. Also, salseros more likely to prefer Collaborating as the leading conflict mode.

From the point of view of considering salsa as a subculture we are interested in the study on linguistic features of Russian salsa dancers by Sokolskaya (2011). The author found that the salseros vocabulary contains 41% of the slang and jargon units associated with salsa. The main features of the salsa dancers speech are: (1) the desire to make their language incomprehensible for "not salseros"; (2) the use of linguistic borrowings from English and Spanish without understanding their meaning in their native language (Russian); (3) the ignoring the age and social status of the interlocutors in the communication within the salsa community.

Thus, there are studies of certain aspects of salsa as a music and dance phenomenon, the phenomenon of modern culture and intercultural communication, as well as of some linguistic and psychological characteristics of dancers. At the same time, not enough studied, especially in Russian psychology, remain the changes that occur in the personality and lifestyle of people involved in this subculture.

2. Problem Statement

The problem of this study is determined by the lack of knowledge of the salsa phenomenon in Russian psychology. The need to identify the psychological characteristics of people involved in salsa (first of all, their motivation, personality traits and changes in lifestyle) is caused by the possibility of practical use of the psychological potential of salsa for personality development and self-improvement.

3. Research Questions

The three main research questions were under consideration in this study:

- 1) What are the main reasons for joining the salsa community of Russian dancers?
- 2) Are there psychological characteristics that distinguish salsa dancers (salseros) from non-dancers (non-salseros)?
- 3) What changes occur in the lifestyle in general and in the psychological characteristics of the salseros in particular, influenced by salsa?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to consider salsa as a means of personality potential development. According to the research questions, the achievement of this purpose is connected with the solution of the following tasks:

- 1) To identify the main reasons for practicing salsa in Russian dancers;
- 2) To describe the most distinctive psychological features of the salsa dancers;

To determine the most significant changes that occur in the lifestyle in general and in the psychological characteristics of the personality, under the practicing salsa.

5. Research Methods

This study is qualitative, so the main method of data collection was a semi-structured interview.

5.1. Experts Survey

Participants. Experts were 7 people (6 men and 1 woman) who involved in promotion and development of the Social Latin dances in Russia and the CIS countries not less than 10-15 years. In particular, among our experts was:

- The founder and lead instructor of the largest salsa school in Moscow;
- The leader, musician, singer and songwriter to a renowned salsa-band in Russia (CubaJam);
- The founder and moderator of the website www.salsa.ru;
- The creator of the first dedicated site about salsa in Russian-speaking Internet;
- Three well-known salsa teachers from different Russian cities.

Semi-structured interview script. The questionnaire consisted of 10 open-ended questions. 3 questions were devoted to the history and experience of an expert in salsa movement and 2 questions related to assessing the popularity and prospects of salsa movement in Russia. 5 questions were aimed at assessing the psychological characteristics of salseros, namely briefly:

- main reasons for practicing salsa;
- most distinctive psychological features of salsa dancers;
- causes and frequency of conflicts among salsa dancers;
- most significant changes in salseros under practicing salsa;
- main psychological advantages (and possibly disadvantages) of practicing salsa.

Further, in accordance with this study purpose and research questions, we consider and analyze only the answers to these 5 questions.

5.2. Semi-structured interview with salseros

Participants. 36 respondents (16 men and 20 women), aged from 20 to 40 years ($M = 28.9$ years), with salsa experience from 1 year to 15 years ($M = 5.5$ years) took part in the interview.

Semi-structured interview script. The brief questionnaire consisted of 3 open-ended questions (about reasons for practicing salsa and changes under practicing salsa), 10 Likert scales for assessing specific changes in different areas under the influence of salsa (by 5 points from "no change" to "fundamental change"), and 6 items to describe the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents.

6. Findings

Below we consider the main results of the study in accordance with research questions.

6.1. Main reasons for practicing salsa in Russian dancers

Qualitative analysis of *the experts' answers* allowed us to identify the main groups of reasons for starting salsa (each expert could give several reasons at his discretion):

- 1) Social-psychological reasons: the search for new contacts (including partner search), the expansion of the circle of contacts and communication, escape from loneliness, as well as an imitation of others (come together with friends), etc. (6 experts from 7);
- 2) Psychological reasons: relief from psychological complexes, correction of uncertainty and incommunicability; development of sociability, and etc. (4 experts out of 7);
- 3) Reasons associated with maintaining health and fitness: additional physical activity, healthy lifestyle, weight loss, etc. (4 experts out of 7);
- 4) Cultural reasons: interest in Latin American culture, interest in music and dance (4 experts out of 7);
- 5) Other reasons: the search for new ways of leisure, a coincidence (3 experts out of 7).

The following analysis of *the dancers' answers* confirms that the most common are social-psychological reasons for starting salsa: "brought friends", "came together with friends", "searching for interpersonal communication", "expanding the range of contacts", etc. (more than 70% of responses). The salseros were also often called as reasons "chance or coincidence", which for the first time led to a salsa party or to a trial salsa lesson, as well as the search for new ways of leisure activity (about 50% of the responses).

At the same time, they rarely called the psychological reasons for starting salsa (less than 30% of responses), which in our opinion is quite natural, since, according to experts, these reasons are related to psychological problems that are not always understood by the person himself, but are visible to the observers.

Thus, we can conclude that the main reasons for starting a salsa lessons among Russian salseros (both according to experts' opinion and according to the dancers themselves) are associated with the desire to maintain and develop the interpersonal communication, as well as the communicative skills and communicative personality features.

These results are consistent with data from Western researchers who believe that the communicative function is one of the main salsa functions in society (Pusnik & Sicherl, 2010).

6.2. Most distinctive psychological features of salsa dancers

In this study, we defined the psychological characteristics that distinguish salseros from non-salseros, based on expert answers on 3 open-ended questions.

Two experts found it difficult to list *most distinctive psychological features* of salsa dancers. The remaining 5 experts twice called "self-confidence", "sociability, empathy", "strong will to change", one of them also noted the "openness and creativity" inherent in salseros.

Responding to a question about *conflicts among salseros*, one expert denied their presence ("salsa is the world of friendship and dance"), three experts noted that conflicts arise less frequently, and two experts said that conflicts among salseros occur as often as among other people. At the same time, four experts believe that most conflicts have shallow reasons and salseros usually know how handling it.

All experts noted the *additional benefits of practicing salsa*. 6 experts once again noted the advantages in communications ("wide circle of communication", "interpersonal skills", "looseness"), 4 experts pointed to the personality development in various fields (music, dance, creative), mastering foreign languages, etc. One expert outlined a commitment to a healthy lifestyle among salseros.

These results are consistent with data from our previous quantitative studies among salsa dancers and non-dancers (Novikova & Tolstova, 2013). We found that salseros are distinguished by a more self-confidence, harmonious communicative sphere of personality, and ability to control aggressive reactions and actions. They more often choose *Collaborating* as the leading conflict mode.

6.3. The most significant changes under the influence of salsa

Answering a question about the most significant changes in salseros under practicing salsa, one of the experts noted that these changes primarily depend on the salsa teacher and the environment at salsa school: there may be diametrically opposite results. Another expert stressed that the nature of the changes depends on the individual characteristics and the reasons joining the salsa community: as a rule, exactly those traits or skills will change that people want to change. The other 5 experts noted positive changes in sociability, interpersonal skills, and openness to people and other cultures. Two of them also added the adjustment of gender roles and development of the communication skills with the opposite sex representatives. So, in general, most experts agree that the most significant changes are related to the communicative behaviors of salseros, which corresponds to their basic needs and reasons for starting a salsa.

Next, we analyze what the dancers themselves noted as main changes in their life and in their personality under influence of salsa.

First, most of them (over 70%) in response to an open-ended question about the changes called "expanding the circle of communication", "new friends", "improving relationships with people (colleagues, parents, etc.)". Moreover, about 40% of salseros noted the emergence of new serious relationships and even the creation of a family. Some respondents noted global changes: "almost everything has changed," "I became happier," "salsa has become a way of life," etc. (about 15% of responses). These answers are consistent with expert opinion on significant changes in communication skills and traits influenced by salsa.

Secondly, the respondents' assessments by Likert scales in more detail show the degree of changes in various aspects of their social behavior (see Table 01).

Table 01. Frequency of answer choices to questions about changes under the influence of salsa (in %)

Aspects of social behavior/personality	No changes	Minimal changes	Medium changes	Major changes	Fundamental changes
Preferences in food	72	17	9	2	0
Preferences in drinks	39	33	17	8	3
Preferences in music	11	16	28	28	17
Leisure activity	0	6	22	33	39
Interest in foreign languages	33	23	28	10	6
Interest in Latin American culture	16	14	25	31	14
Travelling to different countries	36	21	16	11	16
Personality traits	8	33	25	23	11
Interpersonal Relationships	11	6	33	39	11
Choosing a profession	57	5	8	14	16

The data presented in Table 01 show that the smallest changes related with involvement in salsa were in the preferences of food, and the most significant changes were in leisure activities of salseros. 83% salseros noted medium, major, and fundamental changes (in total) in interpersonal relationships, 70% - in interest in Latin American culture, and 59% -- in personality traits.

Third, respondents rated on a scale from 0% to 100% as far changed their lifestyle as a whole after they joined the salsa. 25% of respondents rated changes in their lives at 80%. In general, more than 60% of salseros noted changes from 61 to 100% (Figure 01).

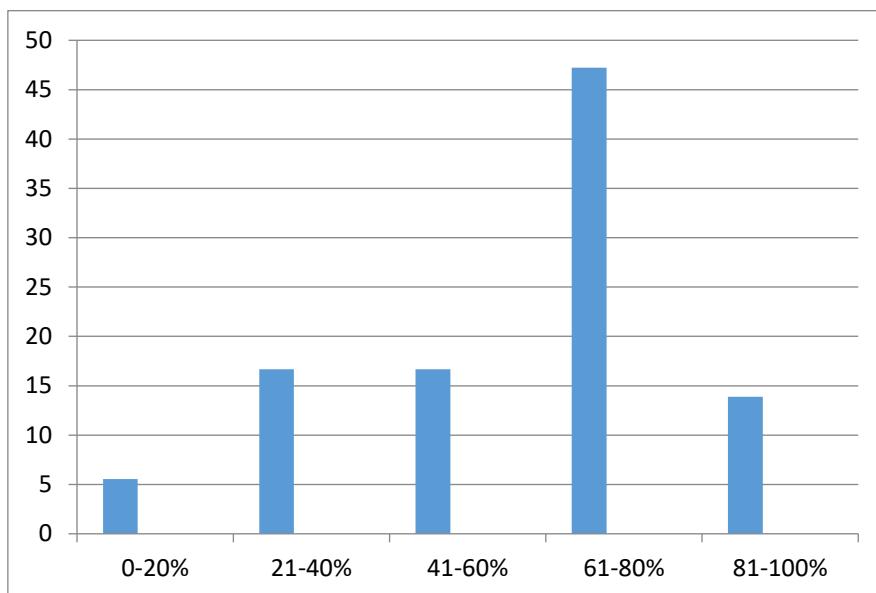


Figure 01. The diagram of answers frequency (vertical axis) to the question: *Assess how your overall lifestyle has changed after you joined salsa, from 0 to 100%* (horizontal axis)

Therefore, both in the opinion of experts and in the opinion of the dancers themselves, salsa significantly changes their lifestyle in general and strongly influences the psychological characteristics of the communications.

7. Conclusion

The present study had the main purpose to consider the psychological potential of salsa for personality development and self-improvement. A theoretical analysis of the literature and few previous empirical studies of the salsa phenomenon allowed us to characterize it as a subculture with its own social, linguistic, and psychological features. Researchers believe that salsa has several basic functions in modern society, such as communicative, emotional, informational, socializing, recreational, psychotherapeutic functions.

Our qualitative research using the semi-structured interviews allows us to conclude that:

- 1) One of the main reasons for starting salsa is social-psychological and psychological reasons: the search for new contacts, desire to solve communication problems, intention to improve personality features, skills, and abilities;

2) In the process of practicing salsa, the salseros lifestyle changes greatly, relationships with other people become more positive and harmonious, and self-confidence, sociability, abilities (musical, dancing, linguistic) are improved;

3) As a result, salseros are different from not salseros in more pronounced sociability, openness, volitional qualities and less conflict inclination.

Thus, it can be said that salsa in most cases help a person achieve what he/she originally came to this community for. Consequently, we can really consider salsa as a means for developing the personal potential of a modern person, especially in the field of communications, cultural and creative development, and a healthy lifestyle.

Of course, this study has a number of limitations associated with a small sample size and the use of mainly qualitative methods. The research prospects are associated with conducting a longitudinal quasi-experiment, which will allow using quantitative methods to show the changes that occur in the personality and social behavior of salseros under the influence of practicing salsa.

Acknowledgments

The publication has been prepared with the support of the “RUDN University Program 5–100”.

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