

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF

Dr Michael Argyle of the Department of Experimental Psychology at the University of Oxford explains why happiness is Scottish Country Dancing.

Dancing is found in all cultures, for weddings, celebrations and other enjoyable social occasions, and in primitive societies it plays a central part in rituals which motivate co-operative action. In some tribes where there is a great deal of co-operation and mutual help it is believed that this is sustained by festivals of song and dance. Does Scottish Dancing work like this?

If you turn up late to dancing and look at the faces of the dancers they seem to be in a very positive emotional state. As part of a larger survey of leisure groups, a number of individuals who belonged to Scottish and other dance groups fell into the sample, and they reported the highest levels of joy produced by meetings of the group than for any other form of leisure. So I followed this up with a sample of local Scottish Dancers to collect more data. The total is only 35, and is probably not very representative, quite a lot had higher degrees for example, but I will use the data to illustrate some points.

The subjects were asked to report "the emotional state produced by meetings of the group" using a 5-point scale, where 5 meant "intense" and 1 meant "none". Scottish Dancing produced a higher level of joy (3.71 - the most typical score was 4) than any other of the leisure groups studied, as shown in the graph below.

Joy was the most intense emotion reported for dancing; some of the others were satisfaction (3.47), excitement (3.00, but

higher for younger dancers), and relaxed (2.83). Frustration was very low; this was much the highest for political groups. Other research has shown that leisure activities are an important source of happiness, especially if they involve some serious commitment, and especially if they are carried out with other people. And of all the causes of happiness leisure is the one which it is easiest to do something about; work, social relationships

social life and health both at 3.58. Other questions showed the same thing, that it is the dancing itself which people enjoy. But dancing cannot be separated from three other aspects - social interaction, music and exercise, and I will say something about each of these.

Dancing is very sociable, you can't do it by yourself, as with tennis, but unlike tennis dancing is basically co-operative, like riding a see-saw, or playing in an orchestra. However,

The most striking feature of Scottish Country Dancing is the high level of joy created

and our personalities are also important causes of happiness but they are much more difficult to change.

I asked what people thought was "the main basis of member motivation". The most important was "an intrinsic interest in the activity" (4.54), followed by "enjoyment of the social life" (3.79). I asked them to rate the importance of possible benefits from belonging to the club. Again "the main activity for its own sake" was rated highest (4.38), followed by "the social life" at 3.58; "benefits for health" also scored 3.58, but "social support" was quite low at 2.13.

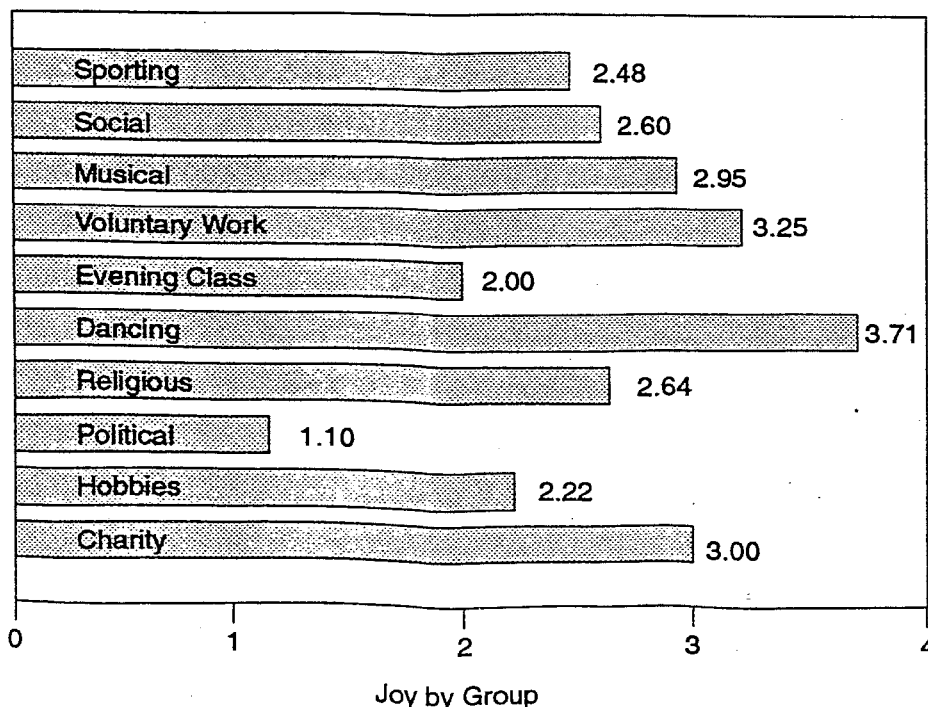
I asked which social aspects of club life gave the most satisfaction. The highest rating was for "being accepted by the club and its members" (3.38), followed by "co-operative activities" (2.91) and "close relationships with other members" (2.65). I asked what caused the greatest benefits from dancing; the dancing itself scored highest at 4.38, followed by

the subjects also reported spending an average of 40 minutes a week in conversation with other members, 21% of their friends came from the club; social life was said to be a major benefit, being accepted was a source of satisfaction, as was co-operation. On the other hand the level of social support reported was not very high, and close relations were only a moderate source of satisfaction (2.65). Church and voluntary work groups were a greater source of social support and close friendships, indeed many said that these relationships were closer than other friendships.

Every kind of social activity generates a special kind of relationship and there are several special features of Scottish Dancing: it is totally co-operative, it is very enjoyable, it involves a lot of positive non-verbal activity, and it does not require much conversation or self-disclosure. Dancing may have another benefit for social life; Robert Burns said that he took up dancing "to improve my manners". I think this would work - the emphasis on "polite turns", on co-operation and on helping people would be expected to produce positive effects in this area of social skills.

"Non-verbal communication" refers to facial expressions, tones of voice, gestures and postures, touch and direction of gaze. These signals have been found to be very important in communicating friendly attitudes to others. Scottish Dancing generates high levels of smiling, looking, and touch - all are powerful signals for interpersonal attraction. A further factor is the co-ordination of these signals, and especially the co-ordination of bodily movements; babies enjoy synchronised sequences of smiles, vocalisation and glances with their mothers, and there is probably some innate satisfaction from such co-ordination. The synchrony from a well-conducted eight hands round or even partners setting to one another may produce both satisfaction and attraction.

Exercise is an important source of positive moods; a 10 minute "brisk walk" makes



SCOTTISH DANCING

people feel better, more energetic, and less tense two hours later; Scottish Dancing can do much more. There are several reasons for this - discharging tension, distracting from worries, feelings of mastery or competence, and release of endorphins. The last of these can produce real feelings of euphoria and probably happens at balls. The effects of exercise are so clear that 80% of American doctors are reported to prescribe it for depression, and many for anxiety.

Music is a common laboratory method of "mood induction"; it also generates bodily movements, makes you want to tap your feet, march or dance. The connection with dancing is close, and it is likely that dancing is one of the origins of music. The rhythm makes you want to dance, the loudness generates excitement, and the tunes can produce different moods. Music does this by echoing tones of voice associated with moods, for example depression with a low and falling pitch, and slow speed.

How important is sex? This is one of the traditional functions of dancing - finding and enjoying the company of a sexual partner. However in my rather middle-aged group of subjects it was not thought to be very important, somewhere between "enjoyable,

motivate behaviour towards the goal; people wouldn't bother about sex unless it was very enjoyable, and this ensures the continuation of the species. Co-operative behaviour in general is also like this, it is enjoyable in itself and leads to mutual help and social integration. Does dancing produce such social integration? Scottish and similar leisure groups are found to straddle several social classes in their membership, but not the whole range. There are positive attitudes towards other clubs. There is a lot of tolerance for newcomers, beginners, and other potentially disruptive people. I asked about "good works" and most people referred to charitable donations by clubs; there is no obvious reason why this should be done, but it is, particularly when members are in a very good mood, as at a ball, perhaps due to what has been called "an overflow of goodwill".

There are several problems commonly found with leisure and voluntary groups. Leadership is difficult, since the leader has no obvious rewards or punishments he can use. I asked about this, and the respondents thought it was done mainly through the leader's own expertise giving him authority, and by persuasion. Another problem is government; in my survey about a third of clubs of all

How important is sex?

but only formal contact between sexes" and "pseudo-romance, as in some dancing"; the first was more common. It would be nice to see if the same was true of younger dancers; after all they do sometimes marry each other. I am inclined to think that the sexual element is present but in a rather restrained form, a kind of "safe sex", since it is unlikely that anything will happen.

How about the possible effect of dressing up and dancing on self-esteem? I asked some questions about this, and found that self-esteem was most affected by skill at dancing (3.54), followed by acceptance (3.25), but not by dressing up or putting on public performances.

It was widely believed by my subjects that dancing provides benefits for health. Other research shows of course that exercise, and especially aerobic exercise, is very good for almost every aspect of health. For example the maximum deterrence against heart attacks can be achieved by 200 minutes of exercise a week, though it is better if this is spread out over five occasions.

Does Scottish Dancing produce any other long term benefits? Where there are such benefits there are usually short-term rewards to

kinds, including dancing ones, were totally undemocratic, another third only partly so. Of course RSCDS rules insist on a certain degree of participation. Other research has found that satisfaction with clubs is greater the more participation there is. It is odd that members don't object more when it is absent, perhaps they are happy for someone else to do the work, perhaps it is easier to move to another club. Other problems common in some leisure groups are the danger of conflict between cliques, anxiety over failure or stage fright. These were very low for my Scottish Dancing subjects.

The most striking feature of Scottish Dancing is where I started, the high level of joy created. This is probably the result of the combination of forms of music, exercise and social interaction, each of which would be enjoyable alone, but which together have a very strong effect. The social relations formed have a special character, being based more on enjoyed co-operative activity and non-verbal communication, than on conversation. The probable benefits are extensive, for happiness, mental and physical health, social skills and social integration.