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Performance as Public Practice

11/13/2023

Big Top Risk for Reward: An Argument of Transdisciplinary Injury Prevention for Circus Performers

Cirque du Soleil represents one of the largest traveling circus companies globally, entertaining more than 400 million spectators across six continents. With such an enormous presence, no shortage of individual talent aspires to join the circus and expand their professional careers. Unfortunately, those performers are ultimately forced to choose between that artistic acclaim and their own safety. As of 2018, approximately 10 injuries, ranging from minor to severe, occur each *Cirque Du Soleil* show (Boller 4). Considering 500 performances annually, a company circus performer is expected to understand the level of risk and accept responsibility for their own physical and technical aptitude. This being said, it should be in the best interest of the circus to protect its performers and the injury prevention model of *Cirque Du Soleil* was last revised 20 years ago. As evidence-based research within sports medicine and Olympic training programs progresses, athletic injury prevention methodology has shifted away from a *mono-disciplinary* approach to a *transdisciplinary* approach. While a mono-disciplinary approach focuses only on the biological mechanics of injury prevention, a transdisciplinary approach provides “individualized rehabilitation” and education to athletes, addressing “multi-faceted factors” such as their physical, psychological, and cultural needs (Faltus and Veronique 2). Based on their demanding traveling schedule, high-risk stunts, and history of medical neglect *Cirque du Soleil* should shift their injury prevention model to a comprehensive transdisciplinary approach in order to minimize risk, prioritize the physical and emotional health of their performers, and improve their financial standings simultaneously.

The necessity for a transdisciplinary approach is observed from the severe environmental factors that affect traveling circus performers physiologically. While designed to illude an audience perception of ease and grace, *Cirque Du Soleils'* choreographed stunts take a toll on performers bodies. Stunts, including but not limited to, gymnastics, trapeze, diving and contortion require “repetitive” and “dynamically loaded” movements that extend through “extreme ranges of motion” and contribute to the development of “chronic injuries” (Faltus and Veronique 5). Despite having an emphasis in medical monitoring, the mono-disciplinary approach fails to address long-term injury prevention. In other words, performers only receive treatment after they become injured, increasing the likelihood of permanent damage. The transdisciplinary approach, on the other hand, consults performers based on their stunts physiological requirements and offers counteracting routines and exercises to not only prevent incidental injury but ensure the body’s future well-being and capabilities.

In addition to the demanding nature of the show itself, *Cirque Du Soleil'* artists are expected to perform “8-10 shows per week over 5-6 consecutive days” not including “off days” which may require international travel to the next tour city. (Faltus and Veronique 7). Because of this traveling schedule’s negative influence on their “sleep quality and recovery”, performers are at higher risk for injury during a show or dress-rehearsal (Faltus and Veronique 7). A trans-disciplinary model calls for medical professionals to work with administration on scheduling that meets a “minimum requirement” of recovery time for performers, thus prioritizing their physical well-being and decreasing the likelihood of “fatigue-related injury” (Faltus and Veronique 10). Moreover, depending on their contract, this lifestyle can be year-round for some performers. Unlike most professional sports with a set off-season designed for recovery and training, *Cirque Du Soleil* tours a show every season, and its performers are given “breaks

ranging from a few weeks” (Donohue 12). In order to keep performers safe and prepared for each show, recovery time must be integrated within this year-round schedule. The transdisciplinary model incorporates yoga, massage-therapy, and physical therapy within the weekly schedule of each circus performer to decrease the effects of muscle fatigue (Donohue 9). Moreover, it addresses the needs of individuals as opposed to requiring the same recovery regumate for all artists regardless of its usefulness.

Where a mono disciplinary injury prevention method merely focuses on the physiology of a performer, a transdisciplinary model takes into consideration the psychological well-being of circus performers in their risk for injury. Caroline Bolling, a professor of Physiotherapy at the University of Dublin, acknowledges circus performance as requiring both “captivating motor tricks and artistic display” therefore its injury-prevention model should also take into consideration the emotional vulnerability that accompanies artists (Bolling 5). According to a 2021 study surveying performers in *Cirque Du Soleil’s Mad Apple*, 27% reported at some point in their careers having experienced “lost movement syndrome”, a psychological condition that makes performers unable to complete a previously automatic skill (Bolling 13). Furthermore, the study attributes mental pressure as the primary cause for lost movement syndrome. More specifically, circus performers with “low self-efficacy are twice as likely to get injured” than their higher self-efficacy counterparts (Bolling 12). The trans-disciplinary model provides each artist access to a psychologist in order to safely discuss, without occupational consequences, their emotional and mental well-being, remove mental obstacles, and achieve performance goals. Not only does this ensure a check-in with artists who may be at risk for injury prevention due to lost movement syndrome, but it aims to increase self-confidence through establishing individual goals between each performance.

In congruence, the trans-disciplinary model accounts for the importance of team-cohesion on mental health and injury prevention, unlike the monodisciplinary approach. Lack of team cohesion and coordination “increases social anxiety and impedes performance” (Faltus and Veronique 6). Social anxiety can impede a performer's ability to ask for help or fully trust stunt partners. From the two trapeze artists throwing and catching each other in the air to the member who sweeps the stage for barefoot performers to walk on, respect and transparency among all parts of the circus decrease accidents from miscommunication. Furthermore, the transdisciplinary model encourages establishing personal relationships with those you consistently work with. Because traveling circus schedules offer “limited opportunities for socialization outside of the touring show environment”, positive relationships amongst performers, crew members, and administrators outside of rehearsal are crucial to maximizing dependability and safety during rehearsal (Faltus and Veronique 6).

While evidence-based research supports the transdisciplinary injury prevention model, *Cirque Du Soleil* may not have the financial ability to incorporate it. As a result of the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic, *Cirque Du Soleil* filed “bankruptcy protection in Quebec Superior Court”, and permanently laid off 3,500 employees (Kelly 2). Considering a profit margin of approximately one billion in 2017, one can understand why *Cirque Du Soleil* hasn't prioritized company reform. Furthermore, company injury prevention, even a mono disciplinary approach, requires a significant amount of money to maintain. From on-site emergency care to physical evaluations, basic medical repercussions cost the circus \$200,000 a week (*Cirque Du Soleil* “About”). A trans-disciplinary approach, in addition to minimum medical services, would require the hiring of enough specialized physicians, psychologists, and nutritionists to have individual evaluations for each company performer. This being said, as of 2023, *Cirque Du*

Soleil, is back touring their shows worldwide and has a new executive CEO. This may be the ideal time to reassess divisions of revenue.

Switching to a transdisciplinary approach would not only decrease liability and increase financial sustainability in the long-term, but also improve *Cirque Du Soleil's* public perception. Within the past few years, *Cirque Du Soleil* has received lawsuits and fines from former employees and OSHA for health and safety negligence. In 2020, Daniel Crispin, a former circus acrobat, sued the company after “an endless battle to have [his] spinal injuries covered by insurance” (SBS The Feed| *I Went Into a Show*). While working for the circus, Crispin received 3 concussions, seven injured spinal disks, and osteoarthritis, yet the company did not arrange for him to receive any medical scans. In the civil case, *Cirque Du Soleil* settled in a \$100,000 agreement with Crispin (SBS The Feed| *I Went Into a Show*). Not only does this case demonstrate the extent of physical injury endured by a circus performer, but discloses the financial and moral ramifications to maintaining a mono disciplinary injury prevention model.

OSHA has also held the company accountable for negligence. Over the past four years, OSHA fines have cost *Cirque Du Soleil* \$25,000 (*Inspection Detail*). Furthermore, one of these violations resulted in the death of an employee. OSHA reports that “a wire rope broke apart” causing the employee to “fall 94 ft to the basement” (*Inspection Detail*). Despite being immediately transferred to the UMC Trauma Center, she was pronounced dead upon arrival. Though OSHA investigates several of these tragic accidents across many organizations, they rarely hold the company financially liable. In this particular instance, *Cirque Du Soleil* had not completed equipment inspection before allowing employees on the fly rail. The transdisciplinary model to injury prevention doesn't just protect performers from long-term injury, but also adds specific jobs tasked with equipment management, requiring multiple people to inspect a given

area/set piece. The transdisciplinary model reduces the likelihood of financial loss from liability by implementing more specific regulations and positions to ensure employee and performer safety.

Taking into consideration the physical and psychological challenges of its circus performers as well as the financial, legal and moral consequences in previous cases of neglect, the injury prevention model in *Cirque du Soleil* needs to be reformed into a transdisciplinary methodology. While executives of the company are hesitant to implement specialized training, hire mental health professionals, and alter year-round schedules on account of decreased revenue, it is their responsibility to prioritize the health of their employees and artists. The demanding schedule of a traveling circus artist does not offer the time to receive external care, therefore the care should be implemented within their work environment. Furthermore, each staff member regardless of title or association should be treated with respect and importance as the effective collaboration of people is crucial to the transdisciplinary model. As this model continues to be understood, it could be implemented in all facets of life. From how we view history to personal relationships, the transdisciplinary model invites open-mindedness and compassion for all people. Moreover, it encourages the importance of understanding one another's identities, culture, qualities, and aspirations. *Cirque du Soleil's* implementation of these practices would not only change the environment within their company, but establish a necessary precedent for other circuses to follow, and with that an expectation that circus performers' safety is prioritized.

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