

Dancing Between Castes: Exploring the Psychological Well-Being of Balinese Women Who Have Married Downcaste

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Abstract

The Balinese caste system, intertwined with patriarchal traditions, often places women in subordinate positions. One practice illustrating this is *nyerod*, when a woman marries a man from a lower caste, resulting in a downward shift in her social status and often accompanied by stigma, discrimination, and inner conflict. This study explores the psychological well-being of Balinese women who have undergone *nyerod*, with a focus on the roles of community, spirituality, and cultural practices, particularly traditional dance. A qualitative phenomenological design was applied to capture the lived experiences of three participants, all active members of village dance communities. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). As a result, three themes emerged: (a) navigating social stigma and inner turmoil, (b) dancing as ritual, joy, and self-expression, and (c) redefining self in a community of movement. Dance was found to be more than cultural preservation—it functioned as a medium of healing, emotional release, and identity reconstruction. The study demonstrates that Balinese dance offers a symbolic and practical pathway for women experiencing *nyerod* to renegotiate their identities and improve their psychological well-being. Access to cultural spaces such as dance communities enables women to reclaim agency, strengthen social bonds, and redefine happiness beyond caste-based constraints.

Keywords: down-caste women, *nyerod*, psychological well-being, Balinese dance, Balinese dance community, gender and culture

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Abstrak

Sistem kasta Bali, yang terjalin erat dengan tradisi patriarki, sering kali menempatkan perempuan dalam posisi yang subordinat. Salah satu praktik yang menggambarkan hal ini adalah *nyerod*, ketika seorang perempuan menikah dengan pria dari kasta yang lebih rendah, mengakibatkan penurunan status sosialnya dan sering disertai dengan stigma, diskriminasi, dan konflik batin. Studi ini mengeksplorasi kesejahteraan psikologis perempuan Bali yang telah mengalami *nyerod*, dengan fokus pada peran komunitas, spiritualitas, dan praktik budaya, terutama tarian tradisional. Desain fenomenologis kualitatif diterapkan untuk menangkap pengalaman hidup tiga peserta, yang semuanya merupakan anggota aktif komunitas tari desa. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan dianalisis menggunakan Analisis Fenomenologis Interpretatif. Hasilnya, tiga tema muncul: (a) menghadapi stigma sosial dan konflik batin, (b) tari sebagai ritual, kegembiraan, dan ekspresi diri, dan (c) mendefinisikan ulang diri dalam komunitas gerakan. Tarian lebih dari sekadar pelestarian budaya, ia berfungsi sebagai media penyembuhan, pelepasan emosi, dan rekonstruksi identitas. Studi ini menunjukkan bahwa tari Bali menawarkan jalur simbolis dan praktis bagi perempuan yang mengalami *nyerod* untuk menegosiasikan kembali identitas mereka dan meningkatkan kesejahteraan psikologis. Akses ke ruang budaya seperti komunitas tari memungkinkan perempuan untuk merebut kembali agen, memperkuat ikatan sosial, dan mendefinisikan ulang kebahagiaan di luar batasan kasta.

Kata Kunci: perempuan kasta rendah, *nyerod*, kesejahteraan psikologis, tarian Bali, komunitas tarian Bali, gender dan budaya

INTRODUCTION

Marriage in Indonesia is a process deeply intertwined with religion, custom, and culture. This is especially true among Hindu-Balinese communities, who are known for their strong adherence to ancestral traditions. One traditional practice related to marriage that continues to be observed is *nyerod* marriage. This refers to a situation in which a Balinese woman marries a man from a lower caste than her own.

The caste system in Bali consists of four hierarchical levels: the *triwangsa* (the three upper castes)—Brahmana, Ksatria, and Waisya—and Sudra (*jaba*), which is considered the lowest caste (Devi & Nurchayati, 2021). Balinese society follows a patrilineal kinship system, where lineage is traced through the father's line. As such, caste status is determined by the head of the household. If a woman marries a man of higher caste, she will be elevated in status, and her children will inherit the caste of the husband. Conversely, if she marries a man from a lower caste, her caste status will be lowered—a process referred to as *nyerod*.

The implementation of inter-caste marriage, particularly when it involves a woman marrying into a lower caste (*nyerod*), remains a matter of contention and continues to pose sociocultural challenges within Balinese society. Families of higher-caste women generally disapprove of their daughters marrying men from lower castes (Mahardini & Tobing, 2017). This is primarily due to the belief that *nyerod* marriages are

disadvantageous for women, as they bring about a host of complex issues, including shifts in social status, alterations in rights and obligations, disrupted communication dynamics, and unequal treatment from the husband's family (Sartini et al., 2020). The downward shift in caste position often results in social stigma and discrimination directed at the woman (Artana, 2021). This phenomenon also affects familial relationships; women who have *nyerod* are sometimes prohibited from visiting their natal families during traditional ceremonies, sharing meals, or partaking in communal food, as they are now considered to belong to a lower caste (Wagiswari & Valentina, 2025). In more extreme cases, families may refuse to attend the wedding, deny the woman access to ancestral rituals, or even sever kinship ties entirely.

A woman's decision to marry into a lower caste constitutes a critical transition typically occurring in early adulthood, with long-term implications for her psychosocial development. This stage of life is commonly characterized by the search for identity, the pursuit of autonomy, and the formation of long-term commitments such as marriage (Santrock, 2021). However, when marriage also entails a caste downgrade, women are confronted with compounded stressors. In addition to adjusting to a new social status, *nyerod* women must also navigate unfamiliar cultural norms, communication styles, and customary obligations within their husband's family and community. Furthermore, they are expected to fulfill the "triple roles" traditionally assigned to Balinese women: the domestic role within the household, the economic role through participation in the labor force, and the ritual role in religious and customary practices (Oktarina & Komalasari, 2022). These roles reflect societal expectations for women to be ideal wives and nurturing mothers who perform household duties, contribute economically, and actively participate in religious ceremonies, all of which are regulated under *awig-awig*, or customary village laws (Oktarina & Komalasari, 2022).

In terms of identity and psychological adjustment, *nyerod* women often experience dissonance between their former caste-based identity and the new social role imposed upon them post-marriage. This situation triggers a complex process of identity reconstruction, situated within the value system of the new family, unfamiliar customary rules, and social realities that are often more restrictive. Previous research by Alandari and Muti'ah, (2019) found that women who entered into *nyerod* marriages experienced psychological conflict characterized by emotional distress, feelings of guilt toward their families, and the loss of social status, all of which contributed to psychosocial discomfort and a difficult process of identity and self-adjustment. In contrast to previous findings, Mahardini dan Tobing (2017) demonstrated that Hindu-Balinese women who marry into lower castes are capable of adaptive adjustment, including building relationships with their spouses, maintaining or restoring connections with their families of origin and in-laws, integrating into broader social environments, and ultimately achieving self-acceptance and psychological balance within their marital lives.

Balinese society places a strong emphasis on customs and ritual obligations, making the active participation of *nyerod* women in their triple roles, particularly in religious and customary domains not only a reflection of cultural devotion, but also a vital means of restoring social acceptance, reconstructing personal identity, and reintegrating into the husband's familial and communal environment. This is because Balinese women who are married typically become actively involved in customary activities within their husband's household. One of the most prominent traditions is *ngayah*, a form of voluntary communal service performed sincerely during religious or social events held in the *banjar* (village council) or at temples (*pura*) (Dahlan, 2023). These *ngayah* activities may include preparing ceremonial offerings for weddings or funerals, assisting with food preparation during communal events, and performing traditional dances in temples. Each *desa adat* (customary village) in Bali usually has its own dance group (*sekaa*), comprised of local women who perform during religious ceremonies. Dancing, in this context, is not merely a physical activity but also an act of cultural preservation and social contribution.

The three participants in this study have found a renewed sense of self through the harmonization of movement and the rhythms of Balinese dancing and gamelan. Beyond receiving emotional support from the relationships formed within the dance group, they also experienced a sense of personal achievement, visibility, and dignity. Dance functions not only as a ritual practice, but also as a source of inner peace. All three participants have been involved in their village's *sekaa* dance group for over a decade, performing not only in their local village but also in neighboring communities and major temples across Bali.

Returning to the topic of inner peace, the dance performed by the three dancers is closely related to coping with stress. Coping is a strategy employed by individuals to deal with stress (Andriyani, 2019). The coping mechanism used by the dancers is a form of emotion-focused coping. This involves managing the emotions that arise when facing a stressful situation, rather than attempting to change the source of the stressor (Tuasikal & Retnowati, 2018). Among the various available approaches, expressive arts, including dance, provide an alternative way to regulate emotions, release tension, and form a sense of meaning for individuals (Kerkou et al., 2017; Wenn et al., 2018). In conclusion, dancing is an effective coping mechanism for regulating emotions, providing release and forming deep meaning for individuals experiencing stress.

Dance performed as a form of coping signifies that it is not merely a cultural activity, but also a space for healing and the reconstruction of individual identity. Regarding healing spaces, dance has historically developed as a medium for emotional expression and cross-cultural communal bonding (Stevenson, 2019). For example, Dance Movement Therapy (DMT), which developed in the mid-20th century, marked a significant integration between dance and psychological treatment to address various mental health issues (Kaul, 2024; Ryan, 2024). Several studies have shown that dance

can reduce depression, anxiety, and trauma symptoms (Koch et al., 2019; Tomaszewski et al., 2023).

Furthermore, dance functions not only as a space for healing but also as a means of reconstructing individual identity. Socially, dance has a significant influence on cultural identity and community cohesion, which can ultimately increase resilience and social integration within communities (Johnson, 2018; Ramesh, 2023). For example, several studies have found that dance can increase group cohesion, social interaction, and reduce feelings of isolation (Kaul, 2024; Veid et al., 2022). Although some studies have discussed healing spaces and the reconstruction of individual identity, dance remains poorly understood, particularly with identity formation among indigenous communities (Draper-Clarke & Green, 2023; Thobani, 2019).

From the perspective of life span, marriage is one of the most important normative life transitions in adult development. Psychological transitions are defined as an inherent part of the human experience, occurring as individuals move from one phase of life to another. These transitions may be triggered by changes in social relationships, career paths, health conditions, or life stages that require individuals to adapt to new circumstances, roles, and identities (Youvan, 2024). Individuals are viewed as active agents who continually develop through processes of selection, adaptation, and reconstruction in response to the challenges and opportunities presented at each stage of life (Baltes, 1997). According to Erikson's psychosocial development theory (Santrock, 2021), early to middle adulthood is marked by the developmental tasks of intimacy versus isolation and generativity versus stagnation.

In Balinese society, particularly for women who marry through the *nyerod* tradition, the psychosocial transition becomes even more complex. Women are expected to establish intimate relationships not only with their spouses but also with their new families, while simultaneously adapting to the social structure of the husband's family and community. Failure to successfully navigate this stage may lead to feelings of emotional isolation and helplessness within relationships. In this study, the participants, now in middle adulthood are also confronted with parenting roles and the expectation to contribute to the next generation. Women who marry through *nyerod* and actively participate in community-based groups, such as dance collectives, may find meaning in generativity through their social and cultural contributions. Conversely, if these women feel a loss of control over their life direction or a lack of recognition in both domestic and customary roles, they may be at risk of stagnation, experiencing a sense of unproductiveness and disconnection. Thus, the *nyerod* marriage tradition may be viewed as a developmental turning point, one that challenges women to construct new meanings and a renewed sense of identity.

According to Kroger and Marcia (2011), identity is not a fixed construct formed solely during adolescence, but rather a dynamic process that continues to evolve throughout the lifespan. In the context of *nyerod* marriage, where a woman leaves behind

the caste that once defined her identity and enters the family and customary system of her husband, who may not belong to any caste, this transition can become a significant point in the reconstruction of individual identity. This process reflects the stages of identity moratorium and achievement, in which individuals actively explore the meanings of roles and values before arriving at a more stable and internalized sense of self (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Furthermore, the theory of narrative identity developed by Kroger and Marcia (2011) explains that life stories can be interpreted through a range of identity themes. Individuals reconstruct their identities through the life stories they create and reinterpret. In this context, women who marry through *nyerod* may re-narrate their lives through the assumption of new roles as wives, both within their husband's family and in the broader social environment. Thus, these women do not merely undergo an identity transition, but rather actively reconstruct their identities through role enactment, enabling them to explore and assign meaning to their newly emerging identities.

This research will explore the psychological well-being of Balinese women who undergo *nyerod* and are demoted through marriage. The caste demotion experienced by Balinese dancers can be a challenge for individuals. These challenges include psychological distress such as anxiety, depression, and loss of control (Nenovarmaychisa & Ambarini, 2017). This can certainly impact the psychological well-being of Balinese dancers. Psychological well-being has six dimensions: autonomy, mastery, environment, personal growth, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 2014). The concept of psychological well-being is a concept brought by eudaimonics, which is seen as a state of positive functioning across various aspects of an individual's life (Ryff, 2014). This aspect of life includes an individual's ability to feel meaning, purpose, and direction in life, utilize potential and talents, and manage various situations in life.

Discussing the challenges faced by Balinese dancers who are demoted through marriage, these initially evoke a range of negative emotions. Research findings from Putri et al., (2022) indicate that individuals initially experience many negative emotions, such as disappointment with their parents and a tendency to avoid conflict. When deciding to perform *nyerod*, individuals prepare to leave their caste and accept all the consequences. Being in a lower caste means individuals must be prepared for change. This unpreparedness often leads to stress, which ultimately has both social and psychological impacts. This stress results from the demands of adjustment, which require individuals to be adaptive (K. S. Dewi, 2012).

Adaptive forms of aligning oneself with the surrounding environment are part of coping. Lazarus (1993) defines coping as an individual's effort to manage external and internal demands arising from the environment, both behaviorally and cognitively. Generally, coping is divided into three categories: problem-focused, emotion-focused, and seeking social support. Successful coping is part of an individual's self-regulation

skills (Eggen & Kauchak, 2013). One aspect of regulation related to coping strategies for stress is behavior. Schunk et al. (2012) explained that individuals with good self-regulation can regulate their cognition, affect, and behavior. From the explanation above, it can be concluded that individuals who lack self-regulation are unable to control stress and do not yet know appropriate coping strategies.

Understanding coping through dance reveals that the body is not merely a physical object, but rather a primary medium for comprehending human experience. This experience is evident when women's bodies actively participate in cultural and spiritual practices through dance. Furthermore, dance is a healing process that involves emotional, cognitive, and physical aspects, collectively referred to as body healing (Brito et al., 2021; Millman et al., 2021). It is known that when dancing, individuals engage in a process of self-immersion and produce feelings of emotion and joy that are integrated with the dance (Anggarani & Kahija, 2016). This aligns with Jazuli (1994) explanation that the presence of dance, with its beauty, can provide inner satisfaction, happiness, and hope. Furthermore, this phenomenon is referred to as flow, as it allows dancers to control their bodies and identities, allowing them to forget their problems (Anggarani & Kahija, 2016; Carr, 2004).

Dance is a unique form of physical activity that combines complex movements with elements of aesthetics, music, choreographed sequences, and interactions with others (Fong Yan et al., 2024). Dancing can enhance physical well-being and foster healing of the heart and soul, as it requires individuals to be present and focused in the moment, increases the production of endorphins, enables breath regulation and movement synchronization, and resonates with the body's energy through musical vibrations (Stringer, 2015). Participation in dance activities also contributes positively to individual health and well-being (Sheppard & Broughton, 2020). The movements involved in dancing constitute a form of physical activity that is generally recognized to promote health and well-being (Gerber & Colledge, 2023).

Furthermore, dancing cultivates a sense of social cohesion and emphasizes the importance of social contact in human life, which in turn motivates individuals across various age groups to dance together (Coogan et al., 2023; Qu et al., 2023). Thus, dance facilitates social contact and interpersonal connection within dance groups, which has been associated with a reduction in feelings of loneliness and social isolation (Saris et al., 2017). Dance also involves music and rhythm. Listening to music has been shown to increase oxytocin levels and reduce cortisol levels (Ooishi et al., 2017). Musical accompaniment during dance can enhance positive experiences and prolong engagement in the activity (Patania et al., 2020). Moreover, longer experience in dance has been associated with higher self-esteem and lower self-judgement among older women, which in turn influences their levels of depression (Cohen & Aisenberg-Shafran, 2025).

This study aims to explore the psychological well-being of Balinese women who have undergone *nyerod*—a downward caste transition through marriage—through a cross-cultural lens that incorporates the roles of community, spirituality, and local cultural values in Indonesia, particularly in Bali. These aspects contribute to the women's subjective experiences of peace, self-worth, and meaning in life. From a health psychology perspective, social systems can enhance an individual's resilience in facing stress and social pressure. One form of such a social system is community (Mukhlis & Al Muqim, 2013).

Supported by social support theory, positive social relationships have been shown to improve an individual's capacity to cope with psychological distress (Koller et al., 2011). In this context, social interaction is not merely instrumental but also reconstructive—allowing individuals to rebuild their sense of identity Mahardini and Tobing (2017) that may have been affected by the *nyerod* experience or the downward shift in caste. One such community is the *sekaa* dance group, which offers women a space for social connection and communal belonging.

Balinese society is widely recognized for its enduring and vibrant cultural traditions. This deeply rooted culture is inseparable from the central role of spirituality in the daily lives of Hindu-Balinese people. Spirituality plays a significant part in shaping both individual and communal experiences. According to Miller (2021), a psychologist focusing on spirituality and mental health, spirituality can serve as an important coping resource. In Bali, dance is not merely about bodily movement; each gesture holds spiritual meaning and is often embedded within religious practices.

From a social constructivist perspective, culture is not solely a fixed system passed down through generations, but also a dynamic process in which individuals can respond to and actively shape their roles (Yuniardi, 2017). Although structurally, women who undergo *nyerod* occupy a subordinate position within the caste system, they nonetheless possess the agency to negotiate their identities through cultural expressions. Traditional Balinese dance provides a space for these women to construct positive narratives of the self, reclaiming dignity and meaning after experiencing the challenges of caste descent.

METHOD

This qualitative research employed a phenomenological approach. Moleong (2012) emphasizes that phenomenology allows for an in-depth exploration and understanding of an individual's subjective experience. In line with Creswell (2014), the phenomenological approach also aims to uncover the essential meanings shared by individuals who have undergone similar experiences. In this study, phenomenology was utilized to understand and interpret how Balinese women who have experienced caste descent (*nyerod*) construct their psychological well-being through processes of identity reconstruction, meaning-making, and engagement in socio-cultural activities such as traditional dance. The researcher believes that this approach enables a holistic

understanding of the participants' psychological well-being by tracing their complex emotions, social dynamics, and spirituality.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews. In-depth interviewing was chosen to explore the participants' lived experiences openly, freely, and thoroughly, in accordance with the research topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. Due to geographic distance, the interviews were carried out online between July 21 and 23, 2025. The conversations were audio-recorded and supported by written notes for data preservation.

Participant

The participants in this study consisted of three Balinese women who had undergone the *nyerod* marriage practice and were also actively engaged as traditional dancers. Snowball sampling was employed to identify information-rich cases that aligned with the study's focus on the intersection between cultural marital obligations and long-term participation in community dance groups (*sekaa tari*). This approach was chosen because the topic was relatively sensitive, and participants were more effectively recruited through referrals from one participant to another. Three participants were involved in this study, all of whom are referred to using pseudonyms to protect their identities while also indicating their original caste background as Ksatria: Agung Rani (53), Agung Ani (48), and Gusti Ratih (49). Each had entered marriage through *nyerod* in their mid-to-late twenties and had sustained their marital relationships for more than two decades. Each woman had also been a long-term member of a *sekaa tari*, with durations of active involvement ranging from 10 to 15 years.

Data Analysis

This research uses an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. IPA is well-suited to describing participants' perspectives on interpreting their personal and social worlds (Kahija, 2017). IPA analysis is conducted through the following stages: reading the transcripts repeatedly, taking initial notes, developing emerging themes, and developing superordinate themes (Kahija, 2017). The use of IPA analysis in this study aims to explore the relationship between *nyerod* experience, well-being, and the meaning of dancing.

RESULT

Through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, this study reveals three major themes that describe the lived experiences of Balinese women who have undergone caste descent due to marriage, a practice known as *nyerod*. The three key findings are (a) Navigating Social Stigma and Inner Turmoil, (b) Dancing as Ritual, Joy, and Self Expression, and (c) Redefining Self in a Community of Movement. The participants' social dynamics in constructing their psychological well-being are

illustrated through these themes. The three participants in this study are given pseudonyms: Agung Rani, Agung Ani, and Gusti Ratih.

Navigating Social Stigma and Inner Turmoil

All three participants experienced both social and psychological pressures. The loss of their social rights includes (1) not undergoing a traditional proposal ceremony, (2) parents not being allowed to attend the wedding ceremony, and (3) having to address their natal family with honorifics such as *tu* or *ratu*, indicating respect for a higher caste. The absence of a proposal ceremony and their parents' absence at the wedding left an emotional scar and inner turmoil for the participants.

"... at that time [on my wedding day] I felt regret and questioned myself, 'Was my choice really the right one?'. Society views me as having sacrificed my family for love. It's like being called 'too heartless'. But on the other hand, I also have the right to choose who my husband is" (Agung Rani, 21 July 2025).

Societal stigma often perceives women who choose *nyerod* as prioritizing romantic love over familial ties. This stigma was shared by the other two participants, and in early stages of their marriage, it led them to question their decision to marry their spouses.

"I cried on my wedding day. I just realised how much it hurt me that my parents couldn't attend my wedding. Even though I am their only daughter, my parents had to accept that their daughter would not be proposed to" (Agung Ani, 22 July 2025).

"We (the participant and her husband) discussed it and asked for a formal proposal to be made to my parents. However, it was rejected. They said that there had never been anything like that in the community. My parents would be more embarrassed if I broke with tradition. Being rejected like that made me sad and weighed heavily on my heart as I prepared for the wedding" (Gusti Ratih, 23 July 2025).

The deprivation of these social rights was compounded by the stigma from both their natal families and broader community. Agung Rani shared that since marrying, she feels relegated to a 'lower tier' when among her family of origin.

*"When I return to my hometown, I must be very careful with my words. I have to use very polite Balinese. If others hear me speaking inappropriately, they will reprimand me. Once, I forgot to use the prefix or *ratu*, and I was scolded and told that my parents had not taught me properly. So, I blamed my parents' upbringing. That was quite upsetting" (Agung Rani, 21 July 2025).*

Similarly, Agung Ani mentioned being scolded for forgetting to use the proper honorifics when addressing elders in her hometown.

"Oh, I've been there. I still get annoyed when I remember that incident. Actually, in my family, it's normal to use formal titles when addressing each other. But in the village, because it's customary not to use formal titles when addressing parents or siblings, I reflexively didn't use them either. Then I was immediately scolded, told to 'melahang mebahasa' or 'correct your language'. I was even told to teach the children properly so they know how to be polite" (Agung Ani, 22 July 2025).

Gusti Ratih also confirmed this experience and said she had become reluctant to bring her nuclear family back to her hometown.

"I've been reprimanded back and forth. Once, I took my little family back to my hometown. My younger sibling asked, 'Why do we have to use the prefix tu when addressing everyone? Can't my cousin use the prefix tu?' because he was reprimanded by a neighbour when he addressed his grandfather directly as kaking. Well, it's difficult to explain that to children, especially since they are children. Since then, I've minimised taking the children back to my hometown. It's pitiful." (Gusti Ratih, 23 July 2025).

Being labeled as women who chose love over their families caused emotional turmoil for the participants, particularly during their weddings. Their perceived lower status within their natal families subjected them to personal and cultural pressure. The loss of social rights created deeply unpleasant experiences for these women.

Dancing as Ritual, Joy, and Self-Expression

Over time, participants gradually began to come to terms with their circumstances. One of the factors that helped participants' adaptation process was the acceptance they received from their new living environments, including their husbands' families and the surrounding communities. The dance community became a significant space for self-recovery. Agung Ani described dancing as a kind of "homecoming," where she felt valued and accepted.

"Since I was little, I often danced, and it became my family's pride. I danced so well that I was invited to perform outside my village. Well, that feeling came back after I got married. The pride I feel when my husband, children, or the community watch and clap for me. No one looks at me as someone who is unskilled. The audience only focuses on my movements" (Agung Ani, 22 July 2025).

Dancing enabled Agung Rani to connect with people who shared similar interests. She also found comfort in using her time in the sekaa tari (dance group) to share her

thoughts and feelings with fellow members, which made her feel relieved. Agung Rani found joy in the dance community not only because she could gather with friends, but also because the movements felt like exercise, and the accompanying gamelan music brought her calm and peace during rehearsals.

"Dancing is like exercise, right? They say exercise can reduce stress. Besides that, getting together with other mums and chatting about home or work issues really lightens the load. Oh yes, and hearing the gamelan music accompanying the dance is, in my opinion, a calming remedy" (Agung Rani, 21 July 2025).

Beyond the space for personal healing provided by the dance community, for Gusti Ratih, dancing also served as a means of self-expression. Several Balinese dances portray inner suffering or emotional pressure, which are reflected in the gestures. For example, graceful yet emotionally tense expressions in Legong dance movements can reflect sadness and inner constraint.

I remember that time, when I had just gotten married. I was still feeling troubled because I had left my family in a way that was considered inappropriate by society. Then there was a request for me to dance the legong at my husband's banjar. Coincidentally, legong is not an easy dance to perform, and coincidentally, I could do it. There, I practised and eventually performed. Legong dance is so expressive, you know? It felt like I could release all my emotions through it. It really helped me to at least be more prepared to face life after marriage" (Gusti Ratih, 23 July 2025).

All three participants agreed that the original purpose of dancing was as an offering to the Almighty God. Dancing created a sense of spiritual connection and cleansing that helped them accept themselves in the face of stigma related to their decision to nyerod.

"At first, I felt hurt by the villagers' views of me as a nyerod, so I surrendered myself to God through the Rejang dance at the temple" (Gusti Ratih, 23 July 2025).

"Yes, I mostly dance the rejang at the temple. When I dance, I feel at peace. My heart is sincere. All the negative feelings that arise because I am sad seem to disappear. I focus on giving my best to God" (Agung Rani, 21 July 2025).

"When I danced Gambuh, it was in my village. Because it was difficult, even after I got married, I was still asked to dance at the Pura Puseh temple in my village. That's when I felt that the people in my hometown didn't see me as a troublemaker, but as an artist. And it felt so peaceful to be able to offer my best to God again" (Agung Ani, 22 July 2025).

Dancing became an activity that drew the participants closer to God. In addition, its physical movements served as a form of exercise that reduced stress and increased happiness. Ultimately, the interviews revealed that dancing provided a platform for self-expression for the participants.

Redefining Self in a Community of Movement

A safe space is essential for every individual. A community can be a place where one rediscovers their sense of self. The dance community became such a space, allowing participants to reconstruct the identity that had been questioned after their *nyerod* (marrying someone from a lower caste). The redefinition of self experienced by participants unfolded gradually through culturally meaningful activities. While dancing, participants felt appreciated for their skills and dedication, not merely judged based on the social status they carried.

Agung Rani shared that she was able to reopen a space where she could see herself as someone of value, regardless of her caste background. "Starting over" was the phrase she used to describe her experience and the importance of the dance community during the early stages of her *nyerod* marriage.

"Freedom is what I feel, no one brings their background into it. We laugh, practise movements, tell stories. There is no stigma attached that becomes a barrier. I am seen as a whole individual, a dancer, not someone who has left their caste" (Agung Rani, 21 July 2025).

Echoing Agung Rani's experience, Gusti Ratih expressed that the dance community not only helped her heal from the stigma she received after *nyerod*, but also gave her confidence to perform and even contribute to the younger generation by helping teach the children's dance group in her village. This new role brought her pride and helped foster a renewed, positive identity.

"Yes, after getting divorced, people in my village looked down on me. However, since joining the dance group in my husband's neighbourhood, I feel involved and am even trusted to teach the children. So, the feeling that I chose the wrong husband, hehe, has disappeared. I feel that I can contribute as a woman to preserving the culture" (Gusti Ratih, 23 July 2025).

For Agung Ani, the *sekaa tari* was far from the stigma and prejudice typically found in broader social settings. It became a supportive environment where she could expand her social network in meaningful ways. She stated:

"We encourage each other in the dance group. No one talks about the past, let alone my caste. That makes me feel accepted. Dancing also helps me regain my confidence" (Agung Ani, 22 July 2025).

The existence of the dance community was more than just a training space – it became a symbolic arena where participants could restore the meaning of their identities, once burdened by stigma. Within the *sekaa tari*, they were no longer viewed merely as women who had "descended in caste", but as cultural preservers. Dancing together became a collective experience that reshaped their identities – not by erasing the past, but by integrating it into activities that are meaningful and culturally rooted.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of interviews with three participants in the studies yielded consistent themes. Through the formation of these themes, it was discovered that the experiences of the three participants were broadly similar. These similarities are evident in the three main themes generated: navigating social stigma and inner turmoil of "*nyerod*", dancing as ritual, joy, and self-expression, and redefining self in a community of movement.

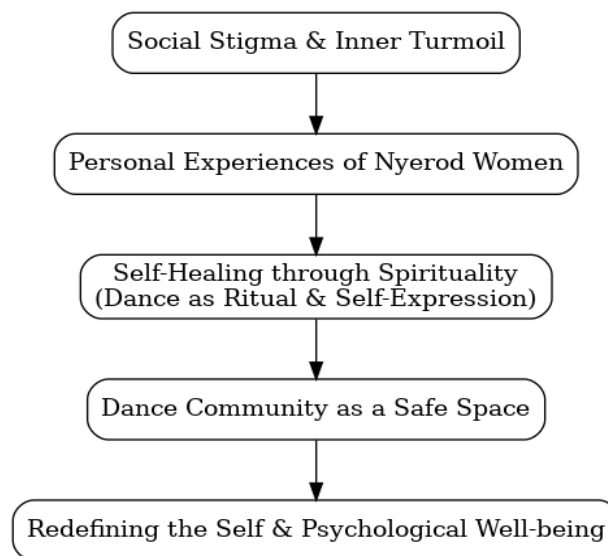


Figure 1. Research Flow

The concepts of status and stigma are intertwined in important cultural traditions, describing related but separate processes. Both involve characteristics or "labels" that distinguish members of social groups, with some categories valued more positively or negatively (Phelan et al., 2015; Reavley & Jorm, 2011). For example, in the Balinese caste system, many participants who participated in "*nyerod*" experienced the loss of their rights as human beings. All participants stated that they were unable to

undergo traditional engagement ceremonies, their parents did not attend their weddings, and they were required to address their biological family members by honorifics such as "*tu*" or "*ratu*", indicating respect for those of higher castes. This differentiation results in unequal outcomes, including differences in influence and self-esteem, social and employment opportunities, access to civil rights, and family.

The above description illustrates that individuals who specifically engage in "*nyerod*" directly reflect a form of status loss and a rigid social hierarchy. The caste system, as pioneered in Jaspal's (2011) research, is maintained through social hierarchy, endogamous qualifications, and the historical division of labor, all of which significantly influence identity processes. Individuals experiencing stigma often experience stress, which ultimately has both social and psychological impacts. This stress results from the demands of conformity, which require individuals to adapt (K. S. Dewi, 2012). Furthermore, experiences of unfair treatment and chronic discrimination are directly linked to lower self-esteem and a significantly higher risk of developing stress-related disorders, including anxiety and depression (Pescosolido, 2015). Therefore, it can be concluded that the stigma experienced by individuals can affect their psychological well-being.

Discussing psychological well-being, this is closely related to Carol Ryff's Model, which offers a eudaimonic perspective on well-being and focuses on positive human functioning rather than simply hedonic happiness (Ryff & Keyes, 1955). In the context of the three participants in this study, it can be explained by the six existing dimensions. For example, in the dimension of self-acceptance, in the context of caste stigma, negative social representations from society can directly lower an individual's self-esteem, often leading to passive acceptance of stigma due to socio-structural constraints. The second context is environmental mastery. Stigma can cause individuals to feel unable to change or improve their surrounding context, which fosters a lack of control over the individual's external world, making all participants reluctant to re-engage with their original environment. In the third context, personal growth in all participants, it is clear that the burden of persistent stigma and discrimination can hinder an individual's openness to new experiences and the realization of their full potential. The focus shifts from growth to survival to seeking a welcoming environment. The fourth context relates to positive relationships with others, where stigma inherently creates social distance, leading to the marginalization of stigmatized individuals. Furthermore, exclusion from communal spaces, as seen in the caste system, severely threatens the basic human need for belonging. Finally, in the context of life purpose and autonomy, participants in this study appeared to experience feelings of sadness, regret, and identity conflict within their families and local communities. Furthermore, stigma is inherently linked to external pressures and societal expectations. Individuals facing stigma may feel forced to conform to social pressures or rely heavily on the judgments of others, rather than internally regulating their behavior or adhering to personal standards.

From the description above, individuals experiencing stigma and psychological distress need space to grow. This space is one that accepts them regardless of caste status. This space is called community. In some cases, communities can take various forms, one of which is a dance community. Self-help groups and community support enable stigmatized individuals to find acceptance and align problematic social identities with valued personal identities, even leading to the creation of new ones (Markowitz, 2016; Petros & Solomon, 2019; Yang et al., 2025). Socially, dance significantly influences cultural identity and community cohesion, which ultimately can promote resilience and social integration within a community (Johnson, 2018; Ramesh, 2023). For example, several studies have found that dance can increase group cohesion, social interaction, and reduce feelings of isolation (Kaul, 2024; Veid et al., 2022). This is what the three participants found, when they were in a dance community, they felt connected to people who shared their interests.

Dance, a fundamental human expression, has long been recognized as a universal phenomenon that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. Dance serves as a physical manifestation of one's cultural knowledge, reflecting how individuals connect with their culture and interact with the surrounding community. This means that dance is not simply a series of movements, but also a non-verbal language that conveys values, beliefs, and cultural identity (Dewi & Wardani, 2023). This is evident in all participants who stated that the dance community (*Sekaa*) serves as a significant space for self-healing and acceptance, especially for individuals facing social stigma. In this community, individuals feel valued and accepted, without being judged based on their background or social status. For example, Balinese women who experienced “*nyerod*” (caste demotion due to marriage) found that within the dance (*Sekaa*), they were seen as whole individuals, dancers, not someone who had abandoned their caste. This environment fostered freedom, where members could laugh, practice, and share stories without the stigma attached.

Further discussing dance as healing, dance has historically developed as a medium for emotional expression and cross-cultural communal bonding (Stevenson, 2019). For example, Dance Movement Therapy (DMT), which developed in the mid-20th century, marked a significant integration of dance with psychological treatment to address various mental health issues (Kaul, 2024; Ryan, 2024). Furthermore, dance can serve to increase embodied self-awareness and creative self-expression, as well as improve overall health and well-being. Dance is also considered an intervention for managing stress, depression, and loneliness (Braun & Kotera, 2025).

Furthermore, dance is a means of self-expression and communication for artists with the public. Freedom to express oneself is crucial in dance performance, as it allows dancers to tap into their creativity, authenticity, and emotional depth. Research shows that dancers who are given the freedom to express themselves tend to perform better and experience higher levels of motivation and satisfaction (Olvhøj et al., 2025; Wahyuni,

2025). Self-expression through dance also contributes to reduced anxiety, increased initiative, and the development of stable self-esteem (Pnivchuk, 2025). The process of dancing is healing and involves cognitive, emotional, and physical processes, which is called embodied healing (Brito et al., 2021; Millman et al., 2021). It is known that when dancing, individuals engage in a process of self-immersion and generate feelings of emotion and pleasure that blend with the dance, this is what is referred to as joy and flow (Anggarani & Kahija, 2016; Carr, 2004).

Participation in dance also allows individuals to freely express their emotions, even when verbal expression is challenging (Narikbayeva et al., 2025). Participants in this study reported experiencing discriminatory treatment from their social environment, including being perceived as having sacrificed their family, causing shame to their parents, and even facing rejection and reprimands from the community. Such discriminatory experiences can generate negative emotions among participants. Engaging in dance can enhance self-regulation abilities, enabling individuals to better control their emotions through movement and expression, which is beneficial when facing challenging situations or intense emotional states (Koch et al., 2019). Stress regulation can be conceptualized as an overarching construct encompassing two key protective mechanisms—coping and resilience—which serve to modulate and attenuate the detrimental effects associated with individuals' responses to stressors (Crum et al., 2020; Maiorano et al., 2020).

Resilience becomes a critical capacity in adapting after experiencing discriminatory situations. It refers to an individual's ability to maintain both physical and mental health in the presence of stress and adversity (Rademacher et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2013). This capacity can be strengthened by enhancing physiological, psychological, and psychosocial resources (Zueger et al., 2023). The concept is rooted in developmental psychology, which frames resilience as comprising two core components: adversity and positive adaptation (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Wright et al., 2012). In the context of discriminatory experiences from both family and parents, before and after marriage, resilience is an essential capability for women who undergo *nyerod* marriage, enabling them to bounce back, adapt, and continue their lives in pursuit of well-being.

Buck and Snook (2020) regard dance as one means of enhancing resilience. Participants described dance as a form of physical activity that alleviates stress, with the accompanying music serving as a source of calm. This is consistent with van den Berg and Cillessen (2015), who argue that participation in physical activities incorporating music and rhythm, such as dance, may contribute to health benefits through various physiological pathways, including those that reduce stress and enhance resilience. Through dancing, participants also expressed joy in being able to gather with their group members, sharing personal concerns, feeling free from social judgment, and experiencing appreciation from the community. This aligns with Wenn et al., (2018)

findings that in dance practice—particularly during group or partner activities—participants engage in interpersonal interactions, conveying emotions through movement and music. Such experiences foster emotional awareness and enhance emotion regulation skills, which in turn positively influence resilience. In addition to these factors, religiosity also plays a significant role in participants' resilience. Risnawati et al., (2020) found a positive relationship between religiosity and resilience. The strong influence of religion and culture evokes a sense of peace in offering dances to God, alleviating the negative emotions participants experienced as a result of *nyerod*. Thus, the combination of enjoyable bodily movement, supportive social interaction, and a strong spiritual dimension forms a crucial foundation for strengthening participants' resilience through active engagement in *sekaa tari*, particularly in coping with challenging or discriminatory experiences associated with *nyerod* marriage.

Balinese culture remains deeply embedded within a caste structure that is inseparable from its patriarchal system. Women are often normatively defined by societal expectations, such as being obedient wives, skilled mothers in raising children, and family members who preserve cultural traditions. However, this study reveals that women who have undergone *nyerod* renegotiate the meaning of happiness through social, spiritual, and cultural experiences that stand in contrast to conventional societal expectations. The three participants in this study described their initial experiences of *nyerod* marriage as laden with psychological pressures, entrenched social stigma, and discrimination from their families of origin. Over time, they were able to rise above these wounds, actively reconstructing the meaning of their identity and happiness—one significant avenue being their participation in dance communities.

These findings reflect Kroger and Marcia (2011) notion of *narrative identity*, which posits that individuals can shape and reinterpret their self-identity through the personal stories they create. In this context, Balinese dance serves as a primary medium for women who have *nyerod* to rearticulated their sense of self. The participants no longer define happiness by social status, caste, or recognition from their families of origin. Instead, happiness is understood as a state in which they can accept themselves, contribute socially, and maintain a spiritual connection. This aligns with Ryff (1955, 2014) theory of *psychological well-being*, particularly the eudaimonic dimension, which encompasses self-acceptance, personal growth, positive relationships with others, and a sense of purpose in life.

The participants' space for recovery lies in the dance community, which integrates their emotions, cognition, bodies, and spirituality. Previous studies have shown that expressive arts such as dance can reduce symptoms of stress and trauma (Kerkou et al., 2017; Koch et al., 2019), while also enhancing social cohesion and self-esteem (Cohen & Aisenberg-Shafran, 2025; Veid et al., 2022). In the Balinese customary context, dance is not solely an aesthetic activity but is also regarded as a medium for *ngayah*—a form of collective service with profound spiritual value. Within this study, despite facing social

stigma, the participants negotiated their social position within customary communities and created new meanings of self—not as victims of traditional cultural systems but as active agents in reshaping their roles.

The redefinition of self experienced by the participants was not solely a process of healing psychological wounds resulting from social stigma; through the dance community, they also redefined their social identity. As expressed in interview excerpts, the participants felt valued for their dancing skills and the dedication they invested in performance, rather than for their caste background. This demonstrates that women possess agency that enables them to navigate restrictive social structures and to reconstruct the meaning of happiness in contextually relevant ways. These findings align with Yuniardi (2017) social constructivist perspective, which emphasizes that culture is not rigid but can be reinterpreted by the individuals who live within it.

Based on these insights, this study demonstrates that Balinese women who undergo *nyerod* perceive happiness not as something bestowed by a patriarchal social system, but as a condition shaped through symbolic resistance, cultural expression, and the negotiation of self-identity—both personal and collective. Dance emerges as a space of emancipation, where the act of moving the body in harmony with the rhythms of the gamelan becomes a claim to dignity, life meaning, and an authentic sense of happiness.

CONCLUSION

Dancing Between Castes is not merely a metaphor, but a lived reality that reflects how Balinese women undergoing *nyerod* marriages navigate their identities while enduring the pain of discriminatory treatment from both family and community, rooted in the negative perceptions toward this marital tradition. For these women, dance is not only a religious obligation performed in temples, but through movement, music, dance groups, and performances also serves as a means to promote health, foster resilience, and cultivate joy in the pursuit of meaning in life and the attainment of psychological well-being.

The joy found in dance is not simply an escape from hardship, but an act of resistance and self-healing for Balinese women who experience caste degradation due to marriage. In the dance community, they find a safe space to rebuild their identities, are valued for their skills and dedication, and experience joy and inner peace through self-expression and a spiritual connection with God.

This study highlights that Balinese culture, while rooted in a complex caste and patriarchal structure, also offers pathways for healing and self-redefinition through dance—provided that women are given the space to participate freely. Within the context of traditional performance and community involvement, dance transcends being an artistic expression; it serves as a medium of spiritual connection, social integration, and personal empowerment. When such spaces are accessible, women are able to

navigate stigma, reclaim agency, and construct authentic well-being within the very cultural framework that once constrained them.

Implications

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be applied by various stakeholders across different contexts. For women undergoing *nyerod* marriages, it is recommended to utilize spaces for self-expression, such as participation in dance groups (*sekaa tari*), as a means to reconstruct personal identity, gain social support, improve physical health, and enhance psychological well-being. Additionally, building solidarity with other women who share similar experiences is an important step toward mutual support, exchanging strategies for coping with stigma, and creating positive narratives about women's identity and roles within Balinese culture.

For communities and policymakers, it is crucial to provide safe and inclusive spaces that enable the active participation of women in social and cultural activities as a means of self-healing, strengthening resilience, and fostering positive identity development. Existing dance groups should be sustained and strengthened through social support, recognition of skills, and acknowledgment of women's contributions regardless of caste background.

In the research field, further studies are recommended to explore the role of other forms of traditional performing arts in healing processes, identity formation, and women's empowerment within complex social structures, as well as to examine other psychological dimensions closely related to culture and the social realities of the community.

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