

How various 'cultures of dance'
construct experiences of health
and growing older

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Research Aims

- Comparative ethnographic study of different dance events attended by 50+.
- Look at the processes whereby specific ‘cultures of dance’ become embodied in the older person.
- Evaluate health problems and health benefits provided by dance using participant observation, ethnographic interviews and narrative interviews.
- Complement existing initiatives on dance as a community empowerment activity.

Literature Review

- Ageing body has been neglected by critical health psychology (Grogan, 2006).
- Wainwright and Turner's (2006) study of Royal Ballet dancers and injuries/effects of ageing.
- Sociological survey of ballroom and modern sequence dance (Cooper and Thomas, 2002).
- Dance movement therapy constructs ageing as a pathological process (Bunce, 2006).
- Importance of embodied perspective for writing about cultures of dance (Ness, 2004).

Methodological Issues

- Existing qualitative and quantitative studies focus on body talk rather than body materiality (Paulson, 2005a; 2005b; Paulson, in press; Paulson and Willig, in press).
- Post post-modern ethnography as mid-line position on relativism-realism debate (Collier, 1998; Brewer, 2000).
- Overt ethnography for ethical reasons. Permission to conduct the research negotiated via dance teachers and City University ethics committee.

Findings on Dance for Older People

- Significance of cultural and historical factors in motivating older people to dance in their retirement, such as having danced as a child.
- Learning to dance concerns separation of mind and body, such as when the teachers use metaphors to describe body movements in words.
- Learning to dance concerns lived embodiment, such as when class members “just dance”.
- Importance of modifying dance movements for the ageing body and the problems of injuries.

Findings on Dance for Older People

- Health benefits of dancing for the ageing body in terms of keeping physically fit.
- Dancers can have a body of any shape or size.
- Dance as facilitating emotional expression and mental health, especially in terms of well-being.
- Rich cultural and social identities offered by belonging to dance groups eg special clothes.
- Stories of older people dancing as time-out from difficult lives, even dancing in the face of death.
- Reasons why older people leave dance groups.

Features of Circle Dancing

- Focuses on a sense of community as all dances are performed in a circle.
- Uses a multicultural perspective as the dances originate from many different countries.
- Popular with older women of 60+ as there is no need for a male partner.
- Teacher preaches a philosophy of the healing power of dance, modifying movements to suit arthritic knees and arms and encouraging the class to visualize members who are sick dancing amongst them.

Circle Dance

“ The 60 year old teacher told me

‘Circle dancing is about mind, body and spirit. It is important for healing and uplifts you if you have suffered illness. One older man has recently suffered a stroke but he has the motivation to recover due to the healing power of dance.’

She asked the class to visualize those who were sick as they performed the last two dances of the session, Ever-dance and Donna Nobis. The raising of the hands in the air conveyed a sense of looking up to heaven.”

Circle Dance

“ ‘Now I don’t let my memory worry me. I just go with the flow. Every dance is like a new dance to me, whether we have done it before, a week ago or a year ago. I just have to re-learn the steps every single time.’ said a lady in her 70s, broadening her wrinkled face into a laugh. She is my partner in one of the jazz dances which is performed in an inner circle and an outer circle, and she laughs and smiles as we dance together, as if we are long lost friends.”

Scottish Dancing

- Focuses on a sense of community as dances are performed in circles or sets and dancing partners are continually exchanged.
- Popular with a range of ages, though most members are 50+.
- Teacher challenges class members to perfect balletic steps and dance in complex patterns.
- Informal conversations focus on health benefits of the fit active body, difficulties of getting brain and body to work together and problems of arthritic hips and knees.

Scottish Dance

“ The 30 year old teacher demonstrated the balletic steps to the class. There were seven ladies over the age of 60 and one man in his 70s. The teacher said ‘ Ladies’ Step dancing was a way of showing off your figure, dress and grace and originated in 17th century France. Balance can be difficult if you are older but balance is something which can be achieved with practice. I find my own balance deteriorates if I do not practice.’ “

Scottish Dance

“Memory is the main problem if you are older. As you age, it is difficult to learn and remember the patterns of dances. It’s hard to get the brain to co-ordinate the body. It would be a good idea to chalk the patterns of the dances on the floor. As you age, if you don’t use it, you lose it.”

(lady in her 60s from the beginners’ class).

Conclusion

- Ethnography offers an in-depth approach to explore the meaning of ‘lived embodiment’ through body talk and body materiality.
- Various ‘cultures of dance’ construct the health of the ageing body in distinctively different ways eg Circle dancing and Scottish dancing.
- Dance events are important for constructing a positive image of the ageing body in terms of physical and mental health.