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Dancing while Aging

A Study on Benefits of Ballet for Older Women

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Abstract

As people age, experiences of depression, loneliness and loss of physical capabilities can emerge. As with previous work on the benefits of music as an intervention for social belonging and valued social identity, dance may increase similar feelings. Although theoretical chapters have been written on dance as it relates to social identity, belonging, and health, little empirical work has been conducted on the benefits of ballet as a recreational activity for older adults. The study reported here is framed by the “communication ecology model of successful aging,” and modestly embellishes this framework based on this study’s findings. Using interviews from 24 American female recreational ballet dancers ranging in age from 23-87 in a small West Coast town, this study investigates, for the first time, how ballet is incorporated into their self-concept and physical, mental, and social experiences of aging. Findings indicate that participating regularly in ballet is a core aspect of most women’s self-concept and means of self-expression. All women discussed how ballet has improved their physical and mental wellness, helping them have a more positive experience of age-related changes. Results showed that most women regard ballet as a very social activity, such that it helps them to feel a sense of community or even kin-like relationships with the other people regularly in class. All women interviewed mentioned that ballet is so integrated into who they are that it is something they hope to do for as long as possible.

Keywords: aging; Ballet; communication ecology model of successful aging; identity; social relationships

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As people age, especially in retirement and assisted living communities, loneliness and depression are increasing health concerns (Gonyea *et al.* 2018; Theurer *et al.* 2015). However, there is strong evidence that recreational activities (e.g., and particularly sporting ones) enhance physical, social, and psychological well-being (Human Kinetics 2010; Leitner and Leitner 2012; Onishi *et al.* 2006; Tinsley and Eldredge 1995). Focusing particularly on older adults, many studies have pointed out that leisurely pursuits (e.g., lifelong learning and volunteering) have such benefits, including anxiety and stress reduction, emotional growth, and enjoyment (Chang, Wray, and Yegiang 2014; Gasoitek and Giles 2013; Glendenning 2004). Cultural involvements and interests, like music, theater- and art gallery visits are also engaging resources that promote positive affective and outcomes among older people (Age UK 2018; Goodman, Geiger, and Wolf 2017; Hays and Minichiello 2005; Jacobs 2014; Murray and Crummett 2010; Pyman and Rugg 2006). For example, an intervention study in care homes found that encouraging music-making among residents contributed to increased feelings of social productivity and positive social identities (Theurer *et al.* 2015). Among activities like these, *dance* has received only a modest amount of work as it relates to aging populations (Cooper and Thomas 2002; Eyigor *et al.* 2009; Keogh *et al.* 2009).

Dance and Ballet

Dance has been a major focus in much anthropological research (Kaeppler 2000; Kringelbach and Skinner 2012; Taylor 1998; Ness 2008; Reed 1998; Sweet 2016, Marion 2008). Historically, anthropological choreology (i.e., ethnochoreology) research considers the dance—particularly folk dance—to be like a dynamic yet coherent text that can be catalogued for the sake of preservation of the body of movements. However, this cataloguing is not a static representation of the dance, rather, it positions the dance in contexts and considers its cultural history within a community. This approach values how the dance holds, creates and shapes meaning and culture (Blacking 1984). For example, some ethnochoreology research, in addition to more contemporary forms of dance (for a review of contemporary ethnochoreology research in Serbia, see Rakoeviae 2015) has considered the purpose of traditional or tribal dances particularly in a variety of ways. Dancing has been a form of prayer to cure a person's illness (Fergusson 1931), rituals to help a community member grow taller (Royce 1977), encouraging good harvests (Delgado 2012), and as an attempt to show strength and prowess before battle like in the Maori "Hakka" (List 1963).

In parallel, dance ethnology focuses on social relationships and characteristics, such as gender, age, the body, and identity of the people dancing (Kaeppler 2000). This affords an understanding of dancers and their means of expression, functioning within the socio-cultural community. Due to the complexity of dance, it is important not only to focus on its artistic dimensions, but also its social ones (Giurchesu, Anca, and Torp 1991). There has been little research to date on the social benefits of dance and, in general, has not focused on ballet (e.g., the social benefits of dance for people with Parkinson's; McGill, Houston, and Lee

2014). Most research regarding social benefits of dance has examined adolescent populations and education. Research by Kreutzmann, Zander, and Webstert (2018) found that for adolescents with little to no training, dancing a choreographed form together can increase feelings of belonging and actual social ties to other adolescents. Similarly, other research has advocated for the inclusion of dance in K-12 education for its benefits for learning, problem solving, synthesizing information, and reinforcing non-dance knowledge (Hanna 2008). Although dance styles, meanings, and levels of formality vary widely, Blacking (2010) argues that “the universality and survival of “dance” (89) suggest that it cannot be abandoned without danger to the human species.” Dance is a special kind of social activity and, as such, the actors of this activity are of special interest. Therefore, he argues, we should be asking the question “*who dances?*”

Answering this question in terms of professional ballet dancers, ballerinas are encouraged to begin training as early as possible, and careers end early as well.¹ According to a popular dance magazine, *Dancespirit*, ballet dancers are often expected to be career-ready by as early as 16 years old. Furthermore, most dance studios allow girls to begin taking ballet as early as three years old in the United States. In fact, female ballet dancers who start in their teens who achieve professional careers are an anomaly (Dancespirit 2012). The average age of retirement for a professional ballerina is 35. Rarely, some dancers continue into their early forties (Dance.net 2009). Although the women in this study may seem young for an aging focus, the vast majority of participants are well over the average retirement age of a professional ballet dancer. With these ages in mind, even recreational ballet dance for older people, which is the focus of the current study, has received negligible attention. This lacuna exists, in part, because younger people are surprised to learn that dancing can be a lifelong commitment—even for older women.

Ballet, as an anthropological area of inquiry, has received attention. Some researchers have argued that ballet is a universal movement language. This can be reflected in its inclusion as an academic form of study in academies across the world (Kaeppler 2000). Although ballet research has distinguished between dancing it and being a spectator of ballet, the focus has mainly been on performance. That said, Wulf (1988) conducted an ethnography of dancers at the Paris Opera Ballet and described dancers’ backstage experiences. Among other foci, she directed attention to professional ballet dancers’ experience of aging as primarily a negative experience, particularly with respect to how dancers avoid aging as much as possible to preserve their careers. The contrast between professional ballet dancers’ aging experience as negative, and the known benefits of cultural recreational activities such as dance as positive, encourages inquiry into older ballet dancers who are recreational participants.

Recreational Ballet and Successful Aging

Clearly, the advantages and values of cultural activities such as dance can be enabling factors in successful aging. Definitional debates asides (e.g., Cosco *et al.* 2014), successful aging and allied processes have inspired the work of social scientists across several disciplines (e.g., Pruchno, Wilson-Genderson, and Cartwright 2010; Heckhausen and Schulz 1995, including anthropology (e.g., Fujiawar 2012; Lamb 2014; Lewis 2013; Vitols and Lynch 2015). Recently, the case has been made that older people’s social relationships, specifically how older people communicate, are communicated to and about, have important implications for successful aging (Giles *et al.* 2013) and across the lifespan (e.g., Bernhold, 2019; Gasiorek and Fowler 2016). Herein, we invoke the “communication ecology model of successful aging” (CEMSA, e.g., Fowler, Gasiorek, and Giles 2015; Gasiorek, Fowler, and Giles 2018) as a framework for our study as dance can be considered vital expressions of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup *communication* (see Gasiorek, Fowler, and Giles 2018).

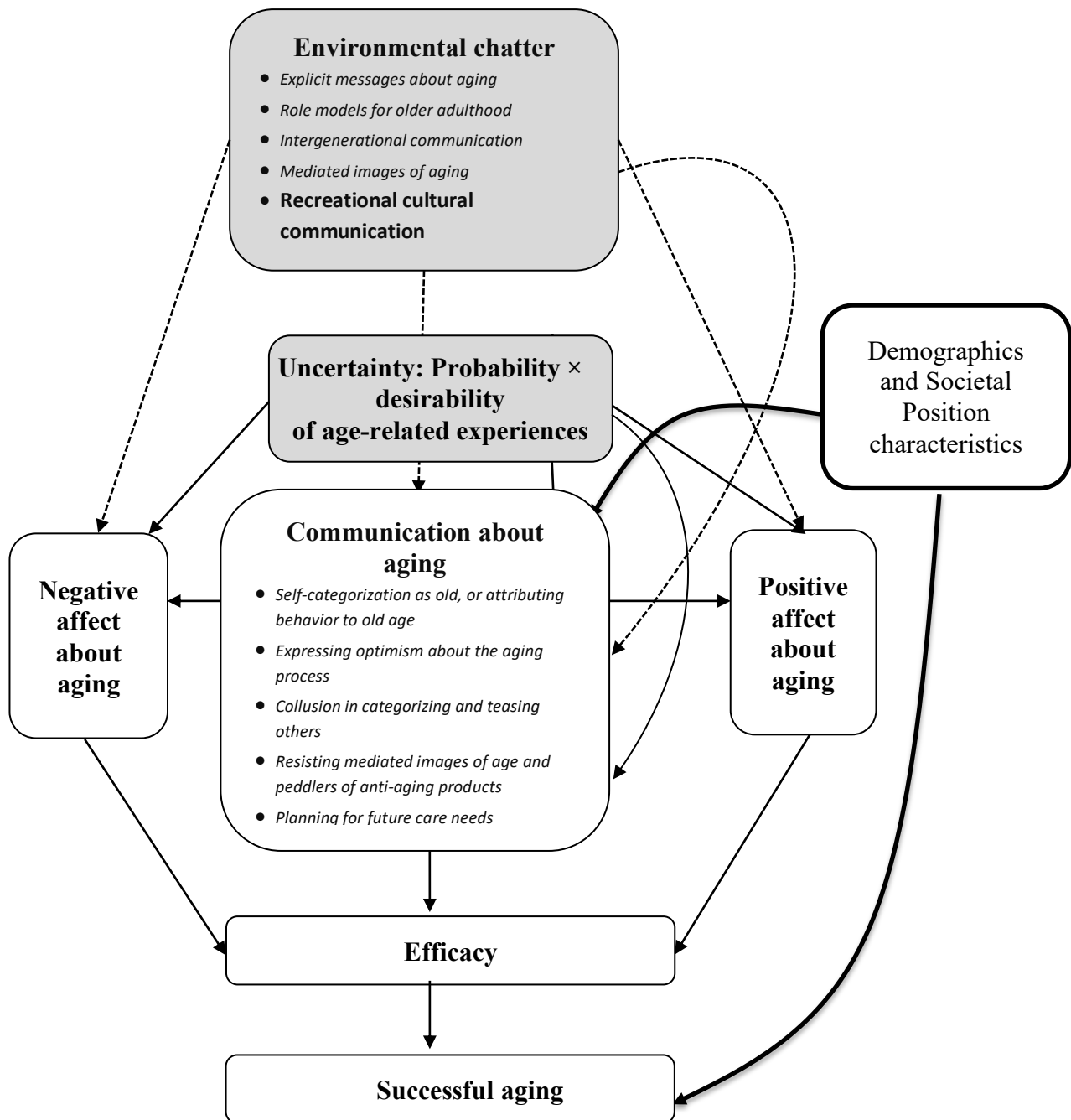


Figure 1. The revised communicative ecology model of successful aging (after Gasiorek *et al.* 2016), with shaded boxes and dashed lines representing revised elements of this model over the original. Based on the current study, we inserted a fourth and non-italicized bolded component to the Environmental Chatter box above.

The essence of CEMSA is that communication practices (see practices listed in the “communication about aging” component of Figure 1) reduce anxieties about the aging process in that they bolster favorable and diminish negative affective views about it, thereby increasing our perceived efficacy to manage aging successfully. A revised CEMSA model (see Gasiorek, Fowler, and Giles 2016) includes facets of so-called “environmental chatter” that refer to how the language and communication people observe from a variety of sources (e.g., role models for how to age well) may also be influential in directly and indirectly predicting people’s aging efficacy. We contend that cultural involvements, such as taking recreational ballet and other forms of dance, are an additional and potent element of “environmental chatter” that can facilitate social relationships and our efficacy in dealing with the uncertainties attending the aging process. The majority of research invoking CEMSA has had participants who are white and middle to high SES. The current study has similar demographics, and as such is appropriate for study through this model. However, in light of the lack of research on ballet, social benefits, and successful aging, our study is aimed at understanding how does ballet influence or factor into the experience of adult ballet dancers’ changing identity as they age? How has and does ballet frame ways that these women experience a changing physical body? In terms of social identity, how has and does ballet influence women’s social relationships?

Research Methods and Data Analysis

This study was conducted in a small, affluent coastal town in central California. The local context is one that highly values the performing arts, and has many shows and donors who support bringing professional artists into the community. Most participants (n = 21) are regulars at a local professional ballet company’s associated school. Another set of participants were recruited from another local dance studio location (n = 4). It is common for dancers to take dance classes at more than one studio. Most women had taken at least one class at both studios at one point in their time living in the town. Participants regularly take intermediate/advanced level ballet classes, with modifications when necessary to suit their physical abilities. Such classes assume that dancers have knowledge of a full repertoire of ballet movements typically included in a ballet class. There is no time spent in these classes explaining how an element is executed, but instead, combinations of dance elements are taught. The instructor teaches the combination of movements quickly, which tend to be novel each class. The dancers then put the movements to music that is chosen by the instructor, requiring the dancers to have musicality.

A typical ballet class for participants in this study costs \$20, and is 90 minutes. The first half of the class is spent doing a typical sequence of movements with a small break to learn the next exercise between movements (e.g., pliés (bending knees with feet flat on the floor), battement tendus (brushing and pointing of feet on the floor), battement glissés, ronds de jambes, fondus, frappés, petits battements, développés, ronds de jambes en l’air, grands battements, and stretching). This is completed holding onto the barre with one hand. Next, dancers come to the center of the room to complete another series of movements often including tendu, adagio and turn combinations as well as some jump combinations. Several movements are also completed going across the floor often including a turn combination and completing the class with a grande allegro combination (a series of large jumps travelling across the floor). Ballet classes commonly end with a reverence (a bow/curtsy) to thank the teacher. Although most of the dancers in this study have performed ballet in the past, the classes that participants take do not include any type of public performance. Although no participants perform ballet publicly anymore, several of the younger participants do perform publicly in other forms of dance. Those experiences go beyond the scope of this study.

A total of 25 participants completed a semi-structured interview with Pines who takes ballet classes regularly with most participants, and has prior experience as a professional ballerina.² At the end of ballet

class at the two studios, Pines announced that she would like to conduct interviews with interested participants in the class. Dancers in these two locations volunteered to be interviewed by notifying her of their interest, often very enthusiastically, to complete the interview. Participants also happily agreed to having their name, age and photos represented in the research.³

This study included 24 completed interviews with adult female ballet dancers (median age = 50 years; age range = 23-87). Seven respondents were under forty years of age and this wide range in ages provides perspective of experiences of ballet from young adulthood to much later in life. The most common experience with ballet was that women started as children, took a break from ballet, and returned as adults with a combined experience of over 40 years of taking ballet classes (n = 17). Of these women, eight of them had careers as professional or semi-professional ballerinas either belonging to ballet companies full time for one to ten years, or performed in paid projects. Another group of women began ballet as adults (older than age 25) and had between four and 15 years of experience (n = 7). Although the women who had professional careers reported stronger ties between ballet and their self-concept, no differences were found in terms of social or physical experiences. In terms of marital status, 12 women were married, nine women were single or in a dating relationship, three women were divorced, and one woman did not reveal her marital status. Sixteen of the participants were mothers. The women were well-educated; most of them completed a bachelor's degree, with two participants holding doctorates. Generally, the women were middle to upper-middle class. All participants regularly take ballet classes ranging in frequency from approximately one to six times a week, with the majority reporting taking classes twice a week

After approval from the University of California at Santa Barbara Institutional Review Board, interviews were conducted over a three-month period between February 2017 and May 2017. Most interviews were conducted at a local coffee shop, seated at a table, and at a suitable time for the interviewee. A small number of interviews were conducted either at the ballet studio before or after the class, or in the participant's home. One interview was completed by phone. Interviews were semi-structured, ranged in duration from 21 minutes to 53 minutes, and were digitally recorded. Each interview began with the question: "Can you tell me about why you started taking ballet classes?" This question allowed participants to reflect on their involvement and experience of ballet from the beginning. Other questions included: "How has ballet changed your social relationships?" "How has doing ballet been a part of experiencing a body that is aging?" and "Would you say that ballet is part of your identity? If so, how?" Each question was followed by probing questions for clarity and completeness of information.

Interviews were transcribed by two undergraduate research assistants (RAs), guided by notations from Jefferson (2004), and checked for accuracy by a third undergraduate RA. Based on Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis was used to generate themes inductively from the interview transcripts. Pines began by listening to all interviews and identifying references to how ballet shaped participants' identities and generated broad themes relating to aging, particularly aging successfully. The same process was used for all references to ballet as associated with the women's relationships to friends, family members, and other dancers. Using these themes, the two RAs coded interview transcripts line by line and this process resulted in the identification and refinement of broad themes and sub-themes. The RAs and Pines met weekly to reconcile differences and questions, and the RAs refined, added or collapsed themes where necessary until sufficient agreement was reached for all interviews. We then returned to the interviews to identify exemplars of the themes.

Findings

Participants could easily recall their personal experiences and trajectories with ballet that had implications for who they are and for their relationships. Most participants described ballet as a core aspect of not only who they are today, but in shaping their self-identities. Results demonstrate themes describing how ballet has shaped and is part of the dancer's changing identity. Analysis of the data also indicated ways ballet influenced their social relationships which have implications for successful aging. Finally, dancers discussed how they hoped and planned for ballet to be part of their life as they age.

Ballet as Part of a Changing Social and Physical Identity

When discussing ballet as part of their self-concept, all women mentioned that it played a role (see Wylie 1974 for a full description of self-concept theory). The first theme, *Shaping and showing the self*, considers how ballet shaped and shapes their identity, and is self-expression. Theme 2: *Ballet as purpose*, describes how ballet has been a piece in shaping the purpose of their life in the past and in the present. Theme 3: *Ballet and the social self*, depicts through three sub-themes how ballet factored into the social and romantic relationships the women held through ballet as they aged, many of which contributed to positive aging through identity affirmation and role models. Theme 4: *Ballet and the physical self*, shows how ballet has helped the women experience more positive mental, physical and sexual wellbeing as they age.

Shaping and Showing the Self

In response to how, if at all, ballet was part of their identities, participants explained how ballet acts both as a fundamental shaping experience for these women to varying degrees, and as a key way they express themselves to others. None of the participants said that it did not influence their identity at all. In general, the older the woman was, the more strongly she explained ballet as part of her identity. For example, Emily (36), one of the younger women, first responded that ballet was not part of her identity even though she enjoys it very much. She then went on to qualify her answer to include, "if someone said I couldn't do that anymore, I'd be very sad. So, maybe yes." By contrast, Shawna (53) explained that ballet was so central to her self-concept that it was "in the blood." Respondents similar in age or older echoed these sentiments. Lisa L. (51) described the centrality of ballet for her life as "a matter of survival for me. The passion is just too deep. It's too integral to who I am... it's a full thing. I can't separate out myself from all of that." Caitlin (58) said, "I feel like at some core it is who I am." Similarly, Sandra (61) says that "it feels like a full integration of who I am as a person... It really taps into every element of who I am as a person."

With ballet being so closely tied to most of their self-concepts, participants also stated that ballet was a fundamental form of self-expression. Regardless of age, participants described ballet as a way that the inner emotion goes outward. Allison (50) describes the self-expression aspect of ballet as "a form of communication it starts with being an inner-part of your inner voice and so that it really gets, it gets deep inside you in terms of being able to express feelings and emotions in that way, and then the movement of the dance is very external and very much projecting towards an audience so it naturally communicates that inner voice." Similarly, Jaime (61) said that doing ballet is like "maybe opening up and inviting you know... well, like, you're inward and then you kind of be outward." Other participants said that ballet is "like a spoken language, it is a language" (Carrie, 58), mentioning that is an entire language form, not insofar as it being in French, but that different movements hold entire meanings for them and for choreographers. Not only did participants describe ballet as a form of self-expression, but participants also described how ballet held purpose for them.

Ballet as Purpose

Participants described how ballet was on a continuum from being a career purpose for them to being a meaningful activity that they enjoy regularly. Ten of the 24 participants had some level of ballet being part of their profession, such as teaching or performing it. For example, Allison describes her experience of dancing with Ballet Arizona and then transitioning into starting her own ballet studio after retiring as a professional ballet dancer, that she “wanted to be a professional dancer...it has become my profession.” Because this has been her path, she said that “almost everything I do is, revolves around dance so I think it kind of shapes my whole life.” In this regard, ballet has always been her profession and integral to her purpose. The women who reported ballet as being part of their career at some stage tended to report ballet as more shaping of their life compared to others.

On the other end of the ballet as purpose spectrum, Ida (77), who never danced professionally and began ballet as an adult (age 26), said that she has always loved ballet. She said that she loves it so much that the first thing she would do when moving would be to find a studio to take class at: “Once we moved around the country I was in Missouri and I always, it was my first thing I would was to go find a class. And well uh yeah I just kept that up.” The purpose of finding a class was because “it was so pleasurable.”

At times, ballet shifted between these two purposes as the women aged. Although it may have started as a professional career or attempt at such goal, it had now transitioned into a valued enjoyable activity age they aged. For example, Shawna said, “I decided early on that I was going to be a professional dancer, I was going to make a go of it.” Shawna danced in several ballet companies for a number of years after high school until she decided to go back to college. Ballet slowly transitioned from being a full-time purpose to a secondary purpose for Shawna as she performed a few more times with her university’s “dance repertoire group.” She then “took a little time off” to have children and transitioned back into dance as a social activity that remains purposeful, but in a different way than before. The sense of purpose offered by ballet as a career or meaningful activity is closely tied to the social benefits gained by these women for doing ballet.

Ballet and the Social Self

Although a small minority of the women (n = 3) mentioned they do not see ballet as influencing their social relationships, saying they do not really spend time with anyone they have met at ballet, most women regarded ballet as a major aspect of their social life. Many women, especially those older than age 45, have “become good friends with a lot of the people in the class... I’ve gotten to know them pretty well” (Jaime). Three themes showed how ballet was a core element that shaped their social relationships. Participants described *dancer versus non-dancer friends*, *intergenerational social relationships*, and *ballet in their romantic relationships*.

Dancer versus Non-Dancer Friends

Respondents, regardless of age, described a level of closeness or qualitative differences between non-dancer friends and dancer friends. Kaita (32) described this as “in some ways it has bifurcated our social lives where we have, like, our non-dance friends together and then I have my dancer friends separately.” With “dancer friends,” participants noted that they can share common social activities like “go out and enjoy, you know, enjoy shows.” (Chris, 49). Shawna described the qualitative difference between those “two worlds” as her dance friends being “like your support group. It’s like a family, where outside of ballet it’s more, like - friends.” For example, Lisa L. said “there’s the social interaction at the studio,

which feels like, pretty much home.” This may range from a sense of deep understanding or trust to what Holly (60) exemplifies in the following response:

I always felt a real kinship with dancers even though I might not be close to them. I feel like we share this gene, that’s a little bit weird and um, I can-I take ballet class wherever I go and I try you know. I took a class in France - I mean in Paris - when I was there a couple summers ago and you know it’s like the Catholic church or AA, it’s like the barre is there and you just go for it. So yeah, I’ve just always felt this weird connection that - because it is a weird kind of calling.

Not only did Holly feel that she shares relationships with people at her home studio, she also felt some sense of *family* with dancers across the world who she did not know interpersonally. Although many participants highlighted similarities they share with fellow dancer friends, many also mentioned the unique qualities of some of the *intergenerational* friendships they had made, as below (for a discussion of intergroup friendships, see Davies *et al.* 2011; Munniksma *et al.* 2013).

Intergenerational Social Relationships

Participants highlighted unique intergenerational relationships they have formed, because they share the common social identity of being a ballet dancers. Kristal (34), one of the younger women, said, “It doesn’t matter that that person is 50 and I’m 34. Like, we share this and so we can talk, we can laugh, and we can go out and have dinner, and we can hang out and yeah, otherwise I probably wouldn’t get to know those people.” For these women, ballet was a way to not only make friends, but to experience deep kin-like relationships. For these women, ballet fostered the forming of intergenerational friendships. Familial relationships are another way that ballet had implication for these women’s intergenerational relationships.

Ballet in Romantic Relationships

A subset of the women discussed how ballet was a part of their romantic relationships that was identity affirming. Taylor (54) mentioned how in a dating relationship, one of the things she liked about her partner was his support for her ballet involvement. She recalled fondly that he once told her, “I think it’s really awesome that you love it [ballet] so much and that you continue to do it.” Taylor valued that her romantic partner affirmed such an important part of herself. Barbara’s (65) husband encouraged her to go to class: “he drives me up here and drives me back and, umm, because he knows how much it means to me.” This helped Barbara feel understood and cared for by her partner as she aged.

However, not all participants recalled positivity and supportiveness from their romantic partners. Lisa L. explained how her ex-husband “completely diminished what [ballet] was for me and the role it played in my life, and what I wanted to do with it, and what I had already done with it.” When women described experiences like this, they described a sense of identity disconfirmation from their partner that was a highly negative experience that left them feeling misunderstood. This demonstrates how deeply-held, at the core, ballet is for many of the participants. This deeply-held sense of ballet influences these women’s physical and mental wellbeing.

Ballet and the Physical Self

Participants noted how ballet helped their overall wellness on three dimensions, mental health, physical health, and sexual wellbeing. Many participants described taking ballet as an activity that helps

them to keep positive mental health. Crystal (23), the youngest respondent, said, "I enjoy doing it for the physical aspect and also, just like mentally. Like, I can definitely tell when I haven't taken for like a couple weeks... I'm way more anxious, I'm way more stressed out, like I'm just not a happy camper and it's just like cathartic to like take it and everything." Holly echoed this sentiment when she told a story about how when she was younger and raising her daughter, she kept ballet as a special and necessary time for her mental health. She told her daughter "this was for my mental health... you know this is for my sanity. And that was one boundary I drew with her." This boundary meant that even though her daughter may have wanted to spend time doing something else, Holly made sure to go to ballet. In general, younger women mentioned ballet helping with their mental health in terms of managing anxiety and mood. Older women explained how the "aspirational component" of ballet kept them challenged and forward thinking mentally. Sandra said, "I've never felt like, okay I'm never going to get any better so I should quit. I always felt like there was a chance to move and do something better...maybe this tonight or tomorrow I can do a pirouette that I hadn't done in a while or it's going to hit or my extension is going to be better."

Along with maintaining positive mental health, the women explained how ballet helped them maintain a positive experience physically of a body that was changing and aging. Most participants, regardless of age, said that ballet is "a great way to get exercise" (Lisa P., 49). What's more, Ida once told one of her ballet teachers, "I felt ballet was the corner stone of my health. That I've been as healthy as I am because of ballet because it keeps you moving, it keeps your joints going...you know my energy level has actually sustained.. its sustained itself and I think it's through ballet that its done that... I think it adds more than 10 years to your life and to your health" Many dancers also explain how over time, their ballet ability has decreased and that "you just modify" (Jocelyn, 39). Even as a younger woman compared to others in the study, Jocelyn already has begun experiencing changing abilities in the ballet studio. At times, as this modification increased due to physical capabilities changing, the women explained how this could get them a bit discouraged. Caitlin, who quit professional ballet at age 26 and started up again at age 41, describes her experience of an aging body in the following way:

Because, you know, I have an older body and there are limitations. You know, I can work on my flexibility but I'll never be as flexible as I was when I was 18. I can work on my strength but it's a constant battle because as you're getting older your body is automatically getting less strong. So just maintaining is hard so getting ahead of maintaining is even harder. But when I feel like old and I can't do anything and what am I doing here, I look at Marge!

For Caitlin, Marge served as a positive role model and inspiration.

Some dancers, viewed the physical experience of taking ballet as inspiring self-awareness in a way that was more than a means of exercise. For Danielle (49) and others, ballet helped her have "a sense of their bodies in space" and gain benefits like strength and flexibility. Barbara recalled that after multiple injuries, surgeries and even a battle with cancer: "I've always come back to ballet to help me get over it." Some of the women even said that ballet was an influential physical experience during their pregnancy(ies). Although some women mentioned how it was a positive way for them to return to physical activity post-partum. Joanne,³ who was more than 30 weeks pregnant when she was interviewed, mentioned "becoming pregnant because I was, like, am I still going to be able to dance and that was my whole fears, like, will I be able to dance." Clearly, despite her excitement about her pregnancy, dance was so central for Joanne that she was conflicted.

One special case of physical experience mentioned by many participants is ballet aiding in maintaining a more positive sense of sexuality into older adulthood (for a discussion of sexuality across

the lifespan, see Danulik 2003; Nussbaum, Miller-Day, and Fisher 2009).⁴ Participants described how ballet improved their physical fitness and that “it gives you more confidence” (Jaime) as a positive influence in their sexuality as they age. For example, Taylor said that ballet had “definitely improved it both from a physical standpoint because if you look beautiful, you feel beautiful, and so you portray that to your partner. Umm, my partner happens to think it’s really awesome.” Amidst the many ways that ballet has shaped and is shaping these women’s lives, they all see ballet in their futures.

Dancing into the Future

All women, with varying levels of passion, stated how they hoped to continue dancing for as long as possible. Lauren (27), a young woman who was newer to learning ballet said that “I definitely would like to continue taking ballet class. As much as I can.” More strongly demonstrating her commitment to continuing, Caitlin pointed out that, “I would try to avoid a change in my life that would keep me from dancing at this point. Like moving somewhere where there were no dance classes, that sort of thing.”

For the women from the studio where most participants were recruited, participants cited one woman as their inspiration (as Caitlin did above). Marge was the oldest participant at 87 years of age. She takes ballet approximately once a week, can still do the splits, and works as a seamstress for the associated professional ballet company. Marge’s daughter is also now a professional choreographer, and she told stories of ways they share in that passion together. Marge said, “I’ll take classes as long as I can... I thought just getting to 85 would be fine, but I’m 87 now, so I don’t know. If I have regular classes and everything in my life goes well.” Kristal, a younger woman in the study, said of feeling inspired by Marge and others older than her: “I don’t feel like I could stop dancing... I’ve seen people in class like Marge and Caitlin...and Allison who have been dancing and they’re still dancing and they maintain a youth and vitality about the that’s not just oh yeah they can still move but like they’re young, they’re fun, they’re energetic because they are maintaining a physical sense and capability and I don’t want to stop dancing.”

Theoretical and Practical Implications of Ballet Participation

Findings suggest that for these women who are generally well-educated, affluent and white, recreational ballet as an element of “environmental chatter” in CEMSA encouraged positive aging; see Figure 1 where this (more generic) element is inserted into the model. Ballet, and perhaps dance in other genres and across various cultural activities, *is* communication - and not merely a context where expressive communication happens (Gasiorek, Fowler, and Giles 2018). The acts of observing oneself dancing - and dancing with others together - are intra- and interpersonal (and, maybe, intergroup) *communicative* elements of environmental chatter. Relatedly, recreational ballet provided positive role models for these women. For instance, Marge was cited as an inspiration and aspiration of where most the other women hoped to be when they were her age. In addition, because ballet was a core component of identity for many of these women, they did not self-categorize as old but, instead, they categorized as ballet dancers. In this sense, they may align with the profile of those older persons—a profile of ager found in previous studies to be those who perceive they are aging well and have the highest levels of life satisfaction as they age called “engaged agers”—who have been found to be the least stressed and the most successful agers (Bernhold, 2019; Gasiorek and Barile 2017; Gasiorek, Fowler and Giles 2015); although whether older recreational ballet dancers might constitute a unique profile is an interesting question for future research.

They also did not forgo continuing ballet even though their physical capabilities may have changed. Instead, they focused on their artistry of the movement, and continuing to do ballet despite needing to modify movements to match their changing physical capabilities. Taken together, the physical

and self-categorizing experiences of these women with ballet may nuance arguments about health and age in the United States that often suggest staving off age and findings of people vehemently self-categorizing as “not old” (Lamb 2018). However, similar to findings by Lamb (2018), CEMSA does conceptualize successful aging as being partly within people’s own control such that people exert some agency in the way that they age, through their communication. These women exercised this aging agency by recognizing and adapting to their changing, older bodies and also added identity categories, rather than doing ballet in order to avoid being old. Of course and in line with Lamb’s findings, the demographic characteristics of the women interviewed here suggest the privilege to even have the option to age with agency by even being able to pay for ballet classes, for example, and mean that the women here are overall more likely to be healthier than other women of lower socioeconomic status. This suggests recreational ballet encourages positive *communication* about aging for these women, thereby enhancing efficacy and a more positive attitude about the process. Other cultural recreational pursuits for other types of populations may encourage the same types of communication that engenders these benefits.

Findings relating more specifically to social relationships indicated that for most participants, ballet was an important way that they made new friends, suggesting that ballet (or similar recreational or cultural activities for other groups) can help combat the loneliness and depression that older adults can experience (Gonyea *et al.* 2018). In addition, participants described these friendships as qualitatively different from their “non-dancer” friends in terms of shared bonds and feelings of trust. Participating in ballet also encouraged more intergenerational social relationships than, arguably, most other people experience (Munniksma *et al.* 2013). This finding supports claims by Pines and Giles (2017) where they theorized that dance could be a superordinate identity. In context, ballet became a superordinate identity and age became less salient in these intergenerational friendships. Similar to Dumit’s (2012) concept of objective self-fashioning, these women incorporated ballet into their being, for some, to redefine who they are and what it means to age. Other cultural and recreational activities may similarly make salient superordinate identities over age as a social identity.

In general, findings suggest positive intergenerational relationships being fostered through recreational participation in ballet in older age as they make friendships with people who are not their age. According to CEMSA, having intergenerational communication that tends to be positive as environmental chatter is associated with positive affect toward the aging process and with efficacy to successfully age (Gasiorek, Fowler, and Giles 2018). Results support the contention that recreational ballet dancing fosters positive intergenerational communication, thereby enabling positive affect toward aging. This contrasts with the experience of most professional ballet dancers discussed in this article (Wulf 1988).

Limitations of this study suggest three major future research directions. First, several men expressed interest in participating in the study, but were excluded from participating to focus the study on the female experience as the majority of professional ballet dancers are female. In addition, previous research has found that gender can be a salient and central social identity (e.g., Steffens and Viladot 2015), meaning that studying male ballet dancers would require its own focus. Future research could more purposefully examine similarities and differences of experiences between male and female recreational ballet (and other) dancers. Second, one participant’s response was excluded for her focus on Eastern styles of dance (e.g., belly dancing, Bollywood). Other genres of dance could be examined to determine if they encourage similar experiences of positive aging. Perhaps any style of dance, not only recreational ballet dance, could function as environmental chatter and a component of identity that fosters efficacy and positive affect toward aging. It may also be the case that the true facet of participating in recreational activities that fosters positive aging is the friends that people are otherwise unable to easily make, and the expansion of their network (see Nussbaum 1994; Rawlins 2004; Rook 1998). Indeed, previous research has shown that dancing with others leads to an increase in one’s social ties (Kreutzmann *et al.* 2017). Third, the

data reported here are only self-report interviews from relatively affluent women, from two dance studios in a small town. As such, findings cannot broaden the demographics for which CEMSA has been applied to in previous research. Future research should observe the actual dance classes across locations to consider societal position more focally (as now has been added to the CEMSA model herein), especially lower income areas as previous research has shown that socioeconomic status is a key component to the physical and subjective experience of aging (Lamb 2018). Examining the discourse that occurs therein, of adult recreational ballet dancers as they take class and interact with their peers and family can help illuminate what *ballet talk* may look like, and answer questions such as do dancers verbally air ballet proudly as part of their identity with others?

Conclusion

There are many processes that foster successful aging. Results from this study provide support for recreational ballet being an activity for this group of women that can foster both a positive social identity and affect that engenders efficacy in managing successful aging. Dancers did not self-categorize as “old,” and they enjoyed positive intergenerational relationships. Overall, participants described, and discussed fondly, how they hope to continue dancing for as long as they can. This orientation suggested a positive view of the future. Participants also explained how recreational ballet encouraged wellness as they have aged in terms of positive mental, physical, and sexual well-being. Several participants mentioned how they have always returned to ballet following a physical injury or a negative emotional life experience. This suggests that recreational ballet offered women a sense of efficacy for overcoming trying physical and emotional experiences as they age. These interviews, and previous research (e.g., Age UK 2018; Goodman *et al.* 2017) provide support for a modest, but important, addition to the communication ecology model of successful aging. Namely, cultural recreational activities, such as ballet, can now be considered a significant element not only for active older adults, but also for those in care facilities (Koponen, Honkasalo, and Rautava 2018) in the process of aging successfully.

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Notes

1. There is no record of statistics generally in the United States of how many adults take ballet recreationally. From the first author’s knowledge as a former professional ballerina and now ballet instructor, each studio that teaches ballet has an adult (18+) class weekly, but usually they vary widely in difficulty, in age, and in how many people come each week.
2. One response was not included in this analysis as the participant focused on her experiences with Eastern styles of dance including belly dancing, and not her experiences with ballet, despite the first author probing her ballet experiences specifically.
3. All participants, except for Joanne, agreed to having their age included in research. Pseudonyms used for participants who did not wish to have their name appear in this article.
4. Sexuality included in physical health instead of in romantic relationships because participants had a physical focus when discussing sexual identities and activities rather than within their relationships.
5. Age is listed in parenthesis following the name/pseudonym of the participant for the first time.

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