On gray dancing: Constructions of age-normality through choreography and temporal codes

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A B S T R A C T

Against the background of population aging, older peoples dance has attracted attention in research and its health promoting effects and social meanings have been brought to the fore. In this article we focus on the context and power dimensions of dance with an emphasis on the organizing of dance among older adults in terms of social discourses and age relationships. On the basis of qualitative interviews with 33 older dancers and 11 dance providers in Sweden, the study illustrates how dance is organized through social discourses on healthism and on the increasing group of older people as a powerful consumer group. The study highlights that older people and their social dance contexts are marked and subordinated in relation to younger age groups through non-verbal practices such as choreography and temporal codes. In short, dancing among older adults is not only a common health promoting and social activity, but also an arena in which age and age normality are negotiated and constructed.

Introduction

Against the background of population aging in most industrialized countries, many voices have argued that older people can and should maintain a high quality of life late in life (Carstairs, 2014; Ransford & Palisi, 1996; Skinner, 2009; Wakeling & Clark, 2015). Many emphasize healthy or successful aging, for which an active leisure is a significant factor (Brown, McGuire, & Voelkl, 2008), and the responsibility for bodily health rests with the individual (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). This development has increased the interest in dance among older people, which is evident from the many studies on how dancing can have positive effects on health and well-being (Connor, 2000; Keogh, Kilding, Pidgeon, Ashley, & Gillis, 2009). A more limited research focusing on the social dimension of dancing has primarily identified its meaning to the older dancers (Cooper & Thomas, 2002; Paulson, 2009). In all, this means that the phenomenon has been investigated as a relatively delimited health related or social activity without problematizing the general context of social discourses on age and aging.

Social relations such as age are not naturally given but are socially and culturally constructed in relational processes, produced and sustained in interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schwalbe et al., 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Hughes (1995) argues that categorizations constitute the first step towards reproducing the idea of distinctive, different categories and, by extension, constructing some groups as the norm and others as subordinated. Age categories such as old (dancers)

are therefore not stable but a result of the social context and of individual actions (Calasanti, 2007; Krekula, 2009; Krekula, Nikander, & Wilinska, 2017; Laz, 1998; McMullin, 2000). Social phenomena and contexts, such as older people dancing, become meaningful through the organizing of age categorizations (cf. Katz, 1996), while creating age relations and age normality.

In this article we contextualize dance among older adults by critically exploring it in relation to the practices creating social positioning and power relations. Based on qualitative data from Sweden, we discuss the discourses that motivate the organizing of gray dancing, and we clarify the age normality created through the temporal and choreographic organizing of dance. The study thus displays that dance among older people is more than a popular health promoting and social activity; it is also an arena in which age relations are negotiated and constructed.

Literature survey

A great deal of previous research on gray dancing draw on quantitative and intervention-related studies of gray dancing from a medical perspective (Keogh et al., 2009), studies of dance therapy (Bräuninger, 2014; Guzmán-García, Hughes, James, & Rochester, 2013) and of dance as participatory art (Fraser, Bungay, & Munn-Giddings, 2014; Zeilig, Killick, & Fox, 2014). Generally, the studies show that older people who dance regularly improve their mental well-being and fitness such as

muscle strength, balance and agility, which prevent illness and accidents.

The studies focusing on the social aspects of older adults' dancing show that dancing gives the participants a sense of community and intimacy, aesthetic enjoyment and self-fulfilment (Cooper & Thomas, 2002; Nadasen, 2008; Paulson, 2009; Roberson & Pelclova, 2014; Thomas, 1995). Nadasen (2008) shows that even an activity beyond the dancing, for example, traveling together to the dance venue is central to the meanings attributed to dancing. Moe (2014) demonstrates how the dance enhances creativity, individually and in groups. The studies of the social aspects of dance have above all focused on older people's experience of dance and dance as a phenomenon, which means that the provider perspective has been somewhat neglected. Similarly, there is a lack of knowledge of the importance of the social context, and the phenomenon has not been studied from a critical perspective in terms of age relations, power, and normality.

The recurring description of older people dancing in terms of health can be related to the general healthism trend (Petersen & Lupton, 1996). Healthism, described as a central ideology in contemporary Western societies, involves increased health awareness and increasing numbers choosing a healthy lifestyle (Greenhalgh & Wessely, 2004), and is characterized as a lifestyle giving priority to health above everything else (Crawford, 1980). This is strongly reminiscent of what is labeled bio-power, a decentralized form of power of a population and its health (Foucault, 1997; Rose, 1989).

In relation to older adults, healthism emerges in scientific and political discussions on the importance of activities to healthy and successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1998; Walker, 2009; Walker & Maltby, 2012; WHO, 2002). The terminology has varied; for example, active aging has been prevalent in European policy, while successful aging is primarily used in North-American contexts (Walker & Maltby, 2012).

Parallel with the growing number of older people, there have also been great changes in the meanings and practices of aging. Expressions like the "golden age of aging" frame assumptions of a historical golden past when older people had higher status, possibly because of their small number, their great wisdom, and control of economic resources (Achenbaum, 1978). These speculations have been rejected as myths, not least because this problematic historiography neglects the complex social, economic, and political processes framing the conditions of older adults, and therefore their status is exaggerated (Quadagno, 1982). However, the current increasing share of older people in the population has reintroduced the perspective to the debate, which stresses the fact that they have never before been such a big group or had such a good life: they live longer, they are healthier and more active, are better off, and generally have a better life quality than ever before and they are expected to grow into a strong political and economic power factor (Schuck, 2010). This is reflected in the description of the growing group of older adults with a sound economic situation as an attractive consumer group, a "gray market" (Twigg, 2012), and of a "silver economy", including the goods and services offered to senior citizens, and associated with the trends of more years at work, volunteerism and active citizenship (Klimczuk, 2016). Long (1998) suggests that it is above all the employment market that demarcates between those who belong to the gray market and those who are given the role of simply being consumers. While arguing for the potential of the gray market, he also points out that older people tend to be marginalized in marketing.

In contrast to the many homogenous descriptions of older people, others argue that the golden age of aging does not apply to the whole collective of older adults. An example of this are the different meanings and conditions of life as a senior citizen, which to some is an opportunity to make good use of time and for others a time of illness and economic deprivation (McMullin & Marshall, 1999). Another example is the great differences in health as well as subjective perception of well-being, among others, between socio-economic and ethnic groups of older adults (Hendricks, 1999; House, Lantz, & Herd, 2005; Ryff, Magee, Kling, & Wing, 1999).

Organizing processes: marking and temporal enactments

The central concept here is 'organizing', which refers to the processes when individuals co-operate to create a shared understanding in given situations (Czarniawska, 2015; Weick, 1969). Age, the social positioning in the article's analytical focus, is an important organizing principle because it is seen as a neutral category. It is assumed to be unproblematic to sort contexts and activities in terms of age, which contributes to normalizing the organizing that relates to age (Fineman, 2011; Krekula & Johansson, 2017).

Organizing processes are directly linked to power relations and to the constructions of social categorizations and relations. The daily organizing of queues at the entrance of a dance venue, for example, prohibition of alcohol, and the design of exercise rooms are examples of subtle forms of an imperative, as individuals have to act in conformity with the demands of the systems (cf. Börjesson & Rehn, 2009; Foucault, 1977).

When the organizing process involves age, this contributes to a social distribution of tasks, responsibility and behavior based on age. The result is that different age groups are assigned different degrees of power and room for manoeuvre (Krekula & Johansson, 2017). Krekula (2009) argues that this organizing is based on differentiating practices, age coding, which make contexts and phenomena, such as dance, over time become associated with limited age categories. This means that some age groups are systematically privileged at the expense of others in different contexts and that an age normality is created, which has also been problematized in terms of the dichotomy marked – unmarked age (Krekula & Johansson, 2017; Krekula et al., 2017). In a study of the sociology of the unmarked, Brekhus (1996, 1998) argued that social marking takes place when actors view one side of the dichotomy as epistemologically unproblematic. Through naming and marking, something is presented as unique and must be distinguished from another generic form. How age normality, that is, the unmarked age, is constructed and which age groups emerge as the norm and as a deviant vary with contexts and situations.

Organizing in relation to Weber's idea of goal rational and value rational actions (Weber, 1922/1978) is also of interest to our study. While goal rational actions refer to instrumental acts, often economically motivated, the value-oriented action is based on specific views and values, or ideological conviction. Drawing on Weber's basic concepts, we can speak of the goal-rational organizing of dance, centering on economic motivation, for example, based on a calculation that older age groups are a strong consumer group. Conversely, the concept of value-rational organizing is used to explore the organizing of dance from other perspectives than goal rationality, for example, as aesthetically and culturally motivated or by means of the argument that dance serves a social and societal function.

As shown below, organizing takes place also through temporal dimensions, that is, time flows on different levels (West-Pavlov, 2012; Zerubavel, 1981). Zerubavel (1987) claims that both individuals and communities use temporal dimensions as semiotic codes signaling aspects such as priority and respect without the need for verbal articulation. For instance, letting persons wait, or giving them limited time, means assigning them low priority. Even if this "language of time" (p. 353) appears as spontaneous action, it can constitute deliberate manipulations of the temporal organizing. In this perspective, time is like "a quasi-linguistic nonverbal system of signification" (Zerubavel, 1987, p 353).

With the concept of timing as codes, Zerubavel (1987) also pays attention to the qualitative dimensions of time, and that different meanings can be attributed to identical time dimensions. These different qualitative time dimensions can be seen in the dichotomy of what he calls ordinary and extraordinary time (cf. Durkheim's (2008 [1912]) argument on the sacred and the profane). Contacts, he argues, have a special value when they occur at times that are socially defined as private; they assume an aura of exclusivity. Weekends are examples of