



Dance for Parkinson's: A new framework for research on its physical, mental, emotional, and social benefits[☆]



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Available online 25 March 2014

KEYWORDS

Dance;
Parkinson's

Summary Parkinson's is a neurodegenerative disease commonly associated with symptoms such as tremor, rigidity, bradykinesia, freezing during gait, motor control deficits and instability. These physical symptoms can cause a myriad of psychological problems including depression, feelings of loneliness, and low self-esteem. Current research suggests pharmacological interventions do not sufficiently address all symptoms and thus alternative therapies have been deemed an important part of treatment for people with Parkinson's. Dance has shown to be a beneficial activity for this population. Upon reviewing recent dance for Parkinson's studies it is clear that there are developing trends with respect to overall approach. The tendency to place more emphasis on changes to clinical signs is creating a gap whereby research neglects to look at how dance is influencing a particular individual in all aspects of their life. There is a need for a framework that allows for and encourages the analysis of the dancing experience for people with Parkinson's on a variety of levels including physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. With such a framework it would be possible to triangulate the information gathered to draw stronger conclusions that are more meaningful to the people with Parkinson's. This paper would like to propose the use of the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health as a possible framework for dance for Parkinson's research. © 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Literature review

Parkinson's research has traditionally centered on trying to understand the disease in more depth and identifying a cure. In recent years we have seen a growing interest in the potential benefits of exercise and alternative therapies for people with Parkinson's (PwP) with research evidencing the positive physical, mental, and social effects.^{1,2} Common medications prescribed to patients do not address all symptoms and many can cause additional side effects.^{3,4} There is a strong need

[☆] This project is financially supported by University of Roehampton, Bupa Foundation and English National Ballet. The views expressed in the submitted article are the authors' own and not an official position of the institution or funders.

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for further research into alternative therapies that may help to alleviate Parkinson's symptoms not addressed by medications and that may also help with managing additional side effects while we continue to work on a cure.

Research into dance as a form of alternative therapy for *PwP* has sparked the interest of dance artists and academics in recent years. Though dance movement therapy has proven to be a beneficial component of rehabilitation for other neurological disorders such as traumatic brain injury and autism since the 1970s,^{5–8} the first study of dance/movement therapy for *PwP* was only reported by Westbrook and McKibben in 1989. It was shown that dance therapy helped to improve initiation of movements (i.e. reaction time) more effectively than the exercise class. An improved mood was also apparent in the dance therapy group, though these results were not statistically significant.⁹ However, there is a need to make clear the distinction between dance movement therapy and the dancing that often takes place in 'dance for Parkinson's' classes as some studies do not make this difference explicit thus causing confusion.

The American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) defines dance movement therapy as "the psychotherapeutic use of movement to further the emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration of the individual".¹⁰ In this case the participants engage with dance as a therapeutic tool or treatment.

Dance for Parkinson's groups may view dance as being an alternative form of physical activity and exercise. They tend to place emphasis on learning about dance as an artistic practice and often times will focus on particular styles of dance such as contemporary, ballet, contact improvisation, or ballroom. The aim is not necessarily to work through individual issues or focus on the self in a therapeutic context but rather to learn about dance as a creative, social, and artistic practice that may also help alleviate symptoms and improve quality of life.

From 2007 to present we have seen an influx in research studies on 'dance for Parkinson's' as described above with a strong focus on how dance may affect functional movements and improve symptoms for people with Parkinson's. In particular Madeleine Hackney and Gammon Earhart have published several reports showing how Argentine tango and ballroom dance may help to improve balance, gait, and functional mobility for this population.^{11,12} They have also demonstrated that people may be more interested and motivated to be physically active in this way in comparison to general exercise regimes.¹¹ More recent studies have included other dance forms such as contact improvisation and contemporary with similar aims of looking at how they may affect functional mobility and severity of symptoms.^{13,14} Overall it is clear from these studies that dancing, whether it be ballroom, contemporary, or contact improvisation, may help to improve functional mobility for people with Parkinson's directly after the sessions take place (short-term) and after weeks or months of dancing.¹⁵

Upon reviewing recent studies it is apparent there are developing trends in chosen methodologies. While some researchers make a point of emphasizing what dance can offer participants in a holistic manner,¹⁶ other researchers such as Hackney and Earhart make clinical signs their

primary focus.^{11,17} There is generally a lack of research that examines the physical, mental, social, and emotional benefits of dance for Parkinson's and how these benefits are related to each other. The tendency to place a stronger emphasis on changes to clinical signs is creating a gap whereby research neglects to look at how dance is influencing a particular individual in all aspects of their life. Without an understanding of how the physical changes relate to and influence daily activities and life experiences, researchers cannot fully describe the relevance and significance of these changes for participants.

There is a need for a framework that allows for the study and analysis of the dancing experience for *PwP* on a variety of levels including physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. With such a framework it would be possible to triangulate the information and determine relationships between variables thus helping researchers to fully understand how dance is affecting the individual and/or group. Through this kind of analysis we can draw stronger conclusions, which are more meaningful to *PwP*.

Individual differences must also be recognized and considered within the analysis. Parkinson's is a neurodegenerative disease that affects each individual in a very different way.¹⁸ Due to the nature of the condition, it is not realistic to view participants all on the same level with simply a number to differentiate between them. Results will depend on how the participants engage with the movement material, how their Parkinson's is affecting them at any given time, issues outside of the dance studio such as family health, and a variety of other contextual factors. It is important to not neglect these components but rather include them in our understanding of the outcomes. Houston (2011) argued for a person-centered approach within dance for Parkinson's research whereby the need to look at the person experiencing the dance is prioritized rather than solely looking at how dance may alleviate symptoms. Houston argues that this approach puts the participants' experiences, thoughts, feelings, and emotions about dancing at the forefront and concerns itself with the 'why' and 'how' dance is experienced rather than causal affects.¹⁹ The present study proposes that an understanding and appreciation of the individual experiencing the dancing as well as the causal effects of that dance experience are both important to our full understanding of how dance can help people cope better with their Parkinson's symptoms.

Aim of the paper

The aim of this paper is to propose a framework for dance for Parkinson's research that will enable analysis of the dancing experience from multiple perspectives with triangulation of qualitative and quantitative information. This framework is underpinned by a person-centered approach that does not neglect the individual experiencing the dance classes but rather includes personal contextual factors within the analysis. It is necessary for the framework to be internationally recognized and acceptable to researchers in a wide range of fields including biomedical and social scientists as well as arts and humanities scholars.

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