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Embodied And Playful Movement for Older Adults: An Important Approach to Health and Well-Being

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Abstract

Given the numerous health-related risks associated with inactive lifestyles among older adults, it is imperative to identify meaningful and exciting exercise programs for this population. Therefore, the purpose of this concept-based paper was to draw on the nature of movement-central performing arts, like physical theater and aerial dance, and showcase how embodied and playful movement experiences can be applicable for older adults, leading to significant physical activity and health outcomes. Drawing on the concept of embodiment and the field of movement-oriented performing arts (e.g., aerial dancing and physical theater), I exemplify in this paper the importance of embodied and playful physical expression for long-lasting physical activity participation, health, and well-being. Based on the paper implications, it is key to view bodily function and movement holistically by incorporating embodied, playful, and physically demanding movement activities in exercise programs for older adults. Such experiences can lead to the love of movement, health, and well-being.

Keywords: Embodied and Playful Movement, Merleau-Ponty, Performing Arts, Older Adults, Health and Well-Being

Introduction

There are several health risks associated with physically inactive lifestyles, especially among older adults and clinical populations. Based on a systematic review of the literature, such health risks include cardiovascular disease, breast and prostate cancer, recurrent falls, limited functioning in activities of daily living, Alzheimer, dementia, high depression levels, and poor quality of life [1]. Given the importance of physical activity to curb such health-related risks, the purpose of this paper was to draw on the nature of movement-central performing arts, like physical theater and aerial dance, and showcase how embodied and playful movement experiences can be applicable for older adults, leading to the love of movement, health, and well-being.

In the first section of the paper, I draw on Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception [2] and discuss the concept of

embodied movement (unison of body, mind, emotions), including its importance to improved body schema (motor habit) and thus health and well-being. In the second section of the paper, I briefly showcase how movement in performing arts is playful and embodied; thus, it tends to be exciting and long lasting with significant benefits to health and well-being. Given the playful and embodied movement experiences in performing arts, I conclude the paper by outlining key implications for movement programming among older adults.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodiment - a brief summary

In his magnum opus, Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty [2] challenged the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy whereby the mind is supposed to be superior to the body and guide every



single action. Instead of viewing the body as an object or a statistic, Merleau-Ponty elevated its essence to a subject, *The Lived Body*, that acts: dances, climbs, swims, walks, and plays [2-10]. The body “catches” and “understands” movement via various activity experiences, *praktognosia*, when it throws itself into meaningful motor significations. The tennis player knows how to return a speedy ball tacitly without mental representation. This sense-giving and habitual movement is not a reflex or cognitive knowledge; rather, it is knowledge “in hand”, which is pre-reflective and “inter-sensorial” via the unity of body, mind, and emotion. It reflects one’s motor habit or body schema [2-8, 11].

A key aspect in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of embodied movement is that body schema (motor habit) can be renewed and reworked. In healthy and especially clinical and older populations, an imbalanced body schema can lead to mobility difficulties and restrictions with strong links not only to decreased physical functioning but also to declined mental health. On the contrary, a balanced body schema via proper movement programs can lead to the love of movement, health, and well-being [2-15]. Therefore, it is imperative to identify holistic, effective, and exciting movement programs among older adults. Such programs can be based on performing arts like dancing, aerial dancing, and physical theater.

Playful and Embodied Movement Within Performing Arts

It is well-established that exercise programs for improved mobility and falls-risk prevention or reduction among older adults should be holistic in nature by incorporating not only balance and muscle training activities but also aerobic exercises [16]. Identifying holistic exercise programs that are meaningful and exciting for older adults is a challenge. Physically demanding movement programs in performing arts like aerial dancing and physical theater tend to be enjoyable among college students leading to long-lasting healthy lifestyles (e.g., exercise participation and healthy diet), physical and mental health, and well-being [8-15]. These artistic activities are meaningful and enduring because they are playful and embodied in nature. They capture all play elements as exemplified by Gadamer [17,18]. Notably, the ultimate form of human play is art because it represents the truth (e.g., comedy and tragedy of real life) and it is performed before a participating audience. Therefore, in movement-central performing arts, performers find meaning and joy in creating bodily, artistic pieces that they share with spectators [17,18]. This non-utilitarian, physically demanding, and creative process of play evokes sensations of joy, excitement, flow, ecstasy, freedom in expression, improved body schema, and deep connection with others [8-15, 18].

This playful movement in performing arts is also embodied because in physical theater and/or aerial dance body, mind, and emotion can act in unison. Body schema/motor habit (e.g., body confidence, awareness, posture, and physicality) improves because it connects with the mind and emotions. The performer is able to unlock and free their body; accept vulnerability and freely express a variety of emotions; bodily connect and communicate with others; and let their body create and guide not only during artistic

performances but also in real life [8-15, 18]. This holistic approach in the way the body is viewed and functions has important implications for movement programming among older adults, as will be discussed below.

Implications For Movement Programming Among Older Adults

The purpose of this short, concept-based paper was to showcase the importance of embodied and playful activities as holistic movement experiences for older adults. Such activities are evidenced in movement-central performing arts like aerial dancing and physical theater. Drawing on the playful and embodied nature of performing arts, such physically demanding and creative movement experiences tend to be meaningful, exciting, and long lasting with significant physical and mental health benefits. Therefore, implications for movement programming in this population need to be explored.

Community-dwelling older adults can participate in embodied, playful, physically demanding, and artistic movements whereby free and creative expression is reinforced [18]. Such arty, bodily expressions can improve body schema (e.g., body confidence, awareness, posture, and physicality) within the community and/or rehabilitation settings [8-9, 18]. It is also key to facilitate not only individualized but also group-based performative activities before an audience for long-term physical activity participation, improved physical and mental health, and well-being [8-9, 14-15, 18].

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Conflict of Interest

No Conflict of Interest.

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