

The Experiences and Meanings of Participation in Ballet among Senior Citizens

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The purpose of this research is to examine the meanings and values of participation in ballet lessons in the life course of senior citizens based on the experiences of senior ballet students. Dance as an art of instinctive human movements helps the elderly promote their health, emotional satisfaction, and life stability and thus lead a rich life in old age in qualitative ways. Dance is a natural act of establishing one's identity and ego through physical movements and expressing one's inner emotions through the active uses of the human body. Ballet has many different values. Dance movements share many similarities with general exercise, thus holding high utilization value as means of exercise prescription at the preventive level. For this purpose, the investigator adopted the qualitative case study method. Subjects were selected according to purposive sampling, one of qualitative sampling methods to select research participants fit for the given topic, or criterion-based selection named by Goetz and Le Compte. They participated in ballet lessons at a cultural center in Seoul for a year (twice per week) or longer. Data was collected with an in-depth interview, participant observation, and document materials for total 12 weeks. The subjects got to learn ballet as they developed interest in new leisure activities after years of appreciating ballet performances. Learning ballet, they experienced changes to their bodies including the right posture and healthy and beautiful body. As they learned ballet, they gained self-confidence and got to have expectations for a second life.

Key word: dance, ballet, senior citizen, health, life-satisfaction

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Introduction

As the society entered the aging stage, the focus was on living a healthy life with no illness in old age. Entering the modern times, the focus has shifted to quality aspects. It is no exception in South Korea, where more and more interest is taken in "successful aging," which defines the healthy life of the elderly as a happy and stable life based on a healthy body rather than the mere absence of illness based on the treatment of diseases. In "successful aging," the elderly become the subjects of their own lives in more active and productive ways through ongoing maturity and psychological development even in the latter half of life.

The senior generation faces age limits and retirement due to the social structure and institution and is scheduled to become a part of the silver generation in approximately ten years. That is, the senior generation has a relatively higher educational background, has played leading roles in economic growth for many years, and is about to retire after experiencing the diverse aspects of the society. They are no longer concerned with making a living and show huge interest in individual lifestyles. The senior generation is also characterized by their self-reliant values as they tend to enjoy their remaining years with their economic wealth and lead a consumption life instead of passing it down to their children(Park, 2007). They have an active life attitude based on their psychological self-confidence, health and rational thinking to support it, and the value of placing importance on themselves. In daily life, senior citizens exhibit as an active attitude as the younger generation and communicate with others freely based on their high intellectual faculty and curiosity. They are in a healthy condition with no particular diseases, enjoying their leisure activities including various hobbies and travel(Ko, 2011).

The senior generation has great interest in health management and old age, is future-oriented due to their growth since the 1970s, and shows diversity and active tendency. They are thus characterized by their own preparations for old age or an independent life depending on the social system(Kim, 2006; Kim, 2007). In addition, they have a relatively high educational background, are in good economic conditions, and participate in economic, social, and volunteer work activities in high numbers.

Dance as an art of instinctive human movements helps the elderly promote their health, emotional satisfaction, and life stability and thus lead a rich life in old age in qualitative ways. Dance is a natural act of establishing one's identity and ego through physical movements and expressing one's inner emotions through the active uses of the human body. Movements called "dance" have impacts on the state of mind and emotional changes as well as physical changes(Jung, 2010), making daily life richer. Dance is an important means of feeling and reestablishing one's identity based on the movement of the body, contributing to the harmonious development of mind and body. Different people gather together and engage in group activities and mutual exchanges in the course of dance, getting a sense

of achievement and self-confidence based on sociality, effort, and patience. Dance is thus expected to play an important role in resolving the elderly's sense of alienation(Jang, 2009).

Of previous studies on the dance experiences of the elderly, Park(2007) reported that participation in dance for all helped the elderly meet their needs for leisure activities and emotional needs. Ko(2011) reported that dance offered the elderly an opportunity to make valuable use of their leisure time, helped them increase their quality of life and prolong their healthy span instead of simple aging, and played a positive role in their healthier and richer old age. Choi (2011) reported that when the elderly participated in dance as a leisure activity, they increased in physical fitness and psychological happiness, obtained the driving force and self-confidence for life through social contacts to interact with others, and confirmed their value of existence.

Ballet has many different values. Dance movements share many similarities with general exercise, thus holding high utilization value as means of exercise prescription at the preventive level(Chang, 2005). Just doing the basic ballet movements is very useful for improving the elements of functional fitness including muscular strength, flexibility, and balance. The barre in ballet helps the elderly with the lack of muscular strength perform the basic ballet movements and reduces the risk of injury very effectively. Ballet exercise programs accompanied by classical music contribute to psychological stability, having positive impacts on mental health. This study thus set out to analyze the experiences and meanings of participation in ballet lessons among the elderly and explore the values of ballet as a leisure activity for senior citizens.

Method

The present study aimed to examine the meanings and values of participation in ballet lessons in the life course of senior citizens based on the experiences of senior ballet students. For this purpose, the investigator adopted the qualitative case study method.

1. Selection of Research Participants

Subjects were selected according to purposive sampling, one of qualitative sampling methods to select research participants fit for the given topic, or criterion-based selection named by Goetz and Le Compte(1984). They participated in ballet lessons at a cultural center in Seoul for a year (per week) or longer. <Table 1> shows the individual characteristics of the subjects.

2. Data Collection

Data was collected with an in-depth interview, participant observation, and document materials

for total 12 weeks.

1) In-Depth Interview

The "oral interview method" devised by the German sociologist F. Schutze(1987) was used in the study. There were total four official interviews and unofficial ones conducted frequently according to the need. Official interviews took place at places of appointment including the lounge of the cultural center where the subjects participated in ballet lessons or a cafe near the cultural center.

2) Participant Observation

The present study used one of the participant observation methods classified by Patton(1991). It allowed the researcher to participate in lessons and observe the subjects without manipulating their actions artificially as a complete participant. After getting consent from the subjects, the researcher made an observation with a focus on their individual behavioral characteristics and the aspects of participation in training in ballet lessons.

3) Document materials

Document materials are objective materials containing no subjective viewpoints of the researcher(Merriam, 1988). They have an advantage of relatively easy collection and are needed to analyze and interpret research questions. In the present study, the participants were asked to express how they felt in ballet lessons emotionally and physically in free forms including words, texts, and drawings and submit them after each training session to understand their inner worlds.

3. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data analysis happened in three processes of transcription, coding by the topic, and discovery of a theme, based on which the investigator carried out case recording and inductive categorical analysis. In addition, member check, triangulation, and peer debriefing(Padgett, 1998) were mainly used to increase the validity and trustworthiness of the qualitative methods.

Table 1. *Demographic characteristics*

number	name	age	Training period	Engagement (per week)
1	K. M. H	50	12 months	2
2	C. I. Y	52	20 months	3
3	J. Y. K	52	18 months	3
4	L. M. J	58	27 months	2
5	P. S. W	60	26 months	2
6	Y. Y. J	61	16 months	3
7	K. M. Y	62	21 months	2
8	M. H. S	63	22 months	2
9	A.M.Y	64	22 months	3
10	S.H.S	66	27 months	2

Results

1. How They Got to Participate in Ballet Lessons

1) Enjoying Ballet as Art to Watch

My husband got two tickets for The Nutcracker. At first, I was reluctant to go since I had no knowledge of ballet. But then I felt that the tickets were too expensive not to be used. Although I had no knowledge of ballet, I found the dancers' movements were so beautiful. They were remarkable to express beauty with their bodies.

<K. M. H>.

Whenever a ballet show was on TV, I would watch it with no mistake despite my little knowledge about it. The dancers were extremely beautiful, dancing gracefully to beautiful music. My first ballet show was at the Gang-dong Art Center near my home. It was absolutely beautiful. Since then, I always go and watch ballet shows.

<C. I. Y>

The subjects took interest in ballet by chance. Their interest in ballet began when they were first

exposed to it through the media or shows. As they watched the beautiful movements of ballerinas and how they expressed the physical beauty that was difficult to express humanly, their interest in ballet grew even bigger out of awe. Once their interest in ballet expanded, they would go and watch ballet shows here and there. Interest in watching ballet shows as the audience worked as the first chance for the subjects to take part in ballet education.

2) Interest in Special Leisure Activities

I heard that the cultural center added ballet lessons. I wanted to try them. My participation began out of "my wish to learn the grace dance of ballet."

<J. Y. K>

I find other types of exercise boring as they ask me to use my body powerfully. Dance is not boring because it is accompanied by music. I have continued to learn dance instead of other types of exercise. I especially wished to learn ballet for its beautiful music.

<L. M. J>

The subjects participated in many different types of leisure life related to dance before learning ballet. Of the leisure activity types for senior citizens, dance sports and line dance have been popularized and universalized. Ballet was, however, considered as a difficult genre of dance for senior citizens to challenge themselves at. Ballet was regarded as high art inaccessible by the common people. While the elderly take easy part in music and art activities with no sense of distance, ballet is not considered to be a popular leisure activity for them because of its symbolic images including the thin bodies and flexibility of ballerinas. There are few ballet lessons for senior citizens. Having vague interest in ballet, the subjects removed their bias against ballet lessons and made an attempt at them as a new type of leisure activity.

2. Process of Experiencing Ballet

1) The Right Posture thank to the Ballet Poses

We do stretching on the mat and bar and center movements. Since the class is for the elderly, there are no difficult movements to follow. Ballet poses help you stretch your body straight...Taking ballet lessons twice a week, I developed a habit of stretching my body straight. My friends also tell me that their postures have improved since ballet.

<P. S. W>

My shoulders and back were bent due to old age and bad habits. My daughter would always say, "You have very bad postures." After participating in ballet lessons, my bad postures have been corrected with my body pain gone.

<Y. Y. J>

The subjects repeated stretching and bar and center movements in ballet lessons, improving their physical appearances. As they get old, people have their muscle mass and bone density decreasing, which results in changes to the figure. Bad postures and figures make muscles and joints distorted, causing pain in daily performance. After learning ballet, the subjects had a positive experience with their changing figures. The right figure at the old age helps to form positive psychology of self-confidence in daily life.

2) Healthy Body thanks to Ballet

I have gained more strength in my legs since ballet lessons. More strength has led to faster gait. My body has been incredibly healthy, which motivates me to do ballet harder.

<K. M. Y>

The cultural center is one metro stop from my home. Before ballet lessons, I always took the subway even when it was just one metro stop from my home. Since I started to do ballet, I have gained a lot of muscular strength. These days, I choose to walk instead of taking the subway.

<M. H. S>

The subjects felt that their bodies became healthy after they started ballet. They used to pursue convenience in daily life instead of exercising due to weaker muscular strength in old age. They experienced an increase to their muscular strength after taking up ballet and began to have a more active attitude to daily life. In old age, a health body is directly connected to quality of life. When the body is not healthy, it poses many limits to one's activities and life. A healthy body, on the other hand, offers the fitness as a basic requirement for trying new activities and experiences. Senior citizens experience the breadth of their experiences and activities narrowed down in old age. Ballet allowed the subjects to challenge themselves at various experiences and activities and lead a vibrant life.

3) Beautiful Body thanks to Ballet

I was surprised to learn that I could express a beautiful movement by moving my arms. I used to believe that only special individuals could make their bodies beautiful through ballet.

As I learned ballet, I was able to express beauty with my body, which made me happy.

<A. M. Y>

Since the ballet class is for senior citizens, it usually teaches slow and stretching movements. I am surprised to make delicate expressions with my aged body in the ballet class. I have realized that even an old body can be beautiful.

<S. H. S>

The subjects had a chance to recognize their bodies anew while learning ballet. As they repeated the slow ballet movements that would pose no harm to their bodies, they got to recognize their bodies. In addition, they trained their bodies with repeating movements and practice, witnessing their bodies change beautifully. They used to regard their bodies only as aged ones. After learning ballet, they got to express their physical beauty with their bodies and developed an expectation to keep their bodies young and beautiful.

3. Expectations for a New Life through Ballet

1) Self-Confidence thanks to Ballet

It is a very special thing to learn ballet at my age. I believe that ballet is a difficult challenge for senior citizens of my age. I take huge pride in learning ballet that others do not challenge themselves at easily.

<P. S. W>

When I told people around me that I learned ballet, they said it was incredible to do ballet at an old age. It was not easy for me to take up ballet. Once I summoned up my courage and started to learn ballet, I got to have confidence that I could challenge myself at anything on my mind even with my 60-something body.

<C. I. Y>

The subjects had self-confidence in learning ballet without being restricted by their old age. In old age, people tend to keep the old things instead of challenging themselves at new ones. They have much fear for failure due to psychological and physical characteristics despite their wish for something new. The subjects made a challenge at learning ballet regardless of their psychological and physical characteristics and overcame their fear for trying something new. Such experiences become stimuli

to senior citizens' new challenges and essential experience processes they need definitely.

2) Expectation for a Second Life through Ballet

Since taking up ballet, I have become more flexible, gained more muscular strength, and straightened my posture right. I feel like I am born again. I feel my body is more beautiful than before getting old.

<K. M. Y>

Seeing my body changing on the outside...Not all old bodies are shabby. Even though they are old, some senior citizens look remarkable for their self-confidence and pride out of years of experiences...I wish to get old like them by doing ballet. I want to keep and maintain my body.

<L. M. J>

The subjects experienced that their bodies became healthier and more beautiful thanks to ballet, changing their life attitudes as well as developing self-confidence. They felt physical beauty in their bodies that made positive changes and had thoughts over how to keep themselves in old age. Instead of regarding the old age as a process of becoming the elderly, they took it as a transition point to start a new life. Having various experiences in ballet lessons, they were afraid of getting old no more and regarded it as a natural changing process in life.

Discussion

The present study applied a case study method and analyzed findings to understand the experiences and meanings of participation in ballet among senior citizens. The subjects got to learn ballet as they developed interest in new leisure activities after years of appreciating ballet performances. Learning ballet, they experienced changes to their bodies including the right posture and healthy and beautiful body. As they learned ballet, they gained self-confidence and got to have expectations for a second life.

In Korea, the elderly have faced old age with no specific life plans due to rapid aging. The quality of life in old age depends on how people spend their old age in their fifties and sixties. The government needs to provide specific plans to help the elderly lead a positive and happy life in old age at the national welfare level. The realization of such plans requires institutional measures to help them make meaningful use of their prolonged leisure time in old age. Today, the hours and types of leisure

activities allowed for senior citizens are limited compared with those for the young generation. In old age, participation in leisure activities enhances living and life satisfaction. Senior citizens of similar age should gather and hang out together instead of individual activities, which raises a need to develop and establish physical activity programs to promote their health. Positive leisure activities in old age help them keep a healthy body and, at the same time, promote their social exchanges that could shrink, thus ensuring successful old life. It is thus extremely important to develop and provide a range of leisure programs such as dance to promote the physical and mental health of senior citizens.

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