

## Growing old gracefully: social dance in the third age

LESLEY COOPER\* and HELEN THOMAS†

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the meaning of social dancing for older people. It is based on a one-year qualitative research project, which is seeking to explore the experiences of social dance for people aged 60 years or more who attend various dance events in Essex and south-east London. The findings suggest that the social dance experience is not only or simply a beneficial physical experience for older people, it also bestows other significant benefits for those who enter the third age and beyond. It can provide continuity within change. It offers an opportunity to be sociable and have fun in ways that both reflect, and avowedly move beyond, the dancers' teenage years. It promotes a welcome sense of a community spirit. It is a way of becoming visible and aesthetically pleasing, and it bestows a sense of worth and achievement in skills learnt through dancing. Last but not least, dancers can experience the joy of a fit and able body in both real and mythic senses.

**KEY WORDS** – dance, older people, social, body, aesthetics of dance, *communitas*.

### **Introduction**

As Paul Thompson has written, 'for the handful of regulars, dancing is indeed a consuming pleasure: it is exercise, and a skill, and companionship, and a romantic echo of youth, all in one' (1990: 164). This paper examines the significance of social dancing for older people. It is based on a one-year qualitative research project, which seeks to explore the experiences of social dance for older dancers. More specifically, the project examined the experiences of dancers over the age of 60 years who attend a variety of dance events in the county of

\* Department of Health and Human Sciences, University of Essex.

† Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths' College, University of London.

Essex, to the east of London, and in south-east London.<sup>1</sup> Sociologists have tended to avoid the topic of social dance, with the exception of the role of dance in youth subcultures. This is despite the recent focus on the sociology of the body, which has to some extent included the sociology of the ageing body. At the same time, dance studies have largely centred on performance dance and on young healthy dancers. Dance ethnography has however begun to explore the relation between dance and the older individual (Cowan<sup>2</sup> 1990; Ness 1992), and one of the authors has explored the meaning of social dance for older people in Britain (Thomas and Miller 1997; Thomas 2000). In the article 'Ballroom blitz' (1997), she describes the afternoon tea dances attended exclusively by people aged 55 years or more at *The Rivoli*, a dance hall in south-east London, where dancers partake in a dance experience not unlike those of their youth.

In this paper, initial observations are developed from the study observations and findings on the social dance experience amongst the over-60s. Whilst we do not infer that our findings can be extended to other dancers in other areas, we consider that they provide a basis from which we can demonstrate how the distinctive nature of the social dance experience provides significant benefits for older people. First, we argue that it can provide 'continuity within change': a generation that was brought up with a certain set of cultural experiences, codes and behaviours, can continue to define itself in these ways without being challenged or ridiculed. Secondly, it may offer a way to enter, not a second childhood as negative images of ageing suggest, but a second 'teenagerhood', where after leaving behind the burdens of family and jobs they can now have 'fun'. Thirdly, it presents an enclosed social world, a world that is not bounded by age *per se* but by dance, and in this way it also provides a sense of community or 'communitas'. Fourth, it is a way of becoming visible and aesthetically pleasing, not so much to the public at large but to each other, in ways that their particular generation appreciate, in dress, etiquette and dance style. Fifth, it provides a sense of worth and achievement in the skills learnt through dancing, when other skills are no longer of use. In this way it provides a kind of cultural capital that dancers can draw on in later life, an insurance policy against old age. Last but not least, through the real experience and simultaneous mythic construction of a fit and able dancing body, dancers can both experience and further personify, even when it is physically difficult, the joy of a dancing body on the dance floor. There are, however, tensions associated with these meanings and constructions of meanings, and where they emerge, they will be explored and untangled.

## **Methodology**

This paper is based on an exploratory ethnographic one-year study of dance for people aged 60 years or more in three areas in southern England: two inner-city south-east London boroughs, and north Essex.<sup>3</sup> All dance venues in these areas for dancers in the older ages were mapped to discover the extent and nature of the phenomenon. After the initial exploratory mapping, six sites were chosen for further investigation.<sup>4</sup> These sites represented the general mix of dance sites in that one was an ‘official’ modern sequence club which took place in the local village hall in Essex, one was a mixed social dance event in south-east London, which took place at a leisure centre, one was a purpose-built ballroom which hosted a mix of ballroom and modern sequence dancing, also in south-east London, and the three others were dance classes which took place at local community centres in all three boroughs. The main methods have been interviews and participant observation, but the dancing has also been filmed. Several edited films were prepared to take back to the participants for further discussion and interviews. Remarkably, we were given videos taken by participants some years before at two of the sites, and these provide further data. The following analysis is based on the observation and participation at these sites as well as 31 interviews. Whilst we investigated all types of dance, for the purposes of this paper we have based our analysis on ‘social dance’ rather than dance classes. The researchers’ participation in the dancing yielded further insights into both the nature of the dancing and the worlds of the dancers.

## **Social dance**

Social dancing for older people in Britain is almost always either ‘ballroom’ or ‘modern sequence’. Initial observations reveal that whilst ‘social ballroom’ still takes place at several venues in London, and more rarely in Essex, it is no longer as popular as ‘modern sequence’ for people in the older ages. This is partly because many ballroom dance halls have closed or been converted to other use. ‘Modern ballroom’ dancing is a closed couple dance, where partners perform together the required dance steps, whether of the waltz, the quickstep, the foxtrot or the tango. The steps, the posture, the hold, the tempo and even the dress are extensively codified and rule-bound. A distinction must be made between ‘social’ and ‘competition’ ballroom dance. Competition ballroom dancing is not confined to the young or

even the middle aged. Older dancers also participate in competitions, although they may be few. Here the hold, posture and dress codes are adhered to even more strictly. 'Latin American' style differs from the 'English' style of modern ballroom dances, but all take place in dance halls such as *The Rivoli* in south-east London.

Most 'modern sequence' dances are made up from figures that were developed from 'ballroom' dances, and there are several similarities between the two. In both forms the dancers as couples move anti-clockwise round the dance floor, and the 'ballroom hold' is often used for both. The major difference between the two lies in the difference between the free style of 'ballroom', and the fixed sequence of steps in 'modern sequence'. All 'modern sequence' is a set order of repeated steps in a 16-bar sequence: four bars are taught at a time. The steps are adapted from those of 'ballroom' dances, with much interchange among the various dances. It is a very structured, formalised dance *genre*, with little room for spontaneity or idiosyncrasy, although dancers can innovate in minor ways within the set format of steps and figures.<sup>5</sup> 'Modern sequence' includes dances based variously on Latin American dances such as the rumba and cha-cha-cha, on 'modern ballroom' dances such as the waltz, foxtrot, quickstep and tango, and on classical or old-time dances such as the swing, saunters and blues.

'Modern sequence' is undoubtedly the most popular type of dance engaged in by the older dancer in Britain and, according to Whitworth (1995), the most popular form of social dancing yet devised. The diary published by the *Modern Sequence Dance Association* lists 320 dance venues in England alone, and in any medium-sized town in Britain, there may be three or four sequence dancing events each evening. In Essex, modern sequence dancing tends to be run as a club with a committee of volunteers who take care of the finances and the venue. Venues tend to be town or village halls or community centres, or anywhere that can be found that can provide a reasonably good dance floor. Members will attend regularly and pay a small entrance fee, which includes a contribution towards refreshments. Often the dance leaders, who demonstrate the new dances every week, will give their services free of charge and help run the club, or occasionally they will be brought in from outside the club and will be paid for their services. In London, in addition to a few modern sequence clubs, dance events are run in a number of ways. Sometimes an individual or a group of friends may decide to set up a club where members pay a small fee to come every week, or it may be, as at the ballroom site, dancers come and go as they please and pay to get in. Some venues have 80 to 90 dancers on a weekday evening, and some who attend have been dancing modern

sequence three or four nights a week for 20 or 30 years.<sup>6</sup> Besides the more widespread availability of sequence dancing, there are other reasons for its greater popularity than ballroom dancing. According to both popular writers about 'modern sequence' and the dancers that we interviewed, it is especially suitable for older dancers because of the friendliness and low cost of the dances, and because the form makes some allowances for the ageing body.

Outside Britain, social ballroom dancing is popular in the United States, Japan and the Republic of South Africa. Unruh's (1983) investigation of the social worlds of older people in northern California identified several older social ballroom dancers. Modern sequence dancing can also be found in one or two places in Australia.<sup>7</sup> Apart from these, however, sequence dancing is generally considered to be a very British phenomenon (Whitworth 1995).

### **Continuity and change**

For the participants in this study, social ballroom and particularly modern sequence dancing appeared to provide an important sense of continuity. The last 60 years have seen significant changes in people's lives, on every level of human experience, including changes in cultural codes and behaviours. It may be suggested that the generations that are now aged in the 70s or 80s have experienced more change than preceding generations. This has certainly been the case with dancing, for during the 1950s the change occurred from couple to solo dancing, and from stylised formal dancing to free-style disco. Continuity theorists propose that older people prefer continuity over change, although recognise that both are present in older peoples lives (Atchley 1993: 6). The proposition refers to a desire for consistency in both internal attributes such as identity, values, beliefs, skills and preferences, and in external attributes such as the physical and social environments, role relationships and activities. Social ballroom and modern sequence dancing appear to provide the vehicle and context for a continuity of identity, values, skills and cultural codes. Most significantly, the dance style is of an era when the dancers were in their teens and early 20s. As one commented: 'this is the dance of my generation: it's what we were brought up on'.

Many of the participants in this study engaged in social dancing when they were teenagers and when 'social ballroom' dance was the key social activity for young people. Many said that it was at these dances that the opposite sexes found partners. Every hall used to have

a Saturday night dance and a band: they were called ‘tanner hops’.<sup>8</sup> Derek, a dance leader, believes that dance came naturally to their age group, because they were brought up with the big bands and in the social ballroom dancing era:

As a 16-year-old, I went to Pwllheli, the Butlin’s holiday camp in north Wales, and this was immediately after that war ... it was very exotic ... And all the girls that were on the dance floor had spent ages getting ready to come to the dance, so they all had lovely dresses and all smelt nice and all the men had spent just as much time getting ready, in suits and all that sort of thing. What you had, which is something – [it’s my] personal view – is lacking now, what you had was absolute romance. The setting was glamorous. ... It really was great, you know. And you’d dance the night away. There was no question of sexual overtones, as you have now. You used to go out in groups. A group of girls would meet a group of boys in a dance hall, and often, because you were more interested in dance really, often you might well dance with somebody that you weren’t particularly physically attracted to. You danced with them because they were a good dancer. And some of the girls that you were physically attracted to, you didn’t go any further with that, because they couldn’t dance!

This account encompasses all the inter-related aspects of social dance that were and are important to the age group: the music, dress, etiquette, and sexual codes. Although this participant’s views were widely shared, others would regard the emphasis on the enjoyment and aesthetics of dance, and the view that it surpassed the desire to initiate relationships with the opposite sex, as a rather romanticised account of most dance-hall interactions. Nonetheless, these different elements continue to play an important part in the meaning of social dance for older people. The music played at social dance venues, both ballroom and sequence, is still an important ingredient of the enjoyment and their popularity:

The other [reason why I like it] is it’s my kind of music. I like that sort of music; I can hear the music; I can feel the music; I like to dance; I like the feel of dancing; it’s great, there something about dance which is quite natural, it appears to me. It’s natural to go and want to dance and it’s natural to enjoy the music that one dances to. (Don)

Most modern sequence dancers took up the dance form in their later years. For some, an interest in modern sequence was an opportunity to rekindle the passion of their youth. This passion had been quiescent during their middle years, often because their time was taken up with bringing up children. Others had continued to dance for most of their lives. Some went on to take ‘ballroom’ and ‘Latin’ more seriously, often to a high standard, winning medals and competitions. Their

experiences in these years retain considerable meaning as part of a dancer's life history. Photo albums and articles of clothing, as well as trophies and certificates, are kept as reminders of the peak of their dancing career. Many of these dancers moved into 'sequence' when dance halls closed down, or they could no longer manage the competitive element of 'ballroom' dancing. Most 'sequence' dancers see this form as the natural and inevitable progression for older dancers, who may not be able or wish to dance to such a high standard. Two ex-competition ballroom dancers who now teach 'sequence' said, for example, that it is gentler and friendlier, and they criticised the 'cattiness' of competition ballroom dancing.

For older dancers who choose sequence, the different interaction between the dancers in the two forms of dance is associated with the use of space. Ballroom dancers require more space than sequence dancers, not only because they move all over the floor, but because they are trained to take long steps. This is more dangerous for those whose lower limb mobility or balance has passed its peak:

Ballroom dancing is not so good 'cause you do all sorts of strange things and do it all over the place. You are always cutting across floors. With modern sequence you do it in an orderly fashion. At our age, you don't want to be bashing into people. Ballroom dancing is more dangerous; you bump into each other. (Annie)

Participants thus framed the move into sequence dancing as an acceptance of their ageing – as a natural progression for their age. It continues what they know already, but within that continuity they can make changes that suit older bodies and minds. Dancers have to live with the recurrent presence of death and disability in one form or another. Often a dance partner will die or become seriously ill, which leaves the other partner suffering not only the loss of a loved one, but also the cessation of a lifelong activity and social world. The death of one partner often leaves the other with a problem. Do they continue with the activity they love most in their life without their long-time dancing partner, or give it all up now that they have gone? Many do return to dancing after an interval, usually following the persuasion of friends or relatives. As Midge pointed out, it is the sense of continuity in practising the skill of dancing, and the need for engagement with the familiar, in all senses of the word, that draws them back. Dancing, it seems, brings a sense of stability when it is most needed:

They're clinging on to something there that they've known so well, and ... I think, you know, that ... you know, they just don't forget dance, even when they have to stay away from it for a while, whatever the reason ... losing

somebody, or having something wrong with them, they just come back to it as though they've never been away, most of them. It's just a question of, you know, settling down again to it, and then it all comes flooding back.

The fact that women live longer than men, and that men are less likely to go to a dance on their own, means that at most clubs there are one or two women dancers who come along on their own or with a female friend. It is well known amongst older dancers that because of the shortage of men, women often dance with other women and some get so used to taking the man's part that they can only lead, not follow.

The established code of social ballroom dancing, with which many dancers became well acquainted in their youth, is that the man leads at all times. On the dance floor in ballroom dancing, the man is always 'right' whether or not he makes mistakes. The partnership dynamics are a little different in modern sequence. Although the dance *genre* requires that the man takes the lead, the woman knows the order of the figures as well as the man, so she is not as reliant upon her partner. How compliant she is to his lead depends on the personal dynamics of the couple. Annie, whose partner is much older and maybe more malleable than she, believes that in modern sequence it is possible to subvert the traditional code:

You are not under a man's thumb with modern sequence. The lady can gently push the man around with a little thumb push here and there and a whisper or two if he's doing it the wrong way – there are so many new dances. Men and women are equal.

The code is also challenged by the effects of ageing, for a failing memory may cause the man to forget his steps. The partner tends to take over when this happens. The change in partnership dynamics demonstrates how dancing couples can adjust to changes in their minds and bodies within the established codes and framework of social dancing. They do not want either ageing or bereavement to cause the total break down of these codes, for then the rules of their world would collapse, but when and where necessary they are subtly subverted. There is, one should note, less scope for mild or hidden subversion of the codes of social ballroom dancing.

For people in later life, modern sequence dancing is therefore a means for the expression of their need for both continuity and change. Continuity is provided, in the sense that the steps, posture, holds, dress codes and music are similar to, if not exactly the same as, those of social ballroom dancing. And it provides a vehicle for the changes that are needed by dancers whose ageing bodies and minds find it difficult to cope with social and competitive ballroom dancing, which is widely considered to be more dangerous and less friendly.



### Enjoyment of the dance and the ‘recycled teenager’

Older dancers readily and repeatedly expressed their enjoyment of dancing, and at some venues the immense pleasure was immediately visible to an observer. One participant expressed the marked contrast in the ways that she felt before a dance and when she entered the dance hall. ‘It is wonderful here – [before arriving] I feel so low, and then I hear the music as I’m walking down the corridor and my spirits lift’. Another commented: ‘You don’t know what goes on behind these doors – if only the others could see how we are enjoying ourselves’. Many were aware that this was their last chance to have some fun in their lives:

I think they really want to enjoy themselves, and that’s for the rest of their life, and that’s it: that’s how it is. I find that the older people really want to live it up as much as they can. (Tim)

This capacity for fun was expressed not only in the dancing itself but in all other aspects of the occasion: its sociability, the dressing up, and the sense of humour that we found in most of the dance communities that we visited. Dancers often used the phrase ‘recycled teenager’ when reflecting on their enjoyment of the dancing and on their attitude to life in their later years. There is in fact a dance group in London for people aged 55 or more years of age called *Recycled Teenagers*. When dancers use this phrase, they appear to refer to their rediscovered and unbridled enjoyment of dancing, and to a social life without the responsibilities of their middle years. It is not, however, that these dancers want to relive their teens, rather that they construct this new period of their lives as one in which they can have all the fun that they had then but without the drawbacks.

According to some participants, one drawback is the need for a sexual relationship with all its complications. Almost all the dancers were tactile and demonstrative with their affections: they kiss and hug each other at the beginning and end of the club nights. Particularly in the Essex modern sequence clubs, they happily swap partners and chat to their friends’ wives or husbands. At the same time, many participants proclaimed a complete lack of interest in meeting a new partner or lover, and this lack of interest is consciously and explicitly expressed as an improvement on previous periods in their lives. The modern sequence dancers in Essex, in particular, maintained avidly that their friendliness was not focused on sexuality, and avoided the rivalry that comes with attracting and keeping the affection of a member of the opposite sex:

In your 50s and 40s you feel threatened when your partner is making a fuss of somebody else, but [now] it's quite a laugh ... my husband never sits with me and he always sits with other women and, to be honest, he's always been like that with other women, and they make quite a fuss of him, and everybody thinks it's a hoot and, as you say, in my 40s I would have been extremely jealous but I'm not now. (Gert)

Nonetheless, at the ballroom and mixed dance events in south-east London, we observed an underlying element of 'sexual' tension, which belied the participants' self-portrayal as being beyond such pursuits. Several dancers had met their sexual partners on the dance floor, and in some cases the exchange of dance partners had progressed to the exchange of sexual partners. Some dancers were quite possessive of their partners: one did not wish to be filmed dancing with his partner in case his wife saw the film. The tension was not entirely generated by the sexual dimension, however, but also by the women's wish to be partnered by the better male dancers. A DJ who also liked to dance found that he was in great demand when he came on to the floor, and that he had to be careful with whom he danced. One particular dance was reserved for one partner: if he danced with someone else, he was in 'big trouble'. Another dancer recognised this rivalry as a comic aspect of being a 'recycled teenager':

One of the good things about this is you become a teenager again – I really laugh when I hear some of them talk – they say, 'I'm not dancing with Bert because he danced with so and so'. (Alf)

### **Sociability and *communitas***

All respondents in the study asserted that they gained much pleasure from the sociability of modern sequence dancing. Derek, for example, when asked why he went to sequence dance clubs, stated: 'Firstly, it was dance, secondly it's a social thing'. At many dance clubs, the social dimension is strengthened by 'special' Saturday night dances, Christmas parties, and well-attended dancing holidays through which many dancers join a countrywide and extensive network of friends and acquaintances. When a dancer becomes ill or has to go into hospital, they are likely to receive hundreds of cards from their fellow dancers. For some participants, the sociability of social dancing is more than friendliness, it is an expression of '*communitas*'. This concept, which stems from the work of Turner (1974), has been used by O'Connor (1997) in an analysis of Irish step dancing, and accords well with our observations of modern sequence dancers. Turner sees *communitas* as involving:

rituals in which egalitarian and co-operative behaviour is characteristic, and in which secular distinctions of rank, office and status are temporarily in abeyance or regarded as irrelevant. (cited in O'Connor 1997: 154)

Dancers from several venues commented on the egalitarianism of dance venues, which they say exists whatever a person's previous occupation and regardless of their social status. The social support network was noted earlier. At the heart of the notion of *communitas* is the idea of a collective or community. As Cowan (1990: 20) notes, to be a participant in the dance is 'to be in (and with) the group; it is also to be in the thick of the meanings created. ... The dance, graphically suggesting a collectivity bound by shared knowledge, skill, and physical connection, is considered an apt metaphor for the community itself'. The experience of a community spirit may well become more meaningful and necessary as people age. The dancers commented that they have little time left, and so must make the most of themselves and each other. They are aware that many of the dancers have lost partners and now live on their own. This adds to the consciousness that the group must be kept together, so that its members can receive emotional and social sustenance from each other. Midge vividly described an enclosed social world to which everyone belonged and faced loss and death:

It was so – when you get old, I mean, as you get older, people die. We lose a load down there ... and we're so pleased to see anybody we know that is still alive! I will run up to them and kiss them ... it's just something that older people do, I think. I mean we like to be liked and wanted, and we like to be a part of a dancing society. I mean a lot of these ladies live on their own ... and they've lost their partners, you see, there is a family there where you belong. You belong in a dance hall, you see. People know you if you're on the circuit.

For some who lived through the Second World War, it is also a continuation of the 'Dunkirk spirit' of the British population at the time, when 'there was a spirit between them going then and I think that spirit is still with them' (Tim). At one venue, the community spirit may be fostered because the dance is held in a community hall in the middle of a large estate, where many of the dancers have lived all their lives. It is interesting that the strongest feeling of *communitas* was found among the modern sequence dancers. We observed, and they insisted, that the collective feeling and understanding that exists in sequence dancing is not found in ballroom dancing.<sup>9</sup> We found that at the venues where the predominant *genre* was ballroom, participants criticised other dancers and did not identify themselves with a group. It may be that it is the pattern and form of the dance itself that adds

to or detracts from this feeling. Whitworth (1995) has reflected on the stronger community spirit of modern sequence dancing:

In sequence [as compared to ballroom] dancing, all couples perform the same sequence and there is a much greater feeling of togetherness – a community spirit is developed by the dancers having the common aim of performing the given sequence correctly. Each couple (perhaps subconsciously) watches the others and they often compare notes after the dance. (1995: 205)

For sequence dancers the overall pattern of the dance that the dancers make together is important. Modern sequence, like other circle dances, works best when all the couples dance together in unison and create an overall aesthetic; this cannot be achieved when dancers are only aware of themselves as individuals. Moving together in time and place, as McNeill's 1995 study showed, is a powerful force in the affective bonding of the individual to the group, and has been associated with dance in many historical periods and societies. Ballroom dancing couples appear to be more focused on their own alignment, performance and small space on the dance floor. In this way, even when the feeling or notion of *communitas* is not expressed verbally, or is an unintended consequence, it can exist as a lived experience that affects and is affected by the bodies of the dancers. This experience appears, in some unfathomable way, to pass into their consciousness, and from this to influence their social behaviour on and off the dance floor. Thus, dancers' sociability off the dance floor is both strengthened by and strengthens the popularity and success of the *genre*.

We found, however, that in some places the achievement of a community spirit was as much an unfulfilled wish as a reality. In all modern sequence dance clubs in Essex, and to a lesser extent at some venues in south London, the respondents contradicted their own advocacy of *communitas* by being territorial about the seating arrangements. In the Essex clubs, as soon as they entered the hall, the sequence dancers took great pains to secure their own seats in specific places around the dance floor. At some clubs, indeed, the dancers brought tapestry cushions embroidered with their names. This tended to create bad feeling amongst other dancers, for new dancers could not find anywhere to sit and some decided not to stay for the evening's entertainment. Some respondents admitted to this lapse in their avowed friendliness:

Oh yes, [people can be] very territorial about their seats ... [there is a] sharp intake of breath if someone sits in your seat. Obviously you know everybody but you create your own special clique ... you know what you're doing and, if you go to a new place, you don't just go and barge in. (Jane)

Despite this territoriality, the sense of community that dancing brings,

whether mythic or real, is an important aspect of the dance experience. It is clearly a significant component of the experience for older dancers, and may take the place of once extant valued communities that are no longer to be seen in the conditions of high modernity, in which doors are locked and extended family interactions are rare.

### **Looking good on the dance floor**

Older social dancers tend to feel that ‘looking good’ on the dance floor is a necessary element of the dance experience. Looking good involves the aesthetics of the dance itself, which implies posture and movement, as well as the dress and appearance of the dancer. Dress is a vital aspect of personal appearance, as are the dancer’s shoes and accoutrements. It is most important that shoes are ‘dance shoes’, which are usually gold or silver and open-toed. While on weekdays a dancer’s attire may be fairly casual, the Saturday night dance is the opportunity to wear something more glamorous. Special occasions are welcomed as occasions to dress up:

We had a dance a little while ago at the officers’ club and we all made a good turnout – all long dress ... it was nice to dress in the long dress, and so you put on your old jewellery and pretty dresses and really go to town ... everybody enjoys themselves. It’s nice when you get to our age that you can dress up and, the men, they dress up and wear bow ties. (Doris)

Having to dress up, look nice and make an effort is regarded as an important part of the battle against the psychological and physical deterioration of getting older, while dressing up in a certain style prompts nostalgia and is an essential ingredient of the pre-1960s cultural code:

That’s another thing you see if you are at home all the while you won’t bother, would you, but you have to dress up, you have to wash your hair. And as you get older it’s harder, you have to make a lot more effort. (Alice)

And again, coming back to what I said, it was a romantic era; you come back to the same thing, the standards, because dress plays a part as well. If you’re not dressed up, if you’re wearing very casual clothes, then you’re going to treat everything very casually in a way. (Derek)

Derek’s wife, Judy, sees the dress code as an antidote to young people’s sloppiness: ‘Youngsters of today slummock along don’t they?’ Most of the older male dancers would probably agree with Les, a former competition ballroom dancer and teacher, who believes that female dancers should be very particular about their dress, should make an

effort to look 'dressed up', and must not wear trousers. Dressing up is an essential part of social dancing for the older dancer. It makes for continuity of style; it is about looking and therefore feeling good; it alleviates actual or felt decline; and it challenges the representation of older people as no longer caring about their visual appearance. For these dancers, caring for their appearance is crucial, and they are actively engaged in constructing a positive image of themselves.

For the most part, the concern with an aesthetically pleasing self-representation is not directed outwards, to the public at large, but inwards to themselves and each other. The dancers' visibility to each other counters their invisibility outside the dance hall. There are dancers, however, who love the limelight and project a visible public image. Eve, a social ballroom dancer at several venues in south-east London, actively promotes her image as a glamorous and vivacious woman who relishes the spotlight. She has featured in newspaper articles and television documentaries. For Eve, dressing up and looking glamorous has become an aspect of her visibility. She has been quoted in a newspaper article as saying, 'I have dresses in every colour: red, orange, black and gold. I've just bought one which is lace and has pearls all over it. A few people will comment on them, especially if they are strapless'.<sup>10</sup>

### **Dance as cultural capital**

In this section, we argue that older dancers draw on their age-defined cultural capital to demonstrate the superiority of their peer group over younger generations. In this way, the advantages of a learnt skill and embodied knowledge balances age-defined disadvantages such as the physical problems of an ageing body. Bourdieu (1984) defined cultural capital as the knowledge that is accumulated through upbringing and education and which confers social status on the holder. Writers on dance and youth subcultures have extended and modified the concept. O'Connor (1997), for example, sees 'hipness' as a form of subcultural capital, while according to Thornton (1995), subcultural capital confers status on its owner, and can be objectified and embodied in the form of fashionable haircuts and carefully assembled record collections.

During the course of this research, it became apparent that the participants had their own objectified and embodied 'subcultural capital'. As has been seen, dancers draw on an embodied knowledge of dancing, a style of dress and a type of music, as well as on generation-bound codes of conduct. They often have their own record collections,

collected over a lifetime of dancing, and they too have a version of 'hipness' or style, even if this might be a kind of 'anti-style' (Polhemus and Proctor 1984). The dancers tend to wear the same dress styles for years on end (with detailed variations) and to ignore changes in fashion. It could be said that they are consciously practising an unsubversive form of 'anti-style', which requires everything to be fixed, certain and rule-bound, in sharp contrast either to followers of fashion or to the subversive 'anti-style' of, say, punks.

The subcultural ideologies of youth are seen as a means by which they assert their own symbolic identity, an identity that they consider to be superior to or different from the culture of other generations. Indeed, Thornton argues that self-asserted subcultural distinctions are always more than assertions of difference, and that they usually entail a claim to authority and presume the inferiority of others. Thus it may be the case that social dance for older people, as for the young, produces and preserves a superior, symbolic generational identity, and that it has its own subcultural distinctions.

It is undoubtedly the case for many of the dancers that the younger generation's dancing is inferior to their own. As one dancer put it, it is not 'real' dancing, only 'exercise to music'. Even when younger people dance the same dances, they are perceived to lack the same sense of grace. Another dancer, whilst watching the rumba, commented that younger people do not know how to dance with the required fluidity and that they have 'staccato' movement. Thus, for those who had danced all their life, dance was a learned skill and had created cultural capital that they drew on to alleviate and overcome the problems of being old. Indeed, by the continued presentation of the body as smart and glamorous through posture, grace, style, skill, dress and other accoutrements, and by elevated codes of conduct and etiquette, these dancers appear to claim the status of a morally and culturally superior generation, one which can always surpass the younger generation, not just on the dance floor but off it too.

### **Dance and the concept of 'old'**

The dancers were often ambivalent when discussing age and dancing skills. It is a truism of gerontology that an individual's chronological age does not necessarily equate with how old that person perceives him or herself to be (Gubrium and Holstein 2000). For some at least, age is a flexible as opposed to a determining phenomenon. Among our informants, some in their 60s or early 70s perceived themselves as quite

young and framed ‘others’, only a little older than themselves, as ‘really’ old (Unruh 1993: 96). Yet the older were not dismissed as incapable on the dance floor. On the contrary, many relatively young dancers observed that whilst the ‘really old’ might cut corners, or might not ‘stride out’ as readily as themselves, many were ‘good dancers’. Many dancers believe that age is irrelevant to good dancing, and that dancers can overcome increasing disabilities through their own skill and grace. Eve praised ‘an old girl who is 86 and who can do anything that anybody does’. For Eve, it depends on how long you’ve been dancing and how fit you are. Alice, a sequence dancer in Essex, was keen to praise another dancer, Lil, who was 86 years of age:

She’s kept fit all her life and she’s the most graceful dancer on the floor. She’s the most graceful dancer I’ve ever seen, and even though she has trouble with her legs, she’s still got that lovely grace.

Dancers also believe that when it comes to choosing partners, age is not a restriction and what matters is whether they are good dancers. Alf, one of the younger dancers at one Essex venue, has a partner who though much older than him demonstrates a grace and elegance that seems to have grown with age.<sup>11</sup> Eric, a lively 70-year-old teacher of competition ballroom and sequence dancing, reported that in some competitions older dancers partnered younger dancers including children:

And the strange, the strange part about it is ... the other thing I like about dancing is ... youngsters don’t see those oldies that dance with them, they don’t see them as old [and they say] ‘They’re one of us. They’re one of us, because they compete. No, they’re not old fogies, because they’re one of us!’

Good dancing may therefore challenge the construction of the ageing body as undesirable and aesthetically displeasing. It also challenges Sherlock’s (1993) unqualified assertion that in contemporary dance culture the body is commodified. Our view is that if anything is commodified, it is the skill of the dancer rather than the body itself. And whilst appearance, as we have seen, is important to these dancers, the construction of a pleasing appearance is not to create a sexually desirable body – as may be among younger dancers – but to add to the enjoyment and aesthetic of the dance.

### **The fit dancing body and mind**

Almost every respondent believed that dancing warded off the ailments of old age, especially the stiffening of the body and the deterioration of the mind. Stories abound of how dancing enables people to keep going



in the face of operations and illness. Many dancers commented that dancing not only kept the body fit but also kept the mind active and working well. Perhaps the most inspiring demonstrations of the value of dance were provided by the dancers who had significant problems of failing bodies and minds and either hid or became oblivious to them. Annie, who runs a club in Essex, noted:

People come with their aches and pains to me [and] they say, 'I shouldn't be here. I've got this wrong with me', and then they do two and a half hours of dancing and don't feel a thing. I've seen people in town with walking sticks, and two hours later I've seen them dancing away as if there's nothing wrong with them. (Annie)

Another dancer, Gert, described her first visit to a club:

That was the biggest shock of my life when I went. And then they were all dancing round, and we couldn't do it. ... And then they all put on their shoes and limped, and I mean limped ... limped home. Yes, just hobbled! ... Yeah, well, you see, they'd been leaning on each other while they were dancing.

As with the concept of *communitas*, therefore, the construction of the ageing dancing body as a capable and able body is both actuality and myth. Dancers are undoubtedly amongst the fittest and liveliest of their generation, and they are certainly not feigning their agility on the dance floor. But dancers prefer to see themselves as active even when their bodies are deteriorating. The tension between the need to continue as a fit and skilful dancer and the actuality of an increasingly disabled body is partly hidden, in order to cope with the awareness that there will be a time, in the not so distant future, when they will no longer be able to dance. The capability of dancers almost literally to put down their crutches and dance suggests also that the body is more than an aggregate of mechanical parts that either work or break down. It is a lived experiential body, which, for a short time at least, can be transcended so that its predominant defining characteristics, in this case disability and fatigue, are forgotten in the pleasure of the dance.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the meaning and importance of social dance (particularly modern sequence dance) for the older dancer. No attempt has been made to focus on a single aspect of the experience; rather our aim has been to convey the importance and the multifarious benefits of dance for many older people. We have argued that social dancing

provides not just the opportunities for physical exercise and increased fitness, but is a uniquely positive experience. The findings contrast greatly with most writing and research on ageing and older people, which focuses on loss and negativity.

Dance can be meaningful for dancers of any age, but we argue that it has particular resonance for those who have entered the third age. Dance mitigates the public invisibility of the older person, demonstrates that chronological old age does not have fixed consequences, and creates real and mythic experiences of aliveness, fitness, fun and flexibility. Moreover, dance provides a sense of continuity when it is most needed, and can generate or recover a feeling of *communitas*, an experience that is particularly important to the age group. Another important aspect of the meaning of dance is that modern sequence and social ballroom dancing help to create and regenerate an age-bound (or cohort specific) 'subcultural capital'. This is particularly important and meaningful when other types of 'capital', such as the work skills of their generation have not only been lost through retirement but have also had generally declining prestige. Many of the respondents avowedly wished to see an influx of younger dancers, but there was also the feeling that newcomers would only be welcome if they accepted the existing age-bound codes of etiquette and behaviour. It must be pointed out, however, that many of the participants in our research, particularly those who engaged in other dance *genres* such as line dancing, happily danced with all age groups in their classes.

Participants in this study often expressed one regret, that they were losing so many of their friends through disability and death, and that none of the younger generation were replacing them. The unfortunate result is that many of the clubs are closing from lack of support or dance leaders, which may eventually lead to the demise of this form of dancing. As modern sequence dance brings so much pleasure and meaning to so many people, it is much to be regretted that the time may come when the opportunities for the next generation of older people to 'go dancing', of the kind we have discussed, will be rare or even non-existent.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank the United Kingdom Arts and Humanities Research Board for funding this project. Thanks must also be given to the many dancers that we danced with, interviewed and filmed; and to the gatekeepers, DJs and dance leaders who gave us every assistance, supplied tea, biscuits and mince pies, and tried to teach us to dance.

## NOTES

- 1 This is not to imply that individuals over 60 years of age are one amorphous mass, as Gubrium and Holstein (2000) point out in the introduction to their fascinating collection. The researchers encountered much resistance from the participants to terms such as 'elderly' and 'retired'. We opted for the term 'older people', as it appeared to have fewer negative associations for the respondents.
- 2 Cowan's exploration of social dancing in northern Greece includes dancers of all ages.
- 3 The fieldwork took place during September 2000 to May 2001.
- 4 A fuller account of the methodology, including the mapping methods and results, can be found in Cooper and Thomas (2002). The mapping is reported in another paper to be published in *Dance Research* in 2002.
- 5 The innovativeness of modern sequence dancers was observed in several of the videos.
- 6 See Whitworth (1995) and the authors' cited papers.
- 7 Anecdotal information from British modern sequence dancers who have frequently visited Australia.
- 8 'Tanner' was the slang name of the old sixpence coin. Commonly this was the admission charge to a dance.
- 9 It was difficult at times to ascertain whether the respondents were referring to this kind of social dancing or competitive ballroom dancing. The latter, by its nature, is very competitive and conflict has been observed between partners as well as between different couples. Social ballroom dancing lacks this aggressive element but is still viewed by sequence dancers as less sociable than modern sequence.
- 10 *Daily Express*, September 7, 2000: 47.
- 11 This woman is seen dancing in two films made at the venue 10 years apart. In the later film that we made, her style and grace appear to have improved considerably on her accomplishment in the earlier film taken by one of the members.

## References

- Atchley, R. 1993. Continuity theory and evolution of activity. In Kelly, J. (ed.), *Activity and Ageing*. Sage, London, 5–16.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Cooper, L. and Thomas, H. 2002. *Dancing Into the Third Age: Social Dance as Cultural Text*. Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths' College, University of London, London.
- Cowan, J. 1990. *Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.
- Gubrium, J. F. and Holstein, J. A. (eds) 2000. *Ageing and Everyday Life*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- McNeill, W. H. 1995. *Marching Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Ness, S. A. 1992. *Body, Movement and Culture: Kinaesthetic and Visual Symbolism in a Philippine Community*. University of Philadelphia Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- O'Connor, B. 1997. Safe sets: women, dance and communitas. In Thomas, H. (ed.), *Dance in the City*. Macmillan, London, 149–172.
- Polhemus, T. and Proctor, L. 1984. *Pop Styles*. Vermillian, London.

- Sherlock, J. 1993. Dance and the culture of the body. In Scott, S. and Morgan, D. (eds), *Body Matters*. Falmer, London, 35–48.
- Straw, W. 1997. Communities and scenes in popular music. In Gelder, K. and Thornton, S. (eds), *The Subcultures Reader*. Routledge, London, 494–505.
- Thomas, H. 2000. Dance halls. In Pile, S. and Thrift, N. (eds), *City A-Z*. Routledge, London, 53–55.
- Thomas, H. and Miller, N. 1997. Ballroom blitz. In Thomas, H. (ed.), *Dance in the City*. Macmillan, London, 89–110.
- Thompson, P., Itzin, C. and Abendstern, M. 1990. *I Don't Feel Old*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Thornton, S. 1995. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Cultural Capital*. Polity, Cambridge.
- Turner, V. 1974. *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York.
- Unruh, D. 1983. *Invisible Lives*. Sage, London.
- Whitworth, T. A. 1995. *A History of Sequence Dancing*. T.A. Whitworth, Chesterfield, Derbyshire.

*Accepted 15 June 2002*

*Address for correspondence:*

Lesley Cooper, Department of Health and Human Sciences,  
University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, Essex, Co43SQ,  
e-mail: lesley.cooper1@ntlworld.com  
Helen Thomas, Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths' College,  
Lewisham Way, London SE14 6NW.  
e-mail: h.thomas@gold.ac.uk