

The Art of Dance and its Connection to Wellbeing and Identity

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The Greek community of Melbourne has long supported a range of cultural activities that derive from its shared heritage. This is significant in the maintenance of a Greek identity among younger members of the community and for providing cultural continuity and consonance among older ones. One element of this shared heritage that remains popular is Greek dancing that remains a popular pastime for various age groups. 19 participants (four male and fifteen female), aged between 18-58 were recruited from a well-established long standing dancing school in Melbourne. The participants were interviewed (in either Greek, English or a mix) about their participation in Greek dancing and the meaning it had for them as well as their reason for taking part. This presentation will discuss findings from this research project. A number of themes related to health, wellbeing and identity emerged from the interviews. It was notable that participants experienced a high level of social connection and identity support from their dancing despite many having started for reasons of health and exercise. It was also found that this highly specific cultural activity helped to maintain strong links within the community as well as with its historical origins in Greece. In this way, dancing can be seen as an important adjunct to health and wellbeing in the Greek community.

Keywords: Dance, Health, Well-being, Identity, Greek, Qualitative

Introduction

In Melbourne there are many Greek specific institutions and one of these is dancing – in fact as noted by the works of Gonzalez, 2008; Tutton, 2004; and He, 2010 Greek dancing has been an element of this local culture for many years but has grown in popularity more recently, perhaps as part of an interest in personal cultural heritage that is evident in Australia as well as worldwide.

The Manasis School of Greek Dance and Culture (<https://manasisdance.com.au>) is a well-established institution in Melbourne that offers an opportunity for individuals of all ages to learn and participate in traditional Greek dancing and also to perform at various events as a member of a group representing the school. One recent and significant too was the group trip to Greece in July 2024 – Destination Patrida.

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Background

In the city of Melbourne, there is a large Greek Community with a suburb in Melbourne referred to as ‘little Athens’. The Greek community in Melbourne, Australia, is large and dynamic. It has been in existence for more than 100 years since the first migrants from Greece began to arrive in Australia. However, it increased greatly in size and strength after the second World War, when thousands of new migrants hoping for a better life in a new country left Greece to settle in “the lucky country” (Avgoulas and Fanany, 2020; Tamis, 2005).

Methodology

Some key demographic as well as methodological information on this current study of the participants from the Manasis School of Greek Dance and Culture:

- 19 participant's
- Four male and fifteen female dancers rang
- Age from 18 to 58
- Thirteen of the participants were born in Australia, while the remaining six were born in Greece.
- Most of the participants also engaged in other sports (eleven individuals), while for the rest (eight individuals), their dance classes were their only form of organised exercise activity.
- Interviews were either in Greek or English – (all interviews and the subsequent analysis of data were carried out in accordance with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research).
- In depth semi structured interviews undertaken
- Thematic analysis undertaken to analyses the data collected

Literature

When analyzing the literature three specific areas will be examined more closely (despite a more extensive review of literature undertaken) – these have been selected bases on the study presented - these being:

1. Culture and Art
2. Health and Wellbeing
3. Identity

When the act of dance has been examined it has gone hand in hand with health and overall wellbeing (Ritter and Lowe, 1996; Hanna, 2006; Murcia et al, 2010). When Greek dancing specifically is examined, we see that it extends to being a cultural activity that steams in facts from older generation's perceptions of their culture of origin and its characteristic elements (Avgoulas, 2013;

Thomas, 2003). What the present study tells us is that dance holds a social value along with the satisfaction it gives to the participants. As we see the participant's making a strong link between the aspect of health and overall wellbeing with health to dance and in turn identity. For a detailed discussion on this please see the works of (Phinney et al, 2001; Ryff, Keyes and Hughes, 2003; Umana-Taylor, 2004).

What we know about dance is that it has had been a positive aspect since the beginning of human history, in regards however to the therapeutic aspect of dance this has only begun to be recognized as a formal profession since the mid-1940 (Ritter & Lowe, 1996; Hanna, 2006; Murcia et al., 2010), and the concept of dance as a therapy for specific conditions is beginning to be explored (Hackney, Kantorovich & Earhart, 2007; Belardinelli et al., 2008). In addition what we see from the literature is the significance and in turn importance of physical activity to both health and wellbeing (see Warburton, Nicol & Bredin, 2006; Haskell et al., 2007). Dance, which combines physical activity with music, which in itself is also strongly linked to emotional wellbeing (see Laucka, 2006) - dance has been shown to facilitate social bonding through participation in a shared activity requiring a pattern of coordinated activity and interaction (McNeil, 1995).

The present study contributes to the literature in this area and includes the additional dimension of cultural identity, which supports the choice of context, namely a Greek dancing school in a large diaspora community.

Having thus a good understanding in the power, value and influence of culture then is a complicated business, though experiencing it and seeing it in action can be very direct, powerful and simple (Mickov & Doyle 2013).

Results and the findings of the Study

Overall, eight themes (including major and minor) have been identified in this study – as noted in the below tables. These themes fit into six dimensions that structure the participants' perceptions and interpretation of their experience: connection to Greek dancing; the meaning of Greek dancing; reasons for participation; dancing as an element of personal identity; Hellenic heritage in diaspora; and dancing and health.

Table 1. Major Themes from Data Analysis

Connection to Greece
Social and Cultural Identity
Cultural Maintenance
Physical and Emotional Benefits of Dancing

Table 2. Minor Themes from Data Analysis

Release of stress and escape from problems
Membership in a social group
Language and Culture
Therapeutic Benefits

What is demonstrated and shown in this study is that dancing plays a significant role in the participants' perception of themselves as individuals of Greek ancestry and their personal connection to their heritage and to Greece itself. All participants viewed their participation in Greek dancing at the Manasis School as highly beneficial, although the relative importance of specific aspects of the experience (fitness; socialising; wellbeing and happiness; maintenance of cultural identity; and so forth) varied, depending on the individual.

A number of participants viewed Greek dancing as providing a link to Greece and their culture of familial origin, even if they themselves had never lived in Greece.

The contribution of participation in Greek dancing to the participants' sense of identity was significant. Melbourne has a large Greek community which is part of the broader Australian diaspora. While much of this community has been in Australia for decades, the Greek identity of individuals as well as community institutions is strong, and members of the community have collectively gone to great length to maintain their distinctive culture in the context of a multicultural nation. Participation in Greek dancing, which is a public activity that derives directly from the community's heritage, is one way of demonstrating cultural identity and showing association with the Greek community in Australia as well as with Greece itself.

Being part of something Greek and learning about it is very important to me. It's like I get a tick from my grandparents, a tick from my parents and one for myself.

[18 year old, Australian-born male]

The aspect of heritage in relation to Greek dancing was also reflected on by the participants –

I have grown up in my family with dancing, my parents from a young age, from when I was in the stroller would take us to dinner dances. I have grown up in dancing and Greek music, and from a young age I was in a dancing group. [23 year old, Australian-born, female]

Performances is why we do this, the performance, and the look in the eyes of the audience. They are amazed – especially the old people, they feel very connected. My family is very supportive of my dancing and have always been. [22 year old, Australia-born female]

Dancing is something I enjoy, being with my friends, it makes me happy and I keep my culture alive. Dancing is also a way to be physically active and is exercise. It gets your heartrate up and you get a sweat. It definitely is physical activity. [20 year old, Australian-born female]

My family supports my dancing and encourages me to come - for me it's the emotional benefits that I get here, an escape and things are more bearable. Connecting with my culture and a sense of connection, apart from your family you have the support of your culture. [58 year old, Greek-born female]

Several participants expressed the idea that dancing allowed them to maintain a Greek identity, alongside an Australian identity - as follows:

Maintaining my Greek identity and it's also good for my health, I get exercise and it's an escape and provides emotional benefits. [58 year old, Greek-born female]

My family likes it that I dance, as I'm not forgetting my identity and I'm keeping my Greekness and the roots of my ancestors. [18 year old, Greek-born female]

Parents and grandparents are the same as they have all made a lot of efforts to keep our Greek culture. Like though Greek School – to uphold the Greekness and that Greek identity. Like not to lose that – not losing that because they left Greece. When they see me dance they are over joyed – there is my grandson, they adore it and very proud. [18 year old, Australia-born male]

There is the physical activity aspect to it as I don't do another sport and a way to keep fit. But it's also a social thing. It's also an escape – I used it a lot in year 12 to zone out, so it was good for my emotional health. Both physical and emotional health and a connection to my heritage. [22 year old, Australian-born female]

The Greek community in Melbourne is large and includes individuals of all ages. The oldest members represent the original immigrant generation who arrived in Australia in the years following World War II and who founded the first Greek institutions in the community. The participants in this study all had an awareness of the multigenerational nature of the community and some idea of the varied experiences of each generation. This knowledge was a factor in their participation and also affected their interpretation of the experience:

When we perform and there are elders there – they cry and get emotional but it makes them happy and provides them with emotional health as it provides them with that sense that the Greek culture and tradition will be continued and the young ones are making effort to keep it. [18 year old, Greek-born male]

Elders of the Greek community get so happy, it gives them happiness and makes them believe that Greek will continue. Their emotions show happiness, they clap, it gives them courage, they clap. [19 year old, Greek-born female]

Cultural continuity between generations was important to and characteristic of the Greek community in Melbourne. They saw their dancing as a manifestation of that, namely that they were continuing a tradition that had evolved in Greece and had been transplanted to Australia. They were aware that this continuity tended to be very important to older members of the community and their own families but were also anxious to continue the traditional themselves and through their own children.

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Greek dancing is something that gives you joy and should be incorporated into healthcare – there are both physical and emotional benefits. [58 year old, Greek-born female]

Greek music and dancing makes me feel good, as crap as I feel too – it's the emotion and I feel it and when I dance I feel that *κέφι*, that [ευεξία] wellbeing. You really don't know what you can achieve here – we maintain our culture and then there are the benefits to health – both physical and the emotional and here is no age limit dancing can be for everyone with limits. [37 year old, Greek-born female]

I love this more [compared to other sport], and its social and I exercise – and of course my heritage plays a role in why I enjoy this so much and I feel it's part of me in my DNA – it just draws me even at my age – back in the 70s we were wogs and not accepted and now I just want it, I'm dance to it and my culture is good for my health, and thus social is so important to our health. [51 year old, Australian-born male]

Dancing is great for your health and the mental fitness it amazing, there is a togetherness here, a connection and that support. [56 year old, Australian-born male]

Dancing is regarded is a social activity that requires cooperation and coordination with others. However, to the participants in this study, the activities of the Manasis School provided a context, not just for interacting with others, but specifically for interacting with others of a similar cultural background and as noted by the participants in the process of data collection we see this being of great significance and importance in fact.

Discussion, Analysis and Conclusion

It was quite evident from what was told by the participants of the positivity associated with Greek dance for the participants that stem generations for them by maintaining the continuity of tradition and links to heritage that were handed down to them from a young age.

Several the participants were born in Australia and are members of the second or third Australian generation. As is typical among this cohort, they are fully integrated into mainstream Australian society and participate in the various social institutions of the wider community. Many of these institutions were originally set up by members of the immigrant generation who arrived in Australia in the years following World War II and strived to recreate what they felt to be crucial elements of their native culture. It is interesting to note that Melbourne is currently accommodating new arrivals from Greece as many try to immigrate to escape the prolonged economic difficulties in that part of Europe. Nonetheless, these new arrivals represent a different Greece from the one known by the original members of the current community, most of whom arrived in Australia in the 1950s.

On this it is hypothesized that the nature of Greek identity in the Melbourne community is changing but not necessarily weakening as maintenance is still of great importance and significance.

The participants in this study all felt a strong need to express and maintain their Greek identity which exists alongside an Australian identity supported by their experiences and interactions in the public environment. For all of them, Greek identity that steam generations as noted in the findings of this paper. Their dancing reflected a desire of the participants in this study to connect with their older relatives, to respect their beliefs and perceptions, and to please them by engaging in an activity that was Greek in nature.

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