Sequins, Sass, and Sisterhood: An Exploration of Older Women’s Belly Dancing

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Disempowering stereotypes plague public perceptions of older women’s bodies, particularly within Western contemporary societies. Consequently, as women age, their bodies often become sources of shame, discomfort, and ridicule. Belly dance, as a form of recreational leisure, provides a unique and somewhat unexpected space for women to subvert such perceptions. Based on qualitative interviews with older American women who belly dance, this article examines the ways in which this form of recreation provides participants a means of (re)gaining mobility, (re)claiming social space, (re)building social support, and (re)defining what it means to be sensual later in life.

KEYWORDS belly dance, menopause, recreation, mobility, empowerment, peer support, sensuality

INTRODUCTION

"Belly dance" often conjures images of scantily clothed, long-haired, full-breasted women, sensually gyrating to exotic melodies and foreign rhythms (Osweiler, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). The presumed setting for such a spectacle is often a dimly lit Middle Eastern restaurant or private party; the patrons, mostly men, causally gazing upon the dancer as she swoons and swivels around their chairs in search of her next tip. She serves as ornamentation to their leisure, a tantalizing distraction from the talk of politics over the hooka (Middle Eastern water pipe). The dancer is most often young (no gray hair or wrinkles), fit and hourglass proportioned (no excess body fat or skin folds),

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fully functioning (no obvious physical disabilities)—an epitome of Western physical beauty (Zones, 2000) with a bit of Orientalist flair.

Though momentous strides for women’s equality have occurred over the last several decades, women’s cultural worth in the United States, and in most other Western industrialized nations, remains largely tied to their physical bodies (Bordo, 1993). Reaching the age of menopause (around age 51, according to the National Institute on Aging [2010]), marks a transitional period of physical and emotional changes. The aging process becomes undeniably visible during this time, as women begin to lose bone density and posture, muscle quality, skin tone, and ease of movement. Graying hair, skin wrinkles, midsection weight gain, and sagging breasts are nearly inevitable. While some signs of aging may be camouflaged fairly easily, others involve much more time, investment, and risk (Cruickshank, 2009). As the rising rates of plastic surgery indicate (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery [ASAPS], 2009), there seems to be increased pressure for women to try to halt the signs of aging rather than celebrate them. The less-tangible signs of mid- to later life are equally disruptive for women, with abrupt hormonal fluctuations, hot flashes, loss of sexual libido, depression, migraines, sleep problems, and general anxiety being common. Increased reliance on hormonal replacement therapy (despite controversy regarding the health risks thereof) (National Institute on Aging, 2007), as well as on anti-anxiety and depression medications (Pratt, Brody, & Gu, 2011), again suggest that women may be internalizing the message that their aging bodies are objectionable (Lyons & Griffon, 2003).

This is culturally significant, for it renders the aging female body as something unappealing and shameful. There are few avenues through which women may find support for appreciating their physical and emotional selves as they are. It is difficult, given Western ideals of beauty that privilege youthful sensuality, thinness, and full physical mobility, for older women to combat such connotations (Cruickshank, 2009; Wiggs, 2010). However, belly dance, as a form of recreational leisure, provides a unique and somewhat unexpected space for women to do so. This article examines the experiences of American women who belly dance and are over the age of 50, guided by the following questions: (a) what attracts older American women to belly dance, (b) what are their experiences with this form of dance, and (c) how do these experiences challenge social expectations about older women’s physical recreation?

Data for this analysis were derived from a subsample of qualitative, semistructured interviews conducted in person and over the phone with American female belly dancers in various locales in 2009 and 2010. These interviews were focused on the benefits women experience from belly dancing in general, and a total of 67 interviews were conducted. It became clear that a considerable portion (16, or 24%) were over the age of 50, and their experiences were unique from younger participants in terms of experiencing
the dance through an older body and the cultural connotations thereof. Thus, this article centers on the unique experiences of these 16 women.

BELLY DANCE IN BRIEF

Clichéd images shape cultural understandings of belly dance. In order to appreciate how older women may find value in this form of movement, it is helpful to begin with a review of its historical, social, and political underpinnings.

Belly dance represents a modern, and largely Westernized, adaptation of myriad dance forms that originated throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia over the last several millennia (Knapp, 1981; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005). As such, belly dance is an expressive and creative genre that has remained largely uncodified in terms of set movements and structure (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005).

However, due to the effects of European colonial expansion, tourism, and globalization over the last several hundred years, the dance has become known almost exclusively as an erotic form of entertainment. Such factors have cemented a juxtaposition between the East, as it was originally perceived (hence references to the “Orient” or “Oriental” dance), and the West. For example, as part of the writings and paintings to emerge during Orientalism, women were often depicted as well-endowed, usually partially nude, performers within harem or outdoor settings whose presumed goal was to titillate, seduce, and entertain men (Alloula, 1986). Since little was actually known by Europeans about the Middle and Near East, such renditions were taken as reality, providing mysterious and sexual fodder about the exotic Other in a foreign land (Carlton, 1994; MacMaster & Lewis, 1998).

Such depictions were given greater credence through various public spectacles in the late 1800s and early 1900s. “Dancing girls” from the Middle and Near East, for instance, were brought to the U.S. in 1893 for the World Columbian Exposition (World’s Fair) in Chicago, becoming infamous for their “hootchy kootchy” dance (AlZayer, 2010; Carlton, 1994). Oscar Wilde further demonized Middle Eastern dancers through his 1894 tragedy, Salome (Carlton, 1994; Deagon, 2005). The situation was exacerbated by the negative renderings (as home-wrecking seductresses, hustlers and villains, prostitutes and harem slaves) of dancers within the over 200 movies filmed on location in North Africa throughout the early to mid-1900s (Dougherty, 2005; MacMaster & Lewis, 1998). Such activities contributed to the exoticism associated with the Middle East and set the stage for the exploitation of female entertainers in the region, who were in high demand during European expansion and colonization. It is of little wonder why belly dance is typically viewed as a form of erotic entertainment, on par with striptease, burlesque, and cabaret (Carlton, 1994; Dougherty, 2005). Consequently, it may seem
odd for older women to engage in it. It is exactly for these reasons that this article examines older women's experiences with this form of dance. Indeed, despite many negative perceptions, belly dance has become extremely popular among non–Middle Eastern women in recent years, particularly in the United States (Wright & Dreyfus, 1998).

HOLISTIC HEALTH

The contemporary context of older women's belly dancing can be framed well within the tenets of holistic health. Holistic health acknowledges the interconnections of body, mind, and spirit and supports the notion that movement may be a strong impetus toward mental, physical, and spiritual well-being (Halprin, 2000). As has been documented in established holistic movement modalities, freedom to feel one's physicality and to move spontaneously is facilitative of self-experimentation, discovery, and personal liberation—characteristics deemed central to overall health (Halprin, 2000; Payne, 2006). Dance is well established as a holistic healing modality because of its ability to fuse body, mind, and spirit activity. In particular, forms of dance that are both individually and improvisationally based are considered the most ideal because of the ways in which such genres allow for freedom of expression and creativity without regulation or judgment (Levy, 1988). In other words, the less structure placed on a person's expression, interpretation, and movement within dance, the greater the potential for healing (Halprin, 2000).

Research has just begun to examine the holistic benefits of belly dance. In its contemporary use, belly dance is most often a highly individualized, expressive, and improvised form of movement. Its technique has never been solidly codified and is subsequently in constant evolution (as opposed to ballet, jazz, or tap), which makes it ideal for personal interpretation and stylization (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003). Existing research suggests that women are attracted to it for a variety of reasons. Within the guise that most women practice it (as leisure, exercise, and recreation; Moe, 2012), belly dance has been found to facilitate greater happiness, confidence, body acceptance, and self-esteem (Giovale, 2006; Paul, 2006). It has also been connected to stress reduction, greater comfort with femininity, fitness, personal growth, and spirituality (Bock & Borland, 2011; Downey, Reel, SooHoo, & Zerbib, 2010; Kraus, 2010; Moe, 2011; Paul, 2006). Finally, belly dance has been interpreted as supporting relationships with others and community building (Moe, 2012; Paul, 2006). Such benefits have been connected to the creative freedom allowed within it (Bock & Borland, 2011; Hoefer, 2001).

These studies represent the totality of scholarly work specifically on the benefits of belly dance and its relation to holism. Such work has largely remained exploratory and descriptive in nature and has not often been aimed
at any single demographic of dancers. The present analysis, then, contributes to the emerging scholarship on holistic health and belly dance, as it focuses on the specific experiences of menopausal and postmenopausal practitioners. As such, additional conceptual framing is necessary, and feminist gerontology provides an appropriate means of doing so.

FEMINIST GERONTOLOGY

Feminist gerontology is a relatively new area of feminist scholarship that focuses on the interconnected inequalities associated with aging and gender (Garner, 1999). While much has been accomplished within the feminist movement of the last few decades, the needs and experiences of older women have remained neglected, comparatively speaking, as the majority of efforts have centered on girls and young to middle-aged women (Garner, 1999; Krekula, 2007). Moreover, gerontological studies are also guilty of ignoring the unique, and often complex, means through which aging is gendered. For instance, while women have been included in gerontological samples, they are often conceptualized narrowly and homogenously in what Krekula (2007) asserts is a “perspective that foregrounds misery” (p. 155). Women are in effect told that the aging process will be accompanied by personal loss, social isolation, physical deterioration, and material decline (Gullette, 2004; Tretheway, 2001; Wiggs, 2010).

Feminist gerontology strives to raise awareness and social change around older women’s lives, health, bodies, and experiences (Garner, 1999). Although age discrimination may occur to men as well, feminist gerontologists examine how ageism uniquely (and disproportionately) affects women (Garner, 1999; Hurd, 2000). For example, men’s social worth is only somewhat dependent on their physicality; even with regard to aging, men may show their graying hair without nearly as much concern about how doing so will impact their perceived attractiveness or their ability to work and contribute to society. Women, on the other hand, must go to many physical and financial lengths to retain any sense of social respectability, since their cultural relevance continues to be tied to conceptualizations of youthful beauty (Wiggs, 2010). Such differences become quite tangible in terms of socioeconomic and health factors. While poverty, for example, disproportionately affects women throughout the life course, the discrepancy between men and women is exacerbated during old age due to myriad factors (e.g., women’s longer lifespan, sexist stereotyping in occupation, wage discrimination, and economic dependence on a spouse; American Association of Retired Persons [AARP], 2010; Arber, Davidson, & Ginn, 2003; Gunnarsson, 2002; Krekula, 2007). Indeed, women constitute 70% of the elderly poor (over age 65; AARP, 2010). Moreover, due in part to their longer lifespan,
women face more health problems and chronic illnesses (Garner, 1999; Hurd, 2000; Roberto, Gigliotti, & Husser, 2005).

Of the studies that have focused specifically on older women’s experiences, a primary finding has been the importance of empowerment and capacity building, particularly through social awareness and support (Garner, 1999; Thone, 1992); thus, activities that encourage networking and community building often yield myriad positive effects. Additionally, research has underscored the importance of group-based recreation and leisure (Heuser, 2005). Communal types of recreation can thus be affirming in terms of physical health and emotional coping as well (Agahi & Parker, 2008; Heuser, 2005; Hutchinson, Yarnal, Staffordson, & Kerstetter, 2008; Liechty & Yarnal, 2010). In sum, the objective of feminist gerontology is to honor both where women have been, as well as where they are going. It is assumed that where they are going may take many forms (Garner, 1999) and that menopause, to the extent that it marks a women’s formal progression into mid- to later life, need not be viewed negatively (Dillaway, 2005a, 2005b). As will be seen throughout the findings and discussion of this article, belly dance meshes well with the tenets of feminist gerontology. This research contributes and expands upon feminist gerontological literature, since no studies exist on older women’s use of belly dance. Moreover, it fits within the epistemological parameters of feminist gerontology in that it is focused on the embodied experiences of older women themselves.

**METHODOLOGY**

Feminist standpoint theory provides an appropriate scaffold for holistic, feminist gerontological research that centers on the distinct and multifaceted experiences of older women. It holds that the experiences and voices of women who participate in research, particularly those of marginalized status, should be the focal point of analysis (as opposed to other, more dominant-hegemonic discourses; Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1985). Standpoint theory works well with data that are gathered and analyzed inductively, with intentional methodological flexibility regarding the views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, and ideologies of participants. Standpoint theory is a suitable means with which to justify the use of semistructured interviews on older women’s experiences with belly dance, since such a subject matter is a source of marginalization on at least two fronts: (a) a negatively stereotyped dance genre, and (b) a socially alienated aged and gendered demographic.

Data for this analysis were derived from a subsample of qualitative, semistructured interviews conducted in 2009 and 2010 that were focused on understanding contemporary American women’s experiences with belly dance. These interviews were conducted via snowball and convenience sampling, beginning with informants known to me throughout the course of my
own belly dance participation (I am a 40-year-old White woman, mother of two, who has belly danced both recreationally and semiprofessionally since 2003) and aided by electronic postings advertising the research over various belly dance LISTSERVs, Facebook pages and Web sites. In total I conducted 67 interviews in person and by phone, depending upon the preferences and location of participants (e.g., they preferred to talk by phone, lived a long distance from me). Upon the interviews being transcribed, I conducted an initial analysis via open coding (Creswell, 2007). During this process, it became clear that a significant portion of the sample (16, or 24%) were over the age of 50 and that their experiences were unique from younger participants in terms of experiencing the dance through an older body (and the cultural connotations thereof). In order to make sense of these experiences, especially in light of the fact that many would not think of older women associating themselves with this form of dance, I separated the 16 transcripts from the others and focused on them more explicitly for this article.

The subsample included women with a range of dance experience, 15 weeks to 36 years. However, most had been involved for quite some time (average of 15 years), as hobbyists (9, or 56%) and professionals (though all retained employment beyond dance; 7, or 44%). They were predominantly from the Midwestern region of the United States (9, or 56%), as this is where I am based and have the most contacts within the belly dance community. However, five (31%) were from the Southwest and two (13%) were from the Southeast. Most of the women identified as White (13, or 81%); two (13%) as biracial (American Indian/White and Hispanic/White), and one (6%) as Latina. Their marital status was mixed, with 12 (75%) married or otherwise partnered; three (19%) divorced/separated and/or otherwise single; and one (6%) widowed. The majority were mothers (15, or 94%), several were grandmothers (5, or 31%), and a couple were great-grandmothers (2, or 3%). They had a range of educational backgrounds but leaned toward the higher end of accomplishment; only one (6%) had not gone beyond high school. Four (25%) had either some college or an associate's degree, three (19%) had bachelor's degrees, five (31%) had master's degrees, and two (13%) had doctorates. Their occupations were likewise diverse but weighted toward the professional sector. Two (13%) identified as "homemakers" or "stay-at-home moms," though both also (had) retained part-time employment. Of the remaining 14, four (29%) were (had been) employed in the service sector (e.g., retail, administrative assistant, teaching assistant), and 10 (71%) were (had been) employed within professional roles (e.g., business management, teachers, therapists/counselors, nurse, engineer, college professor, copy editor). Five (31%) were retired.

The analysis of this subsample was based on a phenomenological approach; the meaning of a phenomenon, in this case older American women's belly dancing, was examined through several individuals' accounts of their lived experience (Creswell, 2007). Accordingly, the analytical focus
was on the “what” and “how” (Moustakas, 1994)—what did the women experience in belly dance and how did they experience it? This approach meshes well with semistructured interviews and standpoint theory, in that such interviews provide for rich, descriptive, and diverse sets of narratives to be generated from individual participants. A phenomenological approach also validates the use of smaller qualitative samples, comparatively speaking, since the focus is on more of a nuanced, contextual analysis (Polkinghorner, 1989). Based upon this approach, codes identified through initial analysis formed a basis for conceptual mapping that allowed for the development of the broader thematic headings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

(Re)Gaining Mobility

Physical mobility is a concern as one ages. It can be discouraging and emotionally draining to deal with sore joints, atrophied muscles, and diminished and/or painful range of movement. A prevalent theme in the interviews concerned the ways in which belly dance helped women move in ways that were comfortable and supportive. As Alexandria (age 50) noted, “Belly dance is very nurturing to your body . . . it is very forgiving. You can enter it at whatever place you are.” Carmela (58) shared more detail specifically about what this genre of dance offers women: “I think it’s good for older women. . . . It’s so personal, everybody is different and it takes that into consideration.” The belief that belly dance was uniquely beneficial for women, especially older women, was important on several fronts.

For instance, there was a strong sense of physical preservation within the interviews. The women felt that this form of movement, likely because it is fairly low impact and easily modified, is beneficial for warding off physical debilitating. Jherico (68) commented, “With the passage of time, exercise has become more important.” As one of the oldest women in the sample, Jherico went on to explain that while she is realistic about her age, she feels inspired to continue dancing as long as she can: “I used to say that I wanted to dance on my 100th birthday. . . . I may be willing to be flexible on that number, but I’d like to just keep dancing right up to the end.” For most of the women, the physical health benefits of belly dance were central to their commitment to it. Margaret (58) explained the importance of warding off disease:

We have a nation that has a real obesity problem. I have a lot of disease in my family, heart disease, diabetes, strokes, stuff like that. You have to work at it in order to stay healthy and strong. It’s preventative. There’s not anything tangible that you’re trying to address, it’s more preserving the mobility and the health that you have.
Carolina (60) commented on using the dance to reconnect to her physical body:

I've always had an artistic side but I became obsessed with academics and so that took over my life for a long, long time. I kind of lost my artistic side. I lived in my head so long that I just sort of forgot about my body... So I'm re-finding that which is really an old part of me, but an unused part. I discovered that there's life below the chin. There's intelligence in your body. There's wealth and emotional richness in your body that's available through physicality.

The prevention aspect was especially salient with regard to the physical changes during menopause.

My body changed very rapidly... skin texture, mental focus, eyes, balance. I think without the dance I would have declined faster. Emotionally I didn't have a lot of, I would say, ups and downs... Definitely being a part of dance and having the positive experiences, having the movement... I can't stress enough the movement and the flexibility. (Senesy, 51)

As Alexandria (50) mentioned, "I think this dance keeps you young, younger than your years." Several interviewees mentioned women they knew who seemed quite a bit younger when they danced. Lois, the oldest woman of the sample, noted, "You look at pictures of me, you don't believe that I'm 74." She explained why this was so meaningful:

I've got a lot more things going... the chronic fatigue and fibromyalgia, spinalthrosis, scoliosis, degenerative arthritis, thyroid problems. I've had neck surgery too. I have a couple of disks fused together... I cannot do without this dance. It's not an option. I don't know if I can put it into words... I tell everybody it's my drug of choice now. Some days when I can't hardly get out of bed, I think about this and it drives me forward.

Part of the importance belly dance has for Lois is found not only in its physical benefits but also in its mental and emotional benefits. This is suggestive of a holism associated to the genre (Halprin, 2000). Other interviewees noted as much: "I truly believe because I've gone out of my comfort zone and because I've tried this and I enjoy it so much that everything goes together. Your body feels better. Your mind's more positive" (Senesy, 51).

Certainly an important aspect to these benefits was the way in which the women felt that, counter to stereotypes, belly dance is accepting of all body shapes and sizes. As Reba (52) attested, "You don't have to be firm. The more belly you got the better!" There was a strong sense of self-acceptance in this regard, the women coming to terms with and even appreciating their bodies. Jherico (68) quipped, "Well, I'm fatter than I started out being... and
I actually like it in a lot of ways." Even women whose bodies were injured or impaired found the dance accommodating to their physical limitations. Aziza (50) noted:

I have slipped discs in my back, and my knees have been bad since I was not even a teenager. I still have my flexibility, and I can still dance. I have maintained balance that I would likely not have maintained because of this. I’ve worked with chiropractors for my neck and my back, and they always comment on how much mobility I have, despite the deterioration in my back. I would say my ability to just physically function is due in part because I dance every week.

For those, like Aziza, who have already personally discovered how easily one’s physicality could be compromised, belly dance served as a means of recovery from illness or injury:

With my second hip replacement, I was having a lot of muscle pain. . . . I was going to physical therapy, and it really wasn’t helping that much. I started back dancing because I thought maybe it might help. It has helped so much. My muscle pain went away entirely. I walk totally differently now than I used to. I have no limp or anything. I walk straight and proud. It’s just such a difference for me. (Adeline, 65)

In this way, belly dance provided an alternative form of physical rehabilitation. To illustrate the range of ways in which the dance could be used in this regard, consider Annie’s (56) experience:

I had pelvic prolapse. In my particular case it developed really quickly and severely, and so I didn’t really have much choice but to have surgery. It was quite difficult to recover from. . . . I had a hysterectomy too. My urethra was put in a sling. The main reason I started taking it [belly dance] was to help strengthen my pelvic floor, even after the surgery, to keep that strong. I like it for that reason because there is the focus on those muscles. I spent a year and a half in physical therapy, and then it was shortly after that when I started belly dance. It really helped me to transition, for me to have a way to have physical activity without having to continue doing the most incredibly boring, repetitive exercises that physical therapy would suggest.

It was clear from the women’s narratives that finding new and innovative ways for moving their bodies was very important to overall well-being. As both Adeline and Annie note, standard physical therapies can become tedious and difficult to maintain. Belly dancing provided a new and creative means of moving one’s body, all the while remaining low impact, safe, and adjustable to individual skills and capabilities. Overall, the women in this
sample were keenly aware of the importance of taking care of their bodies. Belly dancing served as not only a complementary form of physical therapy for those who had suffered ailments or physical injuries, it was also a motivation for physical preservation in and of itself. Physically based recreation can be extremely important to maintaining (or rebuilding) one’s strength, flexibility, and overall ease of movement. Moreover, with continued physicality often comes greater mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being (Levy, 1988), thus suggesting that belly dance is a holistically oriented activity (Bock & Borland, 2011; Hoeflie, 2001; Moe, 2012).

(Re)Claiming Space

The women acknowledged the ways belly dance helped them remain visible, occupying social space that is counter to gendered stereotypes about the cultural roles older women ought to play. This was meaningful, since many had faced decades of gendered socialization. As Carmela (58) described:

[Everybody wants you to conform... Everything falls on you... In our culture old is no good, young is good. Fat is no good, skinny is good. Gray is no good, coloring your hair is good. It makes no sense, like all of a sudden you’re not even a human. Belly dancing gives you that back. It empowers you and it makes you feel better about being a woman.]

Several actually started belly dancing around the time that they reached (what they referred to as) “middle age,” and in several cases a specific event or milestone precipitated their decisions to do so. According to Reba (52), “I reached fifty and I decided, no time like present. I’m not getting any younger. It’s time to start doing what I always wanted to do.” Senesy (51) elaborated,

[You get to this age and if someone’s not accepting of you, that’s okay. If someone had made a comment when I was in my thirties, I would have questioned why I was doing it. I know why I’m doing it. It’s for me. I’m truly enjoying it.]

As did Jherico (68):

[That was a kind of a transitional time anyway, and belly dancing just seemed like something I could do to just authenticate the fact that I was still alive and still young. I just felt like being a maverick, trying to spin out of the preconceived, stereotypical box that I seemed to be in.]

Regardless of their reasons for starting, the women were quite vocal about why they continue belly dancing as older women, especially with regarding to occupying space. Many of these sentiments had to do with the
way the dance helped them to feel like creative and worthy beings. As Jolene (50) discussed,

It’s a time to focus on something that’s unrelated to the rest of your life. You can get so lost in the music and the beauty of the movement... It’s a reprieve. The other part of it is it can make you feel stronger, more capable, like a more whole person.

Central to all the narratives here was the notion of empowerment. To command attention, assert themselves, perform publicly, and so on requires a sense of will-power, self-confidence, and concerted effort. Belly dancing helped the women feel these elements of empowerment. Moreover, it seemed that as the women began embodying these qualities through dance, they found greater pleasure and ease in other aspects of their lives. Caroline (60) commented on the effect of simply adapting a dancer’s posture:

I’m proud of how I look, and I’m proud of how I can move. It’s helped me see in a real way, rather than just sort of an intellectual feminist way, how shallow our concepts of beauty and power are. Just having your dance teacher ask you to roll your shoulders down and back and lift your chest. You cannot be in that posture and feel very horrible. There is a certain power to that reverse causality. That’s the magic of it.

Indeed, the majority of women commented about how they felt emboldened to speak up for themselves or others in ways that were probably contrary to their social conditioning:

I stand up for myself a lot more now than I used to. I question everything. I just don’t say “Okay” and let it go at that. I’m like “Why?” I have the tenacity to question... I’m not as much of a doormat. (Lois, 74)

Still, occupying space is difficult for many. Changes in self-concept are slow and incremental, especially given years of gendered socialization. Thus, it may be difficult for women to move their bodies in unfamiliar ways. The notion that belly dancing involves moving in unfamiliar ways garnered much comment during the interviews. Many recognized that while belly dancing may initially seem unfamiliar, in actuality many of the movements are aligned with and complementary of women’s bodies. A strong sentiment here involved the organic nature of belly dance and a strong belief that it originated from movements that emanate from a woman’s perspective. As Reba (52) explained:
It's an ancient art form. It was developed by women for women. It emphasizes our strength... in our hips, our fluidity, our suppleness. It's made for women. It empowers you, which will scare some women.

The interviewees were vocal about the juxtaposition between belly dance as a mode of individualistic creative movement and the general public's perception of it as a means of exotic seduction. Several connected this apparent contradiction to the overarching patriarchal structure, which is predicated on maintaining women (mentally, physically, and spiritually) in an inferior state (Bordo, 1993). As Jherico (68) noted, “Our culture is so much more free than so many in the world, but still our world is dominated by males.” To that end, Carmela (58) observed: “[W]omen have a power they don’t realize. They [women] hold a key to everything. [Belly dance taps into that power?] Yes.”

It was thus helpful for many of the interviewees, specifically those who had not been dancing for many years, that performing (for those who chose to do so) involves extravagant costuming and make-up. With such embellishment, some of the women felt like there were able to take on another persona. This helped them overcome their anxiety about occupying space in such an overt physical way. In the following excerpt, Adeline (65) describes how difficult it is to put herself in public view. For her, it’s an issue of feeling attractive, and thus legitimate performing publically as an older woman:

I still don’t feel pretty, but when I’m dressed up in my whole costume...

[Why is it that you don’t feel pretty?]
I don’t know, because I’m old I guess. I’m just feeling my age and just, if I were 20 years younger I probably wouldn’t feel that way.

When probed about the salience of her age and why she belly dances, Adeline noted that the occupation of space, a different space than that to which she had occupied in other spheres of her life, was important. She went on to describe the significance she places on her daughters’ reactions. For her, as for others in the sample, occupying space remained at least somewhat contingent on how those close to them perceived it. This is certainly not surprising, given the stigma the women face as belly dancers (Carlton, 1994; Dougherty, 2005). It is also not surprising, given the ways in which women are so frequently conditioned to look for outside approval for their behaviors and appearance (Bordo, 1993; Wiggs, 2010). However, as Adeline underscores, it is not just the superficial approval she is looking for; it is more that her family sees her in a different way—that she is able to step out of her typical social script:

I’m proud, I guess for my daughters. I feel that they can see me as somebody that’s not just their mom. They can see me moving in a way
that most moms aren’t at my age. I continue partly I think for them because it makes them feel good to see me doing it.

Some of the women who belly danced publically still faced social degradation as well as age discrimination. As Lois (74) noted, “A lot of the men look at it as a sexual thing. They want this little smooth skinned cutie up there in a bare costume dancing.” Vicki (58) also shared her frustration about performing as a mature woman: “You don’t get invited to dance. If you look like you’re over 50 it’s really hard. I’m probably a better dancer now than I ever was.” Such observations were problematic on several fronts, not the least of which is that such experiences counter widely held beliefs that belly dance is a highly emotive dance and that what a performer has to offer will grow along with her life experiences. Not surprisingly, several actively challenged such perceptions:

Sometimes the customer expects someone who is scantily clad. As I started aging, I started wearing one piece outfits, going into the restaurant as an educational opportunity . . . how beautiful the dance actually was and that it was every woman’s dance. (Vicki, 58)

Others focused on changing people’s minds about what older women can do. Garnering audience appreciation helped some feel more legitimate in taking up space via performance. As Jherico (68) explained,

The opportunity to perform really nourishes my spirit as an older lady in our culture, because women generally become more and more invisible with the passage of time. It just feels great to get up there and dance and get paid for it and applauded.

Some opted to focus less on public opinion and more on personal experience. For example, Aziza (50) attested to the way she used public performance to process private matters:

My sense of security, my ability to stand my ground and say what I think, and take other people’s opinions . . . all of that echoes from dancing. . . . I have taken stuff onstage to process. The emotion becomes fuel for the performance. I often do not remember the shows when I do that.

A few others simply dismissed the audience. As Lois (74) quipped, “I don’t dance for them. I laugh at them when they pay tickets. I say ‘You’re the one paying money to watch a 73-year-old dancer!’”

Regardless of any questioning or misgivings the women had about dancing publically, the overall sense was that displaying one’s body was empowering. The same can be concluded about those who do not perform
publically. The point is that belly dance is very much a personal, self-defined endeavor. While some sought out, appreciated, and/or were aware of others' impressions of them, what seemed the most salient overall was the impression they had of themselves, and this impression was one of greater confidence and ease with occupying space. It is not just about the exhibition of one's (aging) body. It is also about taking up space, or reclaiming one's sense of space, being proud of one's body and physicality for what it is. In many ways, this sense of empowerment facilitated conscious choices to subvert social stereotypes about both belly dance and the capacity of older women.

(Re)Building Community

Belly dance served a very important function for the women because of the way it allowed them to extend their relationships and build social support. Since social networks typically diminish as one ages (Thone, 1992), the women appreciated the sense of community that seemed part and parcel to belly dancing. As Senesy (51) explained, “You look forward to seeing those women every week ... the communal visit with everybody, the support from the group. You truly feel like you need each other.” In this way belly dance served as a forum for collective joy, of sharing something unique and special. The women frequently observed and felt this group dynamic early in their belly dance experience. Annie (56), who was relatively new to belly dancing, commented,

> It’s good social involvement for me. I’ve been enjoying making friends in this new world. There’s something about group support, just like the idea of the camaraderie ... producing this product that’s contingent on all of you.

Making new friends was facilitated by the ease many felt when starting belly dance classes, since it was apparent that the class was open to women of all shapes, sizes, and abilities. Adeline (65) noted:

> I had gained weight because I was inactive because of the hip and everything. I didn’t feel real good about myself, and coming to the class you would see people that were like you. There were people who were older and people there who were overweight, and it didn’t seem to matter. Nobody was judgmental. I felt a lot of self-acceptance that I hadn’t felt before.

Because of such openness, the women felt permitted to explore their creativity and movement without fear of judgment. Central to this welcoming environment was the balance many of the women felt between group
membership and autonomous creativity. Likely due to the relatively uncodified nature of the genre, there is often a strong sense with belly dance troupes (and within the classes that precipitate them) that the goal is not to look exactly alike but rather to flow together as individual units. As Carmela (58) noted,

You can have five people and they learn the same choreography, and they’re all going to be different because of their body and the way they move. We’re all different and in some dance forms that’s not accepted.

This characteristic appeared to be one of the primary ways in which belly dance stood out from other forms of creative movement and dance. Senesy (51) commented:

I truly think that the freedom you’re given. . . . Even in a group dance you’re still individually able to show emotions. Yes, you’re all supposed to be the same way, but you can still see different things that come out of a person. You’re still part of the group, but you’re still yourself.

There was also a sense of belonging as a whole person, aside from the dance component. Several women felt that belly dancing helped them connect with others who had common experiences or issues: “Half my troupe is really heavy, and this is one of the few places that they feel they can come and feel like they can express themselves and be accepted by people” (Adeline, 65). Alternatively, connecting with women who were quite unlike themselves was also welcomed by the interviewees. In particular, meeting and becoming friends with younger women. Caroline (60) noted:

Women of all ages can come together and dance together and totally celebrate each other. That’s a wonderful thing. It breaks down generation gaps as well as other gaps. One of my students is a fairly young woman who brings her nine-year-old daughter. She’s wonderful. I’ve got another student who’s a new mother. I love that aspect of it, that it’s for every age.

There was also something to getting dressed up and “playing” with other women. It seemed that the dance provided a lighthearted outlet for women who just simply needed the social contact with others. As Dotty (68) noted, “It’s fun to dress up differently and use ‘sparklies.’” Annie (56) also commented,

When you think about it as exercise, you don’t think about dressing up or putting on makeup to go to class. Then you realize that other people do. This is your time to look good and feel good, so make it do that.
Relatedly, there seemed to be comfort in assuming this playful role because the vast majority of belly dance classes (and troupes) are made up entirely of women. As Aziza (50) noted, “It is community time with women.” Such comfort and support was especially helpful to women who had belly danced during difficult periods of time. As Jherico (68) commented, “I find that dance class is an adventure that we have together; performing is really a refuge from so many aspects of life for a female.” Several recollections of such support were shared, building upon the notion of creative dance, like belly dance, serving as a means of holistic well-being (Levy, 1988; Moe, 2012). In the following excerpt, Carmela (58) spoke of the support she received when rehabilitating from a physical injury: “We support each other. They [her troupe mates] really helped me out a lot when I was going through that knee thing. That pretty much messed me up for a while and they were wonderful.” The same was expressed with regard to dealing with victimization:

I went through a period of time where I was dealing with some molestation of one of my daughters. It was a very difficult period. I just can't even describe to you the relief it was to go to dance class and just take a break... Something that I had control over, something beautiful, and something that you can anticipate with joy, rather than get sucked down.

(Jherico, 68)

As well as dealing with difficult relationships, as Aziza (50) noted with regard to her students:

I think a lot of times the women that I've had come in [to class] with relationship issues have had a sense of being in the wrong, of being the one who is at fault. This is an environment, at least the way that I experience it, where women really support each other.

The social support was also helpful for those who had retired and/or become empty nesters:

It's something really important that I wanted to do and really important since I retired. I find it very hard to be still, especially now. My husband... is content to sit, and I just fidget around all the time... I enjoy the women. It's just a lot of fun. There is wonderful support. All my friends are dancers. (Carmela, 58)

Communal aspects of belly dance have been well documented in previous research (Moe, 2012; Paul, 2006); however the specific benefits of this aspect of dance with regard to older women is noteworthy. Such findings extend prior research (Agahi & Parker, 2008; Heuser, 2005; Hutchinson
et al., 2008; Liechty & Yarnal, 2010) regarding the physical and emotional benefits for older women of communal recreation. Indeed, to have access to a community of women, within a space that is positive and supportive, is unique in itself. For such a community to be premised on creative movement, perhaps even group-based performance, and to welcome women of any demographic, is particularly rare. The women in this sample seemed well aware of the social support they accessed through belly dance. They welcomed it, utilized it as needed for a variety of circumstances, and found great pride in contributing to it.

(Re)Defining Sensuality

It is impossible to talk about belly dancing without addressing the sexual undercurrents of the genre and what these conceptualizations mean to the women who practice it. These undercurrents were not lost on the women in the sample. They did not agree with stereotypes that portray belly dance as erotic, seductive, and geared exclusively toward the eyes of men. Jherico’s (68) response was illustrative:

[So what are a couple of the most common misconceptions out there about belly dance?]
That the dancer is trying to get a man, is one. I think that could be initially part of it, but I think as the lady goes through the belly dance process, and spends more time doing it, that becomes less and less important to her. And it’s something men can’t really understand.

Margaret (58) concurred, “Some people would say ‘Oh no, it really is women for the men. It’s a sensual thing.’ But I don’t see that at all. I just see it’s for myself, and it’s for the other ladies.” Indeed, there was overwhelming support within the sample that belly dance is of great benefit to women and that it is not, or at least does not have to be, about entertaining others. As Senesy (51) mentioned, “I wish they didn’t think it was a dirty dance. I wish they would understand and accept it... Until you know what it is, it’s the same thing with life, don’t judge until you try it.” Annie (56) similarly stated, “I would like more people to recognize how belly dancing honors women instead of dishonors.”

Dealing with and responding to misconceptions about the dance seemed to get tiresome, and some of the women assumed an ambivalent tone for having to consistently defend it:

Women are enjoying their own bodies and celebrating their femaleness in a way that is counter to society’s ideas, not really trying to get the attention of men. Most of the belly dancers I know are dancing for the sheer joy of it, for the pleasure of being in their dancing bodies... Belly
dance gives us permission to move our torso and so everybody thinks it's sexual... it's lovely to celebrate being female. Why is it bad? (Jherico, 68)

Rather than answer once again to public perceptions about the dance, the interviewees seemed to focus on how belly dancing made them feel as sexual and sensual beings. As Vicki (58) noted,

I'm dancing for myself. I just enjoy it and really get into it. I don't feel like a siren or anything. I can do some sexy moves. I can really make it sensual. I can be a sultry, you know, kind of feminine with the dance. It's just fluid.

In fact, belly dance seemed to help the women explore and (re)discover their personal sensuality. The dance was much more about their own personal use than it was about anybody else:

You can allow your body to be sexual and sensual. You're not doing it to say, "Hey look at me." You're doing it to feel what you can, for yourself. You're not trying to do it to entice someone. I do find it very sensual. I think there's just so much to it that belongs to women and women alone. So that itself makes it permissible. You're doing this for you, and you're okay to be dressed the way you are, and you're okay to let your body move the way it's moving. (Senesy, 51)

In this way, belly dance serves as something of a permission slip for women to explore and examine their sensuality. The women felt good about their dancing, even if it was somewhat erotic, because the positive feelings came from within themselves. As Reba (52) discussed:

It gets you in touch with being a woman, with what you were meant to be, how you were meant to move. It's your true self, so in that way I guess you're being authentic. Society would like us wanting to be either covered up or fully exposed, you know, Madonna and the whore kind of a thing. I find that belly dance, allows me to be in charge of my body... I think it's distinct in that it's a movement that a woman's body is meant to do. It emphasizes our strength.

Moreover, the women were open and frank about the fact that just participating in the dance, especially as older women, could be conceived as an act of social recalcitrance. The women were, in effect, countering what society says about what is and is not sexy or sensual. Such observations were shared by Reba (52), "You know how older women are devalued in our society? And we're no long sensual or sexy? Well, belly dance blows that myth away." Belly dancing was about transcending public perceptions of the
dance, especially as experienced by older women. There was a notion that through this activity, the women could continue (or begin to) feel sexually alluring and beautiful. Such feelings directly challenged the stereotypes about older women becoming asexual, and so on. For the women in this sample, it was about thinking less about age and more about what it means to simply be a woman. In the following excerpt, Caroline (60) details why belly dance, of all things, seems well positioned to help women with this shift in focus:

It's old and it's ancient and it's in our DNA, and we systematically neglect it. It's a movement that comes naturally to us. A taxeem [fluid rolling of the hips, typically in an upward or downward figure-eight pattern], which is our basic slow movement, and our shimmies [rhythmic muscularily driven vibration focused on the hips and buttocks], which is our basic fast movement, is nothing but a celebration of women walking. This is how our hips are formed. Our femurs come out of our hips at these angles, and it makes us walk like that. That we are built the way we are makes our buns wiggle so it just has to do with how we move. That is an incredibly empowering.

In short, the women acknowledged the stereotypes surrounding belly dance and argue that it really is about much more. Just because the movements and overall aesthetic is sometimes quite sexual in tone does not make it harmful to women per se. Quite the opposite, actually, when used by the women for their own purposes. Jherico's (68) discussion on this point was telling:

To get up there and dance half-naked is so empowering, and it says so much about how you feel about yourself. I think my confidence level is pretty high. It's really helped me a lot with my relationship with males. Before I got involved with dance I had this kind of cultural hypnosis about the one true love and that we would live happily ever after. I always felt that I needed that and that's why I was married and divorced a couple times. Dance has helped me so much in that area. Only a certain kind of guy is going to have the confidence in himself to get involved with me. I've been celibate for 20 years. I don't have that urge and requirement anymore. If it happens, great, if it doesn't, I have a rich, full life without it. I feel just as beautiful and just as desirable as I've ever felt.

The notion of using dance to supplant and/or more fully understand one's sensuality was prominent throughout the interviews. As Caroline (60) discussed, taking up belly dance at the age of 54 was actually a recommendation of a health care professional:
A whole bunch of this stuff happened at once. It was a really horrific period. It was a therapist who told me I needed to rediscover my womanhood. She said “Go take belly dance!” I looked at her like she had come from Mars, but I took her up on it. It was very much a journey of healing.

The notion that belly dance could serve a healing function because of its sensual quality was noted by nearly all of the women in this sample, whether guided by a therapist or not. Notable here was the observation that belly dance was especially therapeutic for women who had experienced past trauma, particularly that which was sexual and gendered in nature. Attesting to the importance of safely coming to terms with one’s body, Reba (52) attested:

I was severely sexually abused as a child and so it’s helped me surmount some of those obstacles. When a survivor is assaulted they, we, disassociate, and that keeps your body rather numb. So as a survivor grows up and matures, one finds it dirty or ugly, and also it incorporates the inability to know how the body moves in space. Belly dance kind of heals all of that. The movement, the gentle movement, in giving to your body, finding it, getting strength, the acceptance of your body as a beautiful thing that you can move around.

Childhood sexual abuse was the most common form of victimization identified within the sample. Given what is known about the difficulty of disclosing and healing from such maltreatment (Crossen-Tower, 2010), as well as various benefits belly dance holds for older women, the fact that the women in this sample were consciously using it as a therapeutic means of recovery is notable:

As a young girl I was sexually abused. Belly dance has turned all of that into something of a celebration. Like “Yeah, that will happen, but I’m here, I’m doing this.” I had many of those kinds of tragedies in my life, and I’m just so happy to be here at this point in my life, doing what I do and sharing this dance. (Jherico, 68)

The juxtaposition between the erotic nature of belly dance and women’s embodied experience is one deserving of greater examination. Yes, belly dancing is predominantly seen as erotic and seductive. According to the women here, it can be, but it does not have to be. It was not that they were buying into what others thought they should be, rather they were exploring who they thought they should be, on their own self-defined terms. In this way, belly dance may be erotic and titillating, and the women who experienced it that way, at least in this sample, consciously chose to do so. For others, it was about reframing what it means to be a woman as well as
a sensual being. To do so meant refusing to buy into stereotypical views of the dance and instead seeing it as something uniquely related to women's self-exploration and discovery. This is significant, for it allows a very direct reframing of the older woman's body, particularly the postmenopausal body, which is too often defined as unappealing and shameful. As discussed earlier, it is difficult for older women to transcend and challenge Western ideals of beauty, which emphasize youthful sensuality, thinness, and full physical mobility (Cruickshank, 2009; Wiggins, 2010). In a society where there are few means for women to reconnect with and appreciate their sensuality within a safe and self-determined context, belly dancing serves a unique function.

CONCLUSION

Reaching midlife, particularly the time surrounding menopause, is a period of rapid change and adjustment for women. Unfortunately, in Western contemporary societies like the United States, this is also accompanied by disparaging and disempowering stereotypes about being an older woman. This article examined the ways in which belly dance provides unique spaces for women to challenge and transcend such perceptions. Four themes were discussed, which attest to the value of belly dance as a holistic endeavor and of relevance to feminist gerontology.

The first of these involved gaining, or regaining, mobility. Belly dance is attractive because it is physically comfortable and supportive of a range of body shapes and abilities. It is easily adaptable and may remain low impact, thus serving as both a physically preventative and rehabilitative endeavor. Moreover, the women connected the physical benefits of belly dance to their mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being, thus lending support to the developing literature on belly dance as a holistic modality (Bock & Borland, 2011; Hoefle, 2001; Moe, 2012). The second theme considered belly dance as an avenue through which older women could occupy a social space that is typically closed off to them. While women's social, economic, and cultural value diminish as they age (Garner, 1999), belly dancing helped them challenge, subvert, and redefine what it means to active mature woman. Moreover, the benefits of occupying space through belly dance transferred to other aspects of women's lives, generating greater confidence and self-esteem. The third theme addressed the communal aspects of belly dancing, an incredibly important factor when evaluating the benefits of older women's recreational activities (Garner, 1999; Heuser, 2005; Thone, 1992). The women noted the joy and creative freedom they felt, both as individuals and members of a group, when belly dancing. The fact that such experiences occurred within an immediate environment involving only women was important, as they felt a sense of comfort and support within such a context. The fourth theme focused on the sensual aspects of belly dance. Despite it
being commonly associated with erotic overtones, women found tremendous value in belly dancing. This was because it was often practiced in a safe, permissive space that allowed for self-determined discovery and creative exploration. This was important to the older women in this study, since they so often faced stereotyping with regard to their postmenopausal sexuality (Cruickshank, 2009; Wiggs, 2010). When practiced according to one's personal comfort, it holds value to women because it is so closely aligned with sensuality.

This is the first study to examine belly dance as a holistic means of recreation within a feminist gerontological framework. Upon initial consideration, this may appear a contradiction since belly dancing may not appear very feminist in nature. However, such presumptions may come more from public perceptions about the genre than from the embodied experiences of its practitioners. When one focuses on the standpoint (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1985) of belly dancers themselves, a different epistemological narrative emerges. Belly dance, for what it contributes to women's overall (holistic) well-being, including improved self-awareness, heightened confidence, and a general sense of empowerment, may be interpreted as feminist in nature (Moe, 2011, 2012). Moreover, what it provides older women, in terms of physical mobility, social visibility, community support, and healthy sensual self-concept, fits with the tenets of feminist gerontology—of honoring the wholeness and diversity of women's identities and experiences (Garner, 1999) and reframing the progression into mid- to later life positively (Dillaway, 2005a, 2005b).

While 16 interviews is not a sufficient sample size to make generalizations in the traditional sense, the smaller qualitative sample contained detailed and nuanced accounts provided by the standpoint of belly dancers themselves. As such, the analysis was grounded within the narratives, providing for the development of a conceptual framework that joined the creative movement of belly dance with holistic health and feminist gerontology. Thus, it provides a foundation for further theoretical generalizability. Another potential weakness involves sampling bias. Given the geographical and social constraints on recruiting, the sample was biased toward the Midwest region of the United States and involved only heterosexual women who primarily identified as White/Caucasian. Given my decade-long background in belly dance, as well as the other available studies on this genre (Moe, 2011, 2012; Wright & Dreyfus, 1998), the sample should not be taken as representative of the larger population of belly dancers in terms of geography, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. Moreover, the women in this sample were well educated and held primarily professional level occupations. This, however, does reflect my experience and previous research. Belly dancing can be quite expensive, particularly when it involves public performance. The women who practice it on any regular basis typically do have expendable income. What is striking about the particular sample of women here is that
while they likely had greater economic means through which to belly dance, their unique social positioning (being among the first generation of women in the United States to gain somewhat ready access to higher education and prestigious occupations) may also have positioned them to more readily challenge and transcend social stereotypes, including those associated with belly dancing.

While using a sample criterion of women over age 50 allowed for the explicit consideration of feminist gerontological research as it relates to creative movement, doing so also highlighted the need for additional studies. Women over age 50 are not homogeneous by any stretch. It would be helpful to focus more explicitly on the experiences of mid-life women (around age 50) versus those of an older age (say, over 65 or 70). Studies that include a larger number of women across a variety of ages could account for a wider range of meanings associated with belly dance over the life course. Nonetheless, the present study highlighted the need for such research and developed a framework for embarking upon it.

NOTE

1. Terminology for this dance is problematic, as several labels exist. *Middle eastern, Arabic, and Oriental* dance are common because they may be fairly universally applied to the region of the world from which the dance originates. Other names connote cultural, language, and regional differences (e.g., *Turkish Orientale, Andalusian* [Moorish], Egyptian Arabic references to *beladi* ["dance of the country or common people"] and *raft sharqi* ["dance of the East"]; Osweller, 2006a, 2006, 2006c; Shuy & Sellers-Young, 2005). With the rising popularity of this dance, additional names have developed (i.e., *belly dance, cabaret, American Tribal Style; Osweller*, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). Despite etymological debate about naming a dance after a specific body part that likely contributes toward its stereotyping, *belly dance* (sometimes stated as one word: *bellydance*) is the most common term in the U.S. There seems to be a conscious use of the term today, perhaps as a means of reclaiming that which has been historically misinterpreted and subjugated. It is for these reasons, and out of respect of the epistemological philosophy guiding this research, that I predominantly rely upon *belly dance* here (opting for two words out of grammatical preference).

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