Social Dance for Successful Aging
The Practice of Health, Happiness, and Social Inclusion Amongst Senior Citizens

Jonathan Skinner
Department of History and Anthropology
Queen's University Belfast

Abstract
This article presents findings from a qualitative study of social dancing for successful aging amongst senior citizens in three locales: in Blackpool (GB), around Belfast (NI), and in Sacramento (US). Social dancers are found to navigate an intense space in society, one of wellbeing accompanied by a beneficial sense of youthfulness. Besides such renewal and self-actualisation, findings also attest to the perceived social, psychological and health benefits of social dancing amongst senior citizens. They also articulate three different social dancing practices: social dance as tea dance (Sacramento), social dance as practice dance (Blackpool), social dance as motility (Belfast and environs).

Keywords: aging, senior citizen, social dance, ballroom, health, nostalgia, leisure

"You see, the thing is when you retire you don't have to live the same kind of life you did before. Alright, I worked in science all my life, but that doesn't mean that I can't change and become a dancer. So it's a different phase of life. A lot of people they don't realise that this is the best time of your life."
(Bill, Sacramento)

"They opened a new ice rink in Bangor [N. Ireland] and my daughters brought me down and said, 'Mum, would you like to go skating?' And I said, 'Well, I've never skated'. But they said, 'You do roller - you did roller skating when you were younger'. It was great then: we had a road to fly down and every hill we went on. Well there were no bicycles in those days and not many cars. I could do ballroom dancing so I wanted to see what it was like to do dancing on skates. And I must say I was very impressed and it's great: flowing and speed! I've been doing it for twelve years now. We do rumba, waltz, quickstep, foxtrot, tango. She [ice skating instructor] did want me to compete, but I thought, no, I'd leave it to the younger generation."
(Sarah, Bangor)

Introduction

Bill is sixty-five and has been retired for the past fifteen years. In that time, Bill took up social ballroom dancing. He dances two or three times a week around the Greater Sacramento environs, California, attending the tea dances or social dances in the afternoons, and occasionally the weekly Friday or Saturday night dance nights when live bands play. Healthy, fit and comfortably well-off, Bill feels that he is making the most of his retirement. Indeed, it is a new lease of life for him. Sarah has just celebrated her seventieth birthday in Bangor, a seaside resort town outside Belfast, Northern Ireland. Since the recent loss of her husband, she has re-entered the local dance world that she was a part of in her teenage and courting years in the 1950s and early 1960s. She started again with the ballroom dancing, added the new salsa dance craze, and is developing her ballroom-on-ice skills that she started in the mid-1990s.

This article is about social ballroom dancing amongst senior citizens. It presents the results of a research project exploring social ballroom dancing amongst senior citizens

in Blackpool (England), around Belfast (Northern Ireland), and in Sacramento (California) undertaken in 2008. The types of social dance practices found constitute loose 'models' that range as follows: daily social practice time on the famous Victorian ballroom floor in the Blackpool Tower; a weekly Dance4Life programme of dance for senior citizens by a dance studio – The Ballroom – in Sacramento; and a programme of escorted visits to a church or village hall for social dancing in and around Belfast. Each of these case studies presents a group of people countering the erosion of social and cultural capital associated with aging as they actively and successfully resist enfeeblement (Tulle 2008). As such, this article contributes, then, to the growing ethnography of the body (see Turner 1996; Waquant 2004; Wainwright and Turner 2006). Research was carried out over 10 months as part of a four year study of social dancing (2004-2008) between Belfast and Sacramento in which I positioned myself as an 'observing participant' rather than participant observer (Daniel 1995:21, 22), as an active dancer seeking to understand the meaning of dance by doing it and having it done to me rather than just hearing about it. This embodied fieldwork gave me particular insights and connections with the people I was working with – such as Sarah - beyond the usual dance connection.

Dance is non-utilitarian human movement, aesthetic and universal. 'To dance is human' states Judith Hanna (1979); and, indeed, dance may be the 'mother of cognition' (Sheets-Johnstone 1966) as human movements precipitate human thoughts not just in early childhood development. This 'structured movement system' (Kaeppler 1985) can be analysed within its sociopolitical context (Campbell 1988; Ranger 1975; Skinner 2007; Wulff 2007; 1973), and interpreted differently as part of 'the layered "choreography" underlying lived activity' (James 2003:91; see also Laderman and Roseman 1996; Cowan 1990; Kirtsoglou 2004; Román-Velázquez 1999; Waxer 2002; Savigliano 1995; Wulff 1998).

Social ballroom dance, in particular, has its own distinctive history. Jonathan Marion (2008:20) defines 'ballroom' as 'a formalized style of partnered dancing', noting that it has both competitive and social aspects to it. Whilst the ballroom partner dancing derives in part from fifteenth century French courtly dancing, the modern twentieth and twenty first century ballroom dancing -split between social and competitive- follows national divisions and trends. For example, competitive ballroom dancing typically features Standard (or Modern) dances such as waltz, tango, Viennese waltz, foxtrot and quickstep; and Latin dances such as cha cha, samba, rumba, paso doble, and jive. Social dancing at ballroom events or in ballrooms or between ballroom dancing competitions can include all the dances above as well as other popular partner dances such as lindy hop, nightclub two step, West Coast swing, the hustle, merengue, salsa and Argentine tango. Indeed, a dance studio will typically teach all of the dances named here, the social as well as the competitive. Social ballroom dance events, however, do not have to have regulation or syllabus guidance and can also be found in night-clubs, community centres, church halls and hotels.

The ballroom partner dances and locations evolved from dances taught by dancing masters in Renaissance European courts to eighteenth century 'dancing schools' for deportment and nineteenth century 'assembly room' social dances for the leisured class to perform their social skills: take tea, socialize, 'court' and, of course, dance (see Franks 1963). This report shows that little has in fact changed. In the 1920s, ballroom dancing's popularity spread to the masses. In Britain, popular 'palais de danse' were run independently or through chains such as Mecca or Rank - formerly two British multinationals now merged into the Rank Group and which now concentrate upon bingo and casino gaming, perhaps following their aging clientele. The World War II years of deprivation, resistance and rationing, and immediately thereafter, are the golden era of the dance halls in Britain as dance crazes such as the jitterbug jostled with social ballroom dancing to fill out these cavernous public performance spaces. To give an example, London's largest venue, The Empress Hall, catered for some five thousand dancers. Victor Silvester - a ballroom dancing pioneer and champion of the 1920s – rode this modern capitalist bandwagon (Hall 1991) with a franchise of over twenty dance studios, and the harnessing of new communication technologies with a BBC dance show (The Dancing Club 1941-1958) and over 75 million record sales between 1930 and 1980 (Silvester 1977).

In the US, Moses Teichmann, a young Austro-Hungarian immigrant draftsman repackaged himself as Arthur Murray, an entrepreneur with the idea of mail order 'dance footsteps' which by the fifties had grown into a franchise of 3,500 dance studios (now currently 225 [Anon. 2008a]) and a hit US television learn-to-dance programme (The Arthur Murray Party). This is another example of twentieth century globalization and transnationalism as cosmopolitans at ease in a new world order (Wallerstein 1990; see also Hannerz 1996) harness the new communication technologies and emerging mediascapes and finanscapes (Appadurai 1990) to their own ends. These cases also show how dance trends and flows are tied to social change as well as economic change. Cressey

(1968), for example, studied the rise of the 'dime-a-dance' taxi-dance hall in Chicago in the 1920s, describing them as a consequence of urbanization, the commercialization of recreation, a decline in moral standards, and the growth in immigration levels with a young male social grouping wanting to pay for entertainment with a member of the opposite sex. Sociologically, he saw them as an expression of the anomie of large modern city life. More recently, Thomas with Cooper (2002a; 2002b) have described this urban phenomenon less critically. In a study of older 'social' dancers in south-east London and Essex, Thomas (2003a: 210; see also 2003b; 2004) refers to the social dancing as an opportunity for senior citizens to experience a "strong sense of communitas," coming together, sharing a common interest, perceiving a common history, moving together with an embodied inter-subjectivity. These observations are reiterated in my more recent study of social dancing amongst senior citizens in three very different locations.

Three Cases of Social Dancing

In the following sections, I present findings from a study of senior social dance in Blackpool, in Belfast and around Northern Ireland, and Sacramento. Rather than compare locations, this report is an examination of different cases of senior social dance. It challenges the stereotype of the actively retiring body and confirms the beneficial effects of social dance amongst senior citizens. The research is in very different locations, with dance organizers, dance teachers, and dancers themselves with variable levels of dance knowledge and mobility. It triangulates on the position of the social dancer via a selection of qualitative mixed-methods (interview, observation-participation, questionnaire).

1. *Blackpool, England – Social Dancing as 'Serious Leisure'*

For this leg of the research, I spent a week in The Ballroom in the Blackpool Tower, dancing, interviewing, observing, and talking with the senior social dancers. Blackpool is the Mecca of ballroom dancing. It is where the British National Dance Championships, and the Blackpool Dance Festival are held. Typically the adult ballroom dance events take place in the Empress Ballroom in the Winter Gardens, a cavernous Victorian ballroom which can hold up to three thousand people. The British public, however, will be more familiar with the Blackpool Tower Ballroom from regular Come Dancing TV broadcasts. It is the Blackpool Tower with its built-in circus, aquarium, amusement rides and ballroom where you find regular social dancing taking place. There, in the middle of this mass leisure centre structure, is a large ballroom - with a capacity of 1,900 people - with Victorian-like paintings and ceiling decorations and a world-renowned Wurlitzer organ. It is a place dating back to 1894 and now billed as 'The Ballroom Experience' where tourists and locals can visit, dance to the organ or circus band, and take tea and cakes.

During a Winter Season week at Blackpool, I was able to interview staff, visitors and dancers at The Blackpool Tower Ballroom. The dancing was genteel and proficient but also 'serious leisure' (Stebbins 2007) for social dancers who train and practice their dancing skills and used the Blackpool floor to enjoy the social dancing environment, the live music and organ, their fellow dancers and transient audience. Despite the constant movement in and about the room between 10am and 11pm, it had a relaxed atmosphere and a feeling of timeless continuity about it. Chris Hopkins, one of the Ballroom organists, noted that it was only in a new era from 1980 that all-day dancing had been introduced.

A veteran organist, Chris 'reads' the audience and the dancers and tries to tune into their tastes whether ballroom, Latin or sequence dancing. During the summer high season, a resident band plays to the visitors. During the winter low season, the organist plays with occasional breaks from the circus band as they move from the circus to the Ballroom to play a set. The social dancers appreciate the live music, responding to it and following it just as much as the musician is responding to and following the dancers. Román-Velázquez (1999) found similar emergent relationships between dancers and musicians in social salsa clubs in London.

The social dancing takes on a party atmosphere during the weekends when the retired dancers are joined by the dancers who are at work during the week. Then, over the weekend, the social dancers swell from the week-day numbers of between two and thirty to several hundred dancers all dancing and socializing. These reappearances gave it "a cruise ship feel" for Hopkins who would talk to them from the stage.

The Social Dance Manager in charge of The Ballroom also had favourite couples: a "gentleman who's 96 and his 87-year-old wife" who can only walk with the assistance of sticks, but can dance around The Ballroom as soon as the music starts playing.

Manager: I was shopping one day and that elderly couple – you know in their nineties - came walking towards me, both of them with a stick. And I looked and went,

> "Oh it's you, I recognize from the dancing!" And she said, "Oh hello, you work there don't you?" And I said, "Well what's the sticks for?" "Oh we have to walk with a stick in the streets." I have never seen them walk in here with a stick. All of them are like that even if it's a bad day sometimes he does bring the stick in. But when he's on that floor you would never believe that's he's a gentleman that has to walk with a stick. So, it's amazing … and I'm sure a lot of it is mental: these steps, they learn them parrot fashion but you have to have the mental capacity to know that. And it is actually quite physical. He doesn't dance with a stick. And I'm sure it keeps them going.

Here, social dancing contributes to the longevity of the dancers, giving them something to enjoy and focus upon - to live for. It quite literally fires off the endorphins and takes away the aches, pains and disabilities associated with old age. It is only when the music is over and the moving connection with one's partner subsides that the arthritis and rheumatism return to haunt the social dancers.

I interviewed approximately a dozen dance couples, individuals and groups. In all cases, bar two, I found the employees' words and sentiments echoed and reiterated. The dancers were all retired and committed to their ballroom dancing. One couple had spent their retirement money buying a flat near to the Ballroom so that they could enjoy the social dancing. Another couple traveled from London once a month for a weekend of dancing there, and the others seemed to travel within an hour and a half's driving distance. All attested to the benefits of the dancing whether physical health (weight management, blood pressure, posture, cardiovascular health and suppleness/ mobility) or mental health (social contact, alertness). One couple from Huddersfield danced three times a week and spend the weekend visiting The Ballroom at Blackpool. They have been dancing ballroom for more than fifty years – thirty of those years together as a social dancing couple. In cases such as this, there is a strong togetherness and familiarity in their joint hobby. Also, there is nostalgia for the dancer's past in the sense that they and others were returning to an earlier time, a time of possibilities and a life to lead. This was, especially in the 1950s ballroom dancing and dance hall context, a time when the dancers were courting, looking for a partner to marry and raise a family with. In other words, the ballroom had been a space and activity of potential, possibility and uncertainty, whereas now it was a space for memory, nostalgia and comfort.

The social dancers perceived themselves to be "a community with similar interests": those proactive against the debilitations of old age, fitting in with the ballroom dance scene and knowledgeable about their hobby whether new or not. Mary likes to come out dancing at least once a week and to stay in touch with "the personalities on the floor" and to heed her mother's words: "don't be a wallflower". Jenny "felt like a lemon" at her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, sitting watching all the dancing, not knowing how to join in. For Jackie, it was watching the dancing on a holiday cruise in the Mediterranean that started her interest in ballroom dancing. She and her husband have now been social dancing ballroom for thirteen years. Both pairs of dancers enjoy feeling "elegant" in the "nice" surroundings. They have more time for their hobbies now that their children have left home for university, and they wanted an activity that they could do together. Currently, dancing suits their lifestyle and life-course. Jenny's husband has prepared for his retirement by carefully phasing down his hours driving a taxi, slowly replacing them with more golf, swimming, choir and dancing. Whereas he is less enthusiastic about the dancing than Jenny, he is glad that they are doing a very affordable activity: "dancing is fair cheaper than drinking as a hobby," he declared. He also preferred it for its sociability:

> It's one of those social things, dancing. It brings people together and they start talking. You can sit in a pub and just talk with each other but no one speaks to you. Then you go into a dancehall and you're talking to people and dancing and making eye contact.

Another couple danced for "emotional pleasure" juggling their part-time business shifts so that they could dance together in the middle of the week – "the high-point of the week for us; it got us through it all." The dancing is a constant in their changing lives. It is their comfort zone that they have been familiar with for decades. In salsa, I have argued for a 'salsa second skin' as dancers use the dancing to relocate easily in a modern mobile society (Skinner 2007:498). This concept, this physical knowledge, 'decontextualised' according to Hannerz (1992:257) is not new, nor is it a symptom of a 'disembedded' malaise about society as Giddens (1991) would lead us to believe. These social dancers have danced through the generations and are intimately grounded with their localities and with their dance compatriots. They jealousy guard their ballroom space at Blackpool. Children were only briefly tolerated, and were often encouraged to do a hokey-cokey on the dancefloor in the hope that afterwards they would leave.

Interviews suggested that the social dancing is rooted in the history of the dance, the dance hall, and their lives:

> JS: Can I ask, you've been at it a while, has it changed over the years?

DANCER 2: Well we have danced to Victor Silvester music.

DANCER 1: It's the speed of the dancing that's changed.

DANCER 1: Yeah The tempo has changed. Victor Silvester: he's very slow where it's a little bit quicker now.

The nostalgia for the dancing and the dancers' youth was apparent whether the dancers were in high-spirits or even depressed and lonely. A number of dancers were dealing with bereavement on and around the dance floor. They were revisiting the places where they danced with husbands of wives, reliving memories, or breaking the boredom and monotony of old age with a trip to the ballroom.

RES: When you get to my age, all you've got to think about really are the good times and there aren't many good times you can see in the future. Life gets boring when you get older. What are we going to do? Like at your age, whatever you're going to do at your age do it now. You just get up in the morning and just go from one day to the next.

In this interview, the dancer, a lone man, was returning to his lost partner's love for the dance. He watched and relived and replayed memories rather than make new ones. There was a poignancy in his viewing the social dancing, all of the serious leisure taking place around us.

2. *Belfast, Northern Ireland – Social Dancing "For the Craic"*

If the social dancing found in the Blackpool Tower was one of serious social dancing, part practice for other occasions, then the majority of examples of social dancing in Northern Ireland follow a more self-entertaining model of social dancing "for the craic." Whilst this study does not claim to be all-comprehensive, it has looked at social dancing amongst senior citizens around Northern Ireland: in Belfast, Bangor, Hilltown, Aldergrove, Lurgan and Banbridge, a range of dance and performance events and practices where I have used a triangulation of research methods from participant to observer, interviewer and questionnaire sampler. Key evenings studied have been public classes and social nights, social dancing between ballroom competitions, and charity and community social service provision with a key Reminiscence through Dance programme supported through a Help the Aged grant and facilitated by senior citizen Ms Philomena Gallagher.

Social dancing in Northern Ireland has a particular social history and context to it given the history, scars and social traumas of 'The Troubles' (the ethnopolitical conflict over Northern Ireland's constitutional status that manifested itself in violence between the late 1960s and the late 1990s between broadly Protestant Unionists wanting NI to remain a part of the UK, and Catholic Nationalists seeking a United Ireland). Music and marching have, in the past as well as the present, been used as markers to distinguish peoples and to mark out territories (Jarman 1997; Bryan 2000). Ballroom dance – unlike Irish folk dance - however, has always been an opportunity to bring people together; that is when they are able to (one participant who grew up during The Troubles noted that she could not cross town to get to dances [see Lysaght 1995]) or allowed to (the 1935 Dancehall Act banned un-licenced dancing in the Republic of Ireland and, even recently, former First Minister for Northern Ireland the Reverend Ian Paisley denounced dance as 'an occasion of sin' [Wulff 2003; 2008]).

Social ballroom dancing in Northern Ireland has been shaped and encouraged by an Actively Aging Well Programme (2002-2007) that was run between Age Concern Northern Ireland and the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland. This was an initiative to put in place 6-week physical activity introductions for older people ranging from salsa to ballroom dancing, tai chi to walking and swimming (Beattie and Greer 2006). Over sixty community and older groups were supported throughout Northern Ireland, many of which are still very active. I attended and participated in a sample of the 'Reminiscence through Dance' events. This community development programme - about inclusive and successful aging - was rolled out across Northern Ireland, but has a particularly strong base of support around Craigavon and Banbridge. There, social dancing features in the Craigavon and Banbridge Health and Social Services Trust programme of activities. This means that independent living senior citizens and those needing transport can be catered to. Events such as social dances are arranged in the community and parish halls and can range in size from small groups of 30-40 (see Figure 1) with a hired DJ, to 300+ dancers with a live band and featured artists. For the 'Reminiscence Through Dance' programme, facilitated by staff over fifty years old and so accepted by the attendees, band music by the likes of Victor Silvester was played and a microphone was passed around the room for the participants to describe what they remembered from their dancing youth and from the music. This then prompted dancing in those able to dance with those unable to dance

Figure 1 'Reminiscence Through Dance' programme, Lurgan – Northern Ireland (photo by author 2008)

joining in by clapping, singing and tapping their feet as they sat and watched.

Ms Gallagher commented upon the programme as follows:

> It's a way of educating them and enjoy starting to take care, better care of yourself, as well as keep physically active but most importantly keep socially active, and one of the ways that they love doing that is through dancing because this would have been the culture.

The senior citizens are aware of the physical benefits of dance, less so the social and mental. The companionship with peers is important. The getting ready for a dance reminds them of when they would have dressed up for 'steppin' out' dancing in the 1960s to big marquees in the countryside which would have held several hundred dancers dancing social waltz and Irish ceilidh dancing to traveling Irish showbands. In many respects the dancing on offer to senior citizens here followed a community care model of church, charity and state provision as opposed to the private serious leisure practice found in Blackpool. It too is based upon nostalgia, but nostalgia for a fun past. Dancing in these social dancing moments takes the dancers back in time. Again, Ms Gallagher notes:

> It's such a great feel-good factor [yeah] and they will just say, "we felt alive", "we felt young again", "we felt excited", "we felt we could take on the world", and that was all through dance.

Lewis Erenberg (1998) coins the term 'Swingin' the Dream' when describing the creative transition from jazz to big band swing in the 1930s Depression era of post-Prohibition United States. This movement - and the showband movement in Northern Ireland and Eire of the 1950s and 1960s - is when dancing became a part of working class and youth culture, occasions when post-World War economic, social and sectarian (religious or colour) differences could be subordinated for the 'ephebism' of the dance (Gottschild 2000:14). Sarah's experiences of growing up in Northern Ireland put her at the heart of this leisure explosion. She grew up in a liberal mixed Catholic family from the Upper Falls Road, encouraged by her parents to dance as they did. As she recalls, "my mother always thought that it would help me in my life and bring me ... me confidence to be with people and to be able to communicate with people and give them confidence too." After a day working in a shirt factory, Sarah's evenings were "exhilarating, dancing the night away! […] Happy memories!" More poignantly, Sarah is now dancing approximately three nights a week with a new, younger crowd of friends, maintaining the routine of life she promised to her dying husband four years ago. She has lost weight from her new-found dancing ("it keeps your body in good repair"), and is experimenting and playing with her balance and weight with the dancing on ice where edges are so critical. She feels uplifted and "invigorated" from the dancing and meeting new people, and her heart is relaxed and strong from the waltzing in time with the music (cf. Belardinelli et al. 2008). Finally, Sarah attributed her dancing to keeping her safe and not just sound; the dancing made her a more tolerant and cosmopolitan individual. It kept her out of The Troubles:

> Well I think that's why I never was involved with the Troubles because the dancing was a mixture of everybody. They come from the Shankill Road and the Falls Road. And nobody would ask you what you were or who you were. We just loved dancing full stop. And I had friends ... actually I danced with men, partners that come from the Shankill Road but we never had any problems like. If you like dancing, you go dancing. You're not ... it doesn't matter what people are or who they are really.

3. *Sacramento, USA - 'Dance4life' Social Dancing*

Sacramento, California, is the legislative capital of the wealthiest state in the United States. It has a population of approximately 2 million if one includes the metropolitan

districts, and it has expanded some 10-15% since 1990 with in-migration from Asia, Latin America, the former Soviet Republics, and considerable resettlement from Los Angeles and San Francisco (Anon. 2008b). It is the most integrated and diverse city in the United States (Stodghill and Bower 2002). This is evinced in the composition of the population: in the city precinct of 400,000 residents, a 2000 census (AreaConnect 2000) estimated a population breakdown of 20% latino (88,000 people) and 40% white (165,000 people) with 63,000 African American and 68,000 Asian. Eleven percent of the population is over 65 years of age. Furthermore, whereas Belfast has the one main dance studio that has survived The Troubles, Sacramento has five or six key dance studios, some of which have been in existence since the 1930s. There is, then, more of a tradition to dance and to attend dance studios and dance nights about Sacramento, and an affluence to be able to afford to. There are dance programmes of visiting professional teachers teaching the elderly in residential homes; private dances put on for the retired and semi-assisted living communities; and a public dance programme – Dance4Life, organized bi-weekly in The Ballroom of Sacramento, Sacramento's largest dance studio at 3,750 square ft, a studio founded in 1996 and supporting some 17 professional teachers. This studio caters to most forms of dance ranging from social hustle and West Coast Swing to competitive ballroom, Argentine Tango, Zumba fitness (latin dance aerobics), and on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons it has a popular social ballroom dance for "seniors 55 plus."

James is one of The Ballroom organizers and describes the afternoons as "popular, very social times." They begin with 30 minutes of dance music that acts as a warm up session. This is followed by a short ballroom lesson for another 30 minutes, and then two hours of non-stop ballroom dancing music. Attendance is between 30 and 80 people for the afternoons, with over a hundred coming in for the party dance nights on the weekends that are for all ages. The progamme has been running for 12 years and has been deliberately modeled on the tea dance, with refreshments and cake freely available at all times. It has become a regular meeting place, drawing retired dancers from a sixty-mile radius. The clientele is of a similar age span as those dancing in Blackpool:

> The ages range from as young as 55 up to 95. We have people in their late 70s who are very avid and capable dancers. That couple just passing us, they are in their 80s and they have been dancing together for 50 years. It is wonderful exercise for them. They recognise that and they come to be able to socialise as well as practise their dance. It is tremendous exercise and improves their balance, their physical abilities.

At the start of this article we heard from Bill, a dancer at The Ballroom of Sacramento. Bill is a scientist who took early retirement when he was fifty. The last fifteen years of his retirement have been "the most wonderful fifteen years" in his life. Bill's retirement has enabled him to change his life and to take on the identity of a dancer. He dances in the evenings as well as the afternoons, and finds his thirst for dancing unquenchable:

> BILL: So it's a different phase of life. A lot of people they don't realise that this is the best time of your life because you have more from your life, if you have a little bit of pension left, because you get some money so you don't have to worry about money. You don't have to worry about competing with anyone.
>
> JS: How does the dancing make you feel?
>
> BILL: Oh absolutely wonderful. There is nothing in the world like it to me. When you get the right partner that can move with the music you do and synchronise it's the highest high that you can get! It's almost like on drugs, almost. But even better. It's amazing! Really great. I come here at 7 o'clock, I leave at 10/11.

Bill also reflects upon the other dancers around him and how the dancing has been a new – and in many cases improved – lease of life for them

> BILL: The people that you see in here, and they started two to four years ago, most of them they could barely move with the music, they couldn't dance. They were not … I would say they were not even healthy, they were very timid. But now a few years later they've been taking lessons, they move around, they talk to people, they ask you to dance.

The social dancing makes the dancers more self-confident, more agile and mobile, more healthy and more happy. Bill's friend Penny has been dancing at The Ballroom since the inception of Dance4Life twelve years ago, and has been social dancing around Sacramento for twenty-seven years. She likes to feel herself moving and being moved. It keeps her young and is a part of her weekly timetable of activities: she only dances four times a week now since a knee operation curtailed her daily dancing. Now in her seventies, Penny has used her dance hobby to transition into retirement. And it continues to help her: "It's good for your heart and your lungs and your muscles. I don't know of anything it doesn't help, even your outlook on life because you see people and see how other people are." Jessica has gone even further and has used her retirement to change employment as "a computer programmer of twenty-five years sitting" to that of trainee

dance instructress teaching in a converted room at home and practising, training and recruiting students at the weekly tea dances. Now sixty, and dancing since 2000, Jessica felt that she burnt out from the demands of her programming job, but that she could never feel the same way about her dancing:

> My husband and I started dancing in 2000 and we became really addicted to it: I love it. I absolutely love it. We practised every day and then about a year and a half ago I decided to become a Dance Instructor. It's very good exercise and as a teacher I also had to learn to lead and I really appreciate what the men have to do because they really have to use their brains. It's not what step am I doing, but where - how does that go, where does the lady go, how do I get her to go there, how do I make sure I don't run into somebody else. They have to think a lot. The lady's good, she just has to follow. But she should know.

Figure 2 'Dance4Life' programme at The Sacramento Ballroom – Sacramento, USA (photo by author 2008)

For Jessica, Penny, Bill and many of the other dancers at the Dance4Life afternoons, they have never been more active, more healthy and more alert. Other dancers came for related reasons: the transition into retirement; the physical connection with another person; "an afternoon not wandering around the Mall"; a practical form of relaxation and exercise; or to entertain new girlfriends, some of whom could not speak English but could join in by dancing instead.

There were two regular characters at the Sacramento Ballroom Dance4Life dance afternoons, a retired racehorse jockey and a retired US Marine. Frankie trained Sea Biscuit and other horses in the 1940s before getting injured and retiring. Now eighty-eight years old and still a ladies man, he dances twice a week to get rid of his arthritis ("I've got arthritis, but when I'm dancing, there's no arthritis pain. It goes away completely"). He is practising for a dance holiday cruise up the West Coast to Alaska with his new girlfriend. Jacob is nicknamed 'the road runner' for his speed around the ballroom. He is eighty-four and has been social dancing ballroom for the past 71 years. As a young Marine fighting in the Pacific during World War Two, Jacob used his dance skills to get guest passes off base so that the officers' wives could have a man lead them in their dancing. He met his wife during the war and has been dancing with his "Irish feather" ever since.

Dancing is their self-medication. They are dancing with each other for approximately six hours a week: they try to be on their feet for six hours a day doing weight bearing activities to maintain muscle density; moreover, Jacob's wife has Parkinson's Disease and on dance-days Jacob loads her up with pro-enzymes to stop her shakes. They find that there is more space and it is safer dancing at The Ballroom. There is a dance etiquette and people are careful not to bump into each other, so they are unlikely to injure themselves or fall over. They are able to pace themselves and are even able to use the next-dance signs to work out which dances to sit out on (see Figure 2).

Andy K., the dance programme co-ordinator, has been running the dance programme for the last three years. He sees it as "a sort of low impact aerobics for seniors." In other words, the Dance4Life programme targets dance as exercise for the actively retired. The programme started as a tea dance but with a schedule and a lesson, it has become a bi-weekly dance exercise session with tea and cake supplied (including free day-old bread supplied by a ninety-two year old baker and social dancer). Because it is an indoor activity, the dancers are not affected by the vagaries of the weather or by the insecurities of the shopping mall. The dancers are "having a good time and have people of their own age to talk to." Finally, Andy pointed out – and reiterated the point from other interviews – that the social dancing was especially good at helping offset Alzheimer's disease:

> ANDY: It helps with Alzheimer's disease because it makes you think. Especially for the men. Because, as they're men, you have to lead the lady and at the same time you have to basically dance in two directions, you have to dance in the present and the future and that keeps your mind going and it forces you to think.

In these three cases of social ballroom amongst senior citizens, dancers come together in a variety of fashions, connecting – mostly with their life partners – for several hours of exercise, enjoyment and practice. At each of these dances, cakes, sandwiches and tea are provided. In the Blackpool Ballroom, dancers are able to practice their moves and routines on a quality dance floor. There is more socializing on the dance floor in the Northern Ireland case studies with party dances such as the conga. There is a strong group feel at the Dance4Life events that begin with dance lessons and cater for bringing on a range of dancers. There is more switching of dance partners there too, though the dancing was the most conventional with no same sex dancing visible (male to male same sex dancing was apparent in Blackpool, and female to female dancing was commonplace in Northern Ireland – largely due to the sex imbalance with a higher male mortality rate than female). Except for the Blackpool dancing, the social dance events all had a localness to them with the hustle and West Coast Swing included in the dance programme in Sacramento, and some ceilidh set dances in the Northern Ireland dance programme.

Dance In-Tense

Whether performing, practicing, or dancing for fun, the senior citizens in Blackpool, Sacramento and around Northern Ireland attest to the benefits of social ballroom. The dancing gives them an agility and nimbleness that is both physical and mental. It gives the dancers - whether new to the dancing like Jessica or a dance veteran like Jacob – an enthusiasm for living, a happiness and sense of wellbeing, and releases unrealized or previously dormant levels of motility. It creates *communitas*. It makes people feel young again, in touch with others for Sarah, or even renewed as in Jessica's case. It staves off illness, and even counteracts decline.

Medical and health studies attest to the qualitative findings presented in this article: dance augments mental, emotional and physical well being and counteracts social isolation (Corbin and Metal-Corbin 1997; Young and Dinan 1999); the mental challenges of dance decreases dementia (Verghese et al. 2003); dance is restorative and recuperative in its marshalling of levels of concentration and release and dissipation of accumulations of energy (Lagan 1986); and dance fosters inclusion, understanding, acceptance and tolerance. In fact, Lima and Vieira (2007:140) conclude their study of ballroom dance as therapy amongst the elderly in Brazil by suggesting that through partnered social dance, "the body may change from being a source of oppression to a source of freedom."

One particularly interesting finding from this comparison of social ballroom dancers in Blackpool and Sacramento, and around Belfast, has been the role *tense* plays in the social dancing, and how the past, the present, and the future all feature in the dance afternoons. Nostalgia for 'days gone by,' as well as 'bygone days', is evident in all three tea dance afternoons. It is in the Blackpool venue, the live organ music, reliving dancehall nights from the 1950s in Belfast, as well as those moments of pleasure grasped during World War Two amongst the Sacramento dancers. Moreover, in social ballroom dancing, the dancers are rekindling body memories of former movements and intimacies. "Dancing precipitates an incredible longing. To recover the pleasure - in the imagining and remembering, the connecting again with my limbs, my breath, my body is to ignite desire," recalls Gotfrit (1988:123) during her participatory study in discos of women's nights out. This is a form of nostalgia not just for the authentic, or for the real of an organic sense of community. It is a sense of nostalgia for one's former self. Gotfrit felt this pull, the "pleasures of memory" in her body, her locating of her self by "interfacing" with others through the dance. This was all triggered in her as soon as she heard the first bars of music and felt a wooden floor beneath her dancing shoes. These nostalgia strings are played upon expressly by the new compilation of Victor Silvester (2001) tracks traded under the evocative title "You Danced to these Bands."

Th ese senior social dancers are not dancing retrospective mental and physical memories, repeating themselves from their earlier years, replaying poignant memories with the mind and the body. Gotfrit (1988:129) claims that the dance floor is where "desire and pleasure are courted and orchestrated," where its public regulation can be relaxed, especially for women. Furthermore, she adds that it is on the dance floor that one experiences "the preamble to other pleasures of the body, in the forms of flirtation, romance, and sex" (126). My experiences participating and observing dancing amongst senior citizens suggest to me that it is generally less predatory than Gotfrit's reported dance environment. The dancers I worked with were either there as couples, or were there for the entertainment and community than finding a new life partner. As such,

for all the nostalgia that attracted them to the dance events, and their memories of previous dance nights and dance partners, they are very much dancing in the present. They are concentrating and their bodies are flowing anti-clockwise around the dance floor in the "here and now" of the dancing. The stimuli of the music, the ambience, the people brought about their responses. The immediacy of dancing, rather than the prelude to the dancing or the tea or return home after the dancing, resulted in the feelings of happiness, the sudden absence of aches and pains, the release of endorphins, the loss of self-consciousness, and the sudden motility realised.

The dancers are also dancing for the future in several senses of the word. The leaders are dancing their moves, leading their partners, and leading into the future as moves fill space ahead of them both physically and temporally. The leader has to think ahead and predict where moves will take the social dancing couple, what will best show them off, how to avoid other couples in their anti-clockwise rotation around the dance floor. Furthermore, in terms of a future, the dancers are acting out a fantasy of the imagination. They are playing a 'Fred and Ginger' in a new era, creating and dancing-out their proto-narratives. Appadurai (1996:3, author's emphasis) describes "*the work of the imagination* as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity." He argues that we live in a postmodern condition wherein we can realize our fantasies and are no longer curtailed by class, feudalism or slavery. On the dance floor, these twenty-first century social dancers have been able to develop perhaps dormant *alter egos*, to have motility realized, to become new subjects such as in the case of the new dance instructor Jessica, or the new dance addict Bill. Whether or not there was a disconnect in one's "body-self relationship" - a break between 'storied bodies and storied selves' (Sparkes 1999:26), between lived body and self and imagined body and self before dancing, or during the period when dancing lapsed in one's life as with Sarah - social dancing in ballrooms and community centres is a performance of self-actualisation. Renewal can be seen on and around the dance floor in Blackpool, around Belfast, and across Sacramento.

In sum, this leisure engagement makes the "young-old" category of senior citizen and can be considered "an egalitarian [people's] version of the high life as they come together for social dancing" (Walsh 1993:118). Brown et al. (2008:91) conclude their study of Carolina shag dancing amongst the elderly on similar lines to mine: that meaningfulness derived from social dancing leads to a continued engagement with life - past, present, and future - and holds the "promise for successful aging." This article has sought to bring social dancing "out of the dark" (Ward 1993:29). The study of social dancing amongst senior citizens has hardly been a study of dancing by twilight; it has been one of altered premises, shattered stereotypes, and pleasant memories.

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