



Community Dance as a Social Prescription Program Utilizing Traditional Japanese Folk Arts: A Video Ethnographic Study of Older Adults in Japan

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Abstract

Background: With the increasing number of older adults living with chronic conditions, innovative approaches addressing the social determinants of health are needed. As part of social prescription, community dance has the potential to enhance social health among diverse groups.

Objective: This study aimed to analyze a community dance workshop designed for older adults in Japan and examine its impact on subjective health perceptions and social interaction through video ethnographic analysis.

Methods: From March 2021 to July 2024, community dance workshops for adults aged 65 years and older were conducted biannually at the Comprehensive Community Support Center in Tendo City, Yamagata Prefecture. Workshops incorporated elements of traditional Japanese culture—such as folk songs, obi sashes, furoshiki wrapping cloths, and folding fans—and were facilitated by dance artists trained in the Noguchi Method. Video recordings were analyzed using ethnographic methods to investigate participant engagement and responses.

Results: Older adult participants demonstrated active engagement through spontaneous movement, laughter, singing, and creative expression. Post-workshop feedback included comments such as “I feel more energetic,” “I could move more than usual,” and “I still feel full of energy,” indicating improved subjective health perceptions. Participants also reported increased social interaction and expressed a desire to continue participating.

Conclusion: Community dance workshops that utilize familiar cultural elements can effectively promote subjective health and social connectedness among older adults. The integration of traditional arts, a safe environment, and a collaborative care approach contributed to the workshop's success and positive outcomes.

Introduction

Global population aging has increased the number of individuals living with chronic conditions and disabilities, who face health challenges influenced by social determinants of health such as social factors, environmental conditions, and economic circumstances [1]. To address these challenges, the United Kingdom (UK) has implemented “social prescription” as a comprehensive approach to help patients achieve greater independence and self-reliance in daily life [2].

Social prescription involves primary care physicians referring patients to link workers, who then connect patients with various community support groups and resources. These link workers provide social, emotional, and practical support, including life advice, arts activities, physical exercise, cooking classes, employment support, and legal advice [3].

Recent research indicates that social prescription is effective in improving health and well-being, reducing social isolation, and decreasing healthcare service utilization [4].

Community dance is one important element within these supportive interventions.

Community dance emerged in the 1990s as a movement that spread widely across the UK, aiming to integrate diverse populations—including immigrants, people with disabilities, older adults, homeless individuals, and at-risk youth—into wider society [5]. This approach leverages the transformative power of dance to revitalize communities

and has achieved success across education, healthcare, and welfare sectors [6].

Research on physical activity and health outcomes among older adults indicates that regular physical activity contributes to maintaining cognitive function, reducing fall risk, and improving psychological well-being [7]. Studies focusing specifically on dance interventions demonstrate improvements in older adults' physical function, cognitive function, and social interaction [8], revealing that creative physical expression plays a crucial role in enhancing their quality of life [9].

In Japan, community dance programs targeting children and individuals with disabilities are gradually expanding, but programs specifically designed for older adults remain limited. Although physical activity and social interaction among older adults are critically important from a community health perspective, innovative approaches incorporating artistic expression have not been sufficiently examined. Our research team recognized the potential for older

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Citation: Yamada K (2025) Community Dance as a Social Prescription Program Utilizing Traditional Japanese Folk Arts: A Video Ethnographic Study of Older Adults in Japan. Int J Nurs Clin Pract 12: 428. doi: <https://doi.org/10.15344/2394-4978/2025/428>

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adults to experience self-discovery, learn about others, and build social relationships through artistic expression involving physical activity. We hypothesized that such experiences could enhance social health, including interpersonal connections and feelings of attachment and belonging to the community.

The purpose of this study was to clarify the effects of community dance workshops rooted in the Japanese cultural context on older adults' subjective health perceptions and social interaction, using video ethnographic methods.

Methods

Workshop design and implementation

We collaborated with the Comprehensive Community Support Center in Tendo City, Yamagata Prefecture, to design and implement a community dance workshop for older adults. The workshop employed dance artists as facilitators and incorporated sounds and props reminiscent of local traditional festivals to elicit free expression and movement from participants.

The program aimed to increase participants' awareness of their physical potential and relationships with others through bodily sensations, enabling them to experience both subjective and social health. Workshops were held biannually from March 2021 to July 2024.

Participants

Participants were adults aged 65 years and older residing in the community who voluntarily joined the workshops. Recruitment was conducted through the Regional Comprehensive Support Center and targeted older adults motivated to participate regardless of health status or physical function.

Facilitators

Two dance artists served as workshop facilitators. Both artists possessed extensive knowledge of the Yamagata dialect, lifestyle, culture, and arts, enabling them to communicate effectively using language and cultural references familiar to participants. Their facilitation approach was based on the principles of the Noguchi Gymnastics Method.

Noguchi Gymnastics is globally recognized as a fundamental method of Butoh dance and emphasizes relaxed posture without imposing unnecessary tension on any part of the body [10]. This method enables natural movement and expressive power while minimizing post-exercise fatigue, which is particularly important for older adults.

Both facilitators had extensive experience conducting dance workshops for older adults, individuals with disabilities, and hospice facilities. Their programs were highly regarded for their unique approach closely connected to participants' daily lives.

Environmental considerations

Prior to the workshop, a meeting was held among staff from the Comprehensive Community Support Center, the dance artist, and

the coordinator to confirm the program's appropriateness and assess the physical demands on participants. The workshop was conducted in a tatami-mat room to reduce the risk of serious injuries from falls. Comfortable seating was provided to minimize fatigue from prolonged sitting.

Data collection and analysis

With participant consent, the workshop was video recorded. Video ethnographic analysis [11] was conducted to examine participant engagement, expression, movement, and interaction. Video ethnography is a suitable method for capturing participants' natural behaviors and interactions, enabling the exploration of physical and emotional experiences that cannot be fully articulated verbally.

The analysis focused on participants' physical movements, facial expressions, voices, and patterns of interaction. After the workshop, a feedback session was held to consolidate participants' perspectives and experiences.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted with approval from the Ethics Review Committee of Yamagata Prefectural University of Health Sciences (Approval No.: 2007-05). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, confirming their agreement to video recording and study participation. Participants' privacy and anonymity were strictly maintained.

Results

Participant characteristics

A total of seven workshops were planned during the study period, of which five were conducted (two were canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Each workshop included 18–22 participants (average of 20), including one or two male participants. Participants ranged in age from their 60s to 80s. Most were community-dwelling older adults living independently, capable of walking unaided and performing light exercise. Some had mild chronic conditions, such as hypertension, diabetes, or arthrosis.

Workshop environment and activities

The workshops were held in a spacious tatami-mat room. The older adult participants engaged in dance activities using traditional Japanese tools such as kimono obi sashes, furoshiki wrapping cloths with traditional patterns, and folding fans. Participants danced freely to local festival music, displaying a variety of expressions and movements. The familiar tatami setting, traditional tools, and music created an environment in which participants could relax and enjoy the activities.

Participant engagement and expression

Participants demonstrated high levels of engagement, evident through laughter, applause, and visible enjoyment of the dance activities. Frequent behaviors included dancing alongside the artist, humming folk songs, and striking kabuki-style poses. These actions reflected a playful spirit and rich creativity.

Video analysis revealed the following behavioral patterns:

“Spontaneous creation of bodily movements and expressions,” “Exchanging glances and sharing smiles with other participants,” “Expressing natural rhythmic sense in sync with the music,” and “Creative interpretations of traditional movements (use of fans, movement of obi sashes).”

Participants praised each other’s dancing and expressed surprise and delight at friends’ unexpected expressions. Within this cooperative atmosphere, mutual understanding among close acquaintances and the discovery of new facets of one another were fostered.

Participant feedback

During the post-workshop discussion, participants responded positively, appearing lively and smiling. Comments indicating subjective improvements in health included: “I felt energized,” “I could move more than usual,” “I still feel full of energy,” “My body feels lighter” and “It felt good to sweat for the first time in a while.”

Regarding social interaction, participants shared remarks such as: “I got to talk to so many people,” “It was so much fun holding hands and laughing together,” “I was happy to see a new side of Mr./Ms. OO,” “I want to try dancing with my grandchildren at home,” “I want to participate again,” and “When is the next one?”

Discussion

Cultural fusion and an accessible environment

This community dance workshop provided older adult participants with an opportunity to engage with traditional motifs and discover new aspects of themselves and others through free dance expression. Unlike typical health promotion exercises for older adults, this program encouraged participants to share local dialects, music, and traditional dance. Through the integration of traditional performing arts by dance artists, participants enjoyed familiar songs and dances while engaging in free and creative expressive activities.

The importance of culturally appropriate programs has been emphasized in prior research, which reports that respecting participants’ cultural backgrounds leads to higher participation rates and greater satisfaction.[13] This study also suggests that incorporating elements of Japanese traditional culture enhanced participants’ sense of familiarity and security, thereby promoting active participation.

Social connection and personal expression

The collaborative atmosphere of co-creating and sharing space fostered participants’ ability to enjoy spontaneous ideas and poses. Through dance activities, older adult participants found opportunities to build new relationships with each other and experience expressions unique to themselves.

From the perspective of social cohesion theory, participation in shared activities is known to deepen trust and mutual understanding between individuals and strengthen social networks [14]. In this workshop, participants were observed discovering new aspects of one another through physical expression and deepening their social cohesion.

Within a culturally shared environment, participants gained a sense of community belonging and psychological security. The program, which emphasized encouragement of free expression, enabled each participant to express their individuality. Within this joyful and unifying space, participants became the protagonists of their own experiences.

Effects on subjective health perception

The improvement in subjective health perception evident from participant feedback likely reflects both the physiological and psychosocial effects of physical activity. Numerous studies have reported the positive effects of dance activities on physical function, cognitive function, and psychological well-being in older adults [7,8], and the results of this study align with those findings.

In particular, movements based on the Noguchi Method provided natural and comfortable physical activity without imposing excessive physical strain on participants. This is considered a crucial factor in sustaining their motivation for continued participation.

Dignity and recognition

Community dance workshops do not explicitly address aging, illness, or disability. This distinction allows participants to be rediscovered and acknowledged through affirmations such as “How interesting!”, “Wonderful!”, “How lovely!”, and “How precious!”. This approach creates a space that respects individual dignity by valuing participants’ expressions and contributions.

The concept of person-centered care in geriatric care emphasizes respect for individual dignity, choice, and autonomy [15]. In this workshop, participants were able to focus on creativity and expressiveness rather than on their abilities or limitations, likely enhancing their sense of dignity and self-worth.

Collaborative care approach

Creating such an environment required collaboration with staff from the Comprehensive Community Support Center to implement safe programs that considered participants’ physical capabilities. Pre-workshop meetings thoroughly examined the appropriateness of objectives and methods, ensuring participant safety and program suitability.

The importance of multidisciplinary collaboration in geriatric care is well established[16], and this study achieved a safe and effective program through collaboration among artists, Comprehensive Community Support Center staff, and researchers. This collaborative approach not only served as a means but also created a cohesive space centered on older adults.

The context of socially engaged art

Since the 1990s, artistic activities actively engaging with local communities have spread globally under the concept of Socially Engaged Art (SEA)[17]. In Japan, SEA activities have primarily focused on art projects featuring invited renowned artists, with relatively few examples of community-led artistic activities that utilize local resources.

This dance workshop, however, demonstrated rich artistic expression by older adult participants, rooted in Yamagata’s natural environment, culture, and everyday life experiences. It created a

unique art workshop developed by people sharing the same regional and cultural foundation and can be positioned as a new model for community-based Socially Engaged Art.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, because it was conducted within a specific cultural and geographical context, generalizability to other settings may be limited. In addition, the relatively small number of participants made statistical verification difficult. Furthermore, the study did not include an evaluation of long-term effects or the measurement of quantitative health indicators.

Future research should explore the adaptation of similar programs to diverse cultural contexts and incorporate evaluations using quantitative health outcome measures.

Conclusion

The success of this dance workshop program was influenced by the following factors:

Subjective Health Effects: Participants reported tangible health benefits from dancing, found the experience enjoyable, and expressed motivation to continue.

Cultural Authenticity: Incorporating local traditional culture rather than external elements required artists and coordinators who were familiar with the region's characteristics and customs. **Safety Assurance:** Personnel and systems capable of adjusting program content to suit the characteristics of older adults—serving as facilitators bridging the gap between participants and activities—were indispensable.

Through these dance workshops, older adult participants increased their motivation to engage in physical activity, experienced improvements in physical abilities, and deepened their understanding of social interaction. Community dance workshops demonstrate the potential to contribute to improved social health outcomes.

Implications for nursing practice

These findings suggest that community dance programs incorporating cultural elements can serve as innovative interventions to promote social health among older adults. Nurses can play a vital role in developing and implementing such programs through community partnerships and collaborative care approaches.

Within community-based integrated care systems, nurses are responsible for comprehensively assessing the physical, psychological, and social needs of older adults and matching them with appropriate community resources. Culturally appropriate interventions such as community dance offer potential solutions to challenges such as social isolation and loss of purpose—issues that conventional medical approaches may not fully address.

Competing Interests

The author declare that he has no competing interests.

Funding

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP19K19601.

Ethical Review

This study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of Yamagata

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