

# Irish Céilí Dance and Elderly Dancers

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Irish céilí dancing is described. The meanings of dance are explored for three elderly Irish céilí dancers through participant observation and through open-ended interviews. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of embodiment is used as a philosophical framework to interpret the interviews. This account focuses on the multiple layers of meaning that the lived body can manifest in the world as a broad perspective for interpretation. Interviewees revealed that dance has rich and varied meanings, ranging from its perceived health benefits, its usefulness as a vehicle for socialization, its stimulus for reminiscence, and its connection to cultural heritage.

**KEY WORDS:** céilí dance; Irish dance; elderly; phenomenological research; culture.

Let foreigners brag and crow  
That dancing's their devotion  
'Tis little the craychurs know  
Of the poetry of motion;  
Their polkas and quadrilles  
Are nothin' else but prancin'  
An' Irish jigs and reels  
The King and Queen of dancin'.  
—*J.J. Sheehan*, 19<sup>th</sup> Century dancing master

What is it like when the dancing is really good? I always compare it to flying. When your partner and you are in synch and everything

works and you're both stepping off together, and, you know, you don't seem to be spending much time touching the floor. I just say it feels like flying. (*Jack*, 58 year-old céilí dancer)

## Introduction

Céilí is a Gaelic word that translates as “an evening visit, a friendly call.” (Brennan, 2001, p. 30) The word's original meaning remains quite evident when one attends a contemporary Irish céilí. I have participated in Irish céilí dances for several years now, and I still experience a rush of excitement whenever I enter the dance hall. The lively Irish fiddle music beckons as a crowd of dancers weave a mesmerizing spell of movement. It is impossible to resist the exuberant energy of a céilí. Young and old, rank beginner and seasoned dancer, Irish and Irish-at-heart are attracted to the camaraderie found in céilí dancing.

A céilí today implies Irish figure dancing, which is group dance that can be enjoyed by individuals of all ages and abilities. Several other activities besides dance can typically occur at a céilí, including live music, singing, story-telling, and the liberal enjoyment of food and drink. All of these actions combine to create the opportunity to become a part of a vibrant and colorful community.

## History and Description of Céilí Dance

The character of Irish céilí dancing is intimately tied to the tumultuous history of the Irish people. Throughout the 19th and early 20th Centuries a movement to obtain Irish independence was coupled with a desire to preserve Irish culture. This culminated in 1893 with the formation of Conradh na Gaeilge, or the Gaelic League. While the impetus of the league was the preservation of the Irish language, the Gaelic League also took an interest in reviving traditional Irish dance. A very active branch of the Gaelic League, located in London, organized the first Irish céilí, which was held in Bloomsbury Hall on October 30, 1897. (Brennan, 2001; Whelan, 2000) Following this first céilí, an effort began to research, document, and standardize traditional Irish dances. In 1939, An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, or the Commission for Irish Dance, published a handbook of acceptable Irish figure dances under the title of *Ár Rincí Foirne*, “Our Figure Dances.” This handbook, in its newer edition, remains the official guide for teaching Irish figure dances.

The titles of Irish céilí dances range from allusions to battle (Siege of

Ennis, Siege of Carrick), to rural activities (Haymakers Jig, Harvest-Time Jig), to the patron saint of the Irish (St. Patrick's Day). Additionally, several Irish tunes bear the same names as the dances, and are customarily played to accompany the respective dance. In fact, *Ár Rincí Foirne* (1995) begins by stressing the important link between "gay spirited music" and dancing. "We are fortunate possessors of a remarkable heritage of national dance music . . . tunes so full of rhythmic vitality that listeners can seldom resist the inclination to tap their feet." (p. 2) Indeed, a céilí is usually blessed by the energy of live music. Musicians often play traditional Irish instruments, such as fiddle, accordion, tin whistle and, occasionally, Uilleann pipes.

Céilí dances are either reels or jigs, with timing that is either 4/4 or 6/8, respectively. Céilí dancing is quite energetic and aerobic. Dancers step lightly on the balls of the feet, and dance steps are executed with quick, lifting, and controlled movements that are held close to the body. A characteristic style of all Irish dance is that the majority of movement occurs in the lower half of the body. The upper torso is held still and erect, and arms are held straight and at one's sides, unless holding hands with a partner. In that case, a standard dance position is elbows held close to the body, forearms bent upward, and hands held at shoulder height.

Irish céilí dances take the form of round dances, progressive/long dances, and figure dances for two to eight couples. Figure dances consist of a body, or a set of dance movements that are repeated several times in the dance, and figures, which are varied movement patterns danced between the repetitions of the body. Different patterns of steps (sevens, threes, and rising steps) are woven into céilí dances as intricately as Celtic knot work. Dancers may advance, retire, pass right and left, promenade, interlace, circle or spin. Designs such as diamonds, squares, roses, waves, gates, arches and crosses are formed by the varied dance movements. The process continuously engages and challenges both the dancer's body and mind.

### **Background, Selection of Participants, and Interviews**

In addition to possessing a love for Irish dance (I am one-half Irish-American), I am a registered nurse with a background in philosophy. My present professional interest involves the promotion of healthy aging, and the céilí group with which I currently dance provides many opportunities to observe elders who seek to maintain an active, participatory

lifestyle. For the past three years, I have danced and performed with an intergenerational Irish céilí dance troupe whose members range in age from sixteen to eighty. Dances take place at a local Catholic church and at the Police Athletic Association hall in the Portland, Oregon vicinity. Seven of the dancers are aged 55 years and older. Three of the elder dancers, whom have served as my teachers, were instrumental in founding the dance company and have remained active in the group for over 20 years. The dance company performs at Portland area nursing homes, on St. Patrick's Day and at Celtic fairs in the local area.

Wishing to learn more about their perspectives on dancing, I interviewed these three dancers. As a guideline for the open-ended interview and to stimulate reflection and response, I used a series of questions developed during my coursework in qualitative research during my post-doctoral fellowship at the The Oregon Health Sciences University. These questions were additionally approved for use by the University Institutional Review Board.

1. When did you begin dancing? What events led you to dance?
2. How old were you when you started dancing? How old are you now?
3. What kinds of dance do you do? How often do you dance?
4. How has dancing changed for you over the years?
5. Can you tell me about the history of this dance company?
6. What is it like for you to dance? What does dancing mean to you?
7. What is it like for you to dance in a performance?

I interviewed the three participants, allowing them to talk as long as they liked, which was approximately two to two and one-half hours each. I interviewed Mary twice because she called me back with more to say. Wally and Emmett were interviewed once. With the consent of the participants, all interviews were taped and transcribed. Participants further agreed that excerpts from their interviews may be shared in publications.

The questions generated lively, spontaneous discussion by the participants. I guided them only to stay on the topic of dance. Additionally, I made observations of the participants during the weekly dances in which I participated.

### **The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty**

As a philosopher, I chose to interpret the interviews within the philosophical framework of phenomenology, specifically Merleau-Ponty's work

that focuses on the experience of the lived body. Merleau-Ponty begins his phenomenology by giving primacy to perception. For Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenologist's goal is:

. . . to return to the things themselves . . . to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientist's schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is. (1981, p. ix)

Beginning with things as they show themselves in perception, Merleau-Ponty posits that things do not simply impose themselves on consciousness as atomistic sense impressions, nor do we construct things in our minds. Rather, we discover things through a subject-object dialogue. This subject-object dialogue occurs through what Merleau-Ponty calls the lived body. The human subject as being-in-the-world is first a lived body. Prior to the split between subject and object, the act of perceiving displays a phenomenal mode of preexistence. In a chapter entitled, "The Body is Already a Theory of Perception," Merleau-Ponty states, "Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism . . . External perception and the perception of one's own body vary in conjunction because they are the two facets of one and the same act." (1981, pp. 203, 205) It is the lived body that is the bridge between consciousness/body, internal/external, subject/object, self/other. For Merleau-Ponty, the flesh of the body extends to the flesh of the world, for ". . . to be a body is to be tied to a certain world . . . it is a grouping of lived-through meanings . . . my point of view upon the world." (pp. 70, 148, 153)

The centrality of the concept of the lived body in Merleau-Ponty's thought renders his philosophy an excellent theoretical grounding for a qualitative study of dancers. In fact, Merleau-Ponty writes that the ". . . body is comparable to a work of art . . . [in the sense that] a novel, a poem, picture, or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed. . . ." (1981, p. 151) This concept is especially valid when the art form is dance, because the medium or instrument of artistic expression is literally the dancer's body.

One's body provides the general means for identifying oneself with a variety of projects in the world, and Merleau-Ponty discusses several layers of meaning that the lived-body-in-the-world can manifest:

Sometimes [the body] is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and

moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world. (1981, p. 146)

## The Interviews

Using the layers of meaning that the lived body can manifest as a broad perspective for interpretation, I now turn to presenting the lived experience of three elderly céilí dancers. In their reflection on the personal meaning of dance, each interviewee demonstrates particular aspects of the lived body as described by Merleau-Ponty. Wally, who is preoccupied with the biologic limitations of an ill body, experiences dance through a layer of meaning that is purely physical, while Mary and Emmett extend the meaning of dance outward from the core of physical embodiment to encompass meanings found in their respective social and cultural life worlds.

*Wally: "It takes away the pain"*

Wally is an 80-year-old dancer who relates his dance history to a history of health problems. When asked when he started dancing, he replies:

I was 58, I had blood in the urine, probably prostatitis . . . I had known . . . well an old friend of mine got prostate cancer . . . and it was a horrible thing . . . and when the doctors got through with him they had cut everything out there was to cut out, but, there was nothing. And I thought this is not for me. . . I'm not afraid to die, but I wasn't about to go and have any doctor cutting on me . . . but then I thought, well I probably have six months more left to go . . . I didn't have any pain, but I thought I'm going to enjoy my next six months.

For Wally, dance is therapy. It has a curative effect:

And anyway, six months later instead of dying I was perfectly good. Now, uh, before I started Irish dancing, I had arthritis in the hip and when I'd need to bend I had to keep moving, rolling, around until I could find the place that was comfortable. There again, six months after I started Irish dancing, no more arthritis.

Wally refers to the disciplining that the body must undergo to derive the therapeutic effects of dance. He humorously asks the rhetorical question

that certainly sounds familiar to most dancers: “After the second class I said, *‘what am I doing to myself?’* . . . but, you know, the longer I danced the better I felt.” The effort is worth it for Wally, because the essential meaning of the milieu of dance and its accompanying music is found in its ability to soothe physical suffering: “I’ve always said . . . that I’ll be alright if there’s the music . . . and I think it is the music that takes . . . that is almost like a sedative . . . it takes away the pain.”

Still, Wally has continued to suffer physical ailments. He describes the experience of myocardial infarction while dancing one night:

I got through the dance fine, but I went to sit down and I felt this *tremendous* pressure, so I thought I’ll go out and get some fresh air and be alright and I came back in and found Jim and said, “Alright you’ve got to take me on to the doctor, can you take me on there?” and he said, “You’re having a heart attack.”

Immediately following his description of the heart attack, Wally turns to a discussion of the loss of mental capacity:

What’s frustrating to me now is my mind is wandering so bad . . . uh, I know these dances like I know the back of my hand, but when we come to the part where . . . O.K., we’re going to do—extended sides . . . it’s so aggravating—now, if I were sharper, what I would do is act like it’s a challenge and say, “O.K. what comes next?” and pretend they have to know . . . but I’m not that sharp. Well, what’s aggravating, is if you’re asked to do it, you teach the dance . . . and then somebody teaches it with you . . . I feel like saying [said in Irish and then translated] “Who’s cutting this meat, you or me?”

Here, Wally describes an incident from dance class that I had witnessed. However, I did not realize the significance of the event for Wally until he brought it up in the subsequent interview. During all of the episodes of the dance group that I have observed, Wally has not participated in the actual dancing. Rather, he has stood on the periphery of the dance, observing, instructing, correcting and calling the sequence of the dance steps, asking dancers to repeat a certain movement until “it’s done right.” During the incident of which he spoke, he had been slow to recall a particular dance movement, and another, younger dancer, had stepped in and called the movement sequence. I was dancing that evening and at the time thought nothing of this event—we all occasionally forget a step or make a mistake. Yet, for Wally, this usurpation was humiliating. He is rarely capable of dancing anymore, and now the memory of the dance, which he once knew like a part of his body—“like the back of his hand”—is also dimming.

As such, Wally’s accounts of “dancing well” are framed in reminiscences of the past. However, what is perhaps more interesting is that

Wally also believes that *other* dancers were better, more serious, more disciplined in the past, and hence the Irish dance form itself was purer in past years:

Some years ago the Céilí Club was, like I said, they were more exclusive . . . in those days the club didn't let you dance unless you went to class. You just didn't walk in without a class . . . It was more fun, because I was stronger and I could dance better. Just for instance, now, you know you go through the *Sweets of May* once—we used to go *five times*—by the third time I thought I was done for, but by the fourth time I'd got my second wind and I could really dance then . . . and the people took dancing very seriously . . . and there were some *awfully* good dancers . . . you see most of those people that did céilí are no longer there—they're old . . . you see I was already 60 something then and have outlasted most of the younger ones . . . it kind of bothers me to watch now how it has developed . . . when I watch them do step dancing now it bothers me because of that wiggling around . . . it's so un-Irish . . . it's not Irish at all . . . it's *terrible* . . . sooner or later I'm going to see someone breakdance on the floor! Well, even if you're doing set dancing, if you ever saw anybody come from Ireland, set dancing, you *never* saw them wiggling, straight up and down . . . even their legs . . . they may be doing what is called battering but their bodies are straight . . . now some of the step dancers really do the step wiggle . . . I've seen it . . . they don't do the practice . . . they don't do that any more . . . and it's degenerating.

Wally's relationship to dance is colored by his preoccupation with the restrictions and limitations of illness and what his mind/body can no longer achieve. Merleau-Ponty writes that our embodied perception is influenced and situated by an "intentional arc which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation." (1981, p. 136) Thus, Wally "sees" the dance form degenerating around him just as he is experiencing the personal loss of able-bodiedness.

*Mary: "It's just fun for me, that's why I do it."*

Mary is a 76-year-old dancer, a tiny, attractive woman who has had nine children. She possesses a lively wit and a mischievous streak. When asked when she started dancing, Mary recounts a youthful incident of clandestine dancing in a church basement that resulted in a pastor's reprimand. She jokes:

. . . *Now don't tell my mother this* . . . but when I was a kid, you know I was a Presbyterian, and in those days Presbyterians *didn't dance*. *OH, MY GOODNESS*, in fact, they advised us not to have intercourse



'cause it could lead to dancing [pause and a big laugh] . . . well, maybe not, maybe it was the other way around . . .

Not to be deterred, this event caused Mary to take up dancing in the homes of sympathetic friends.

When pressed to explain what dance means for her, Mary's reply is simply that "it's fun," and that is what she hopes to convey to others interested in learning to dance.

So then, but as far as actual dancing is concerned, it was just *fun* and that is the main reason that I hope people come . . . we *do not* do competition, and we do have people come *just* for fun. And if they can't have fun, it's not, well uh, we're not doing our job . . .

Yet, even though Mary gives dance this uncomplicated meaning, she also gives a good example of what Merleau-Ponty calls a "body understanding" of dance, an understanding that is "to experience a harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance." (1981, pp. 139, 144)

I guess *after* you learn the dances, and have the self-confidence that you're not going to make too many mistakes, uh, then you feel like, *confident* that you can do it, and you do it well, and enjoy it . . . whereas at the *learning* stage, why then, it's another, you know, it's another situation, where you're thinking, well, gee, I hope I don't make a mistake, and, you know, when you get past *that*, then you don't, you kind of do it . . . auto . . . it seems like . . . after you learn a dance . . . you don't have to *think*, that your muscles kinda, or your legs or whatever, kinda lead you into it, without you thinking . . . so then you can kinda just devote more time to maybe the *step*, or actually, whatever you want to do. . . .

As Merleau-Ponty writes, "A movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its world." (p. 139)

Unlike Wally, Mary is not concerned with preserving the dance form per se, or with flawless technique. Instead, she remarks, "We're not, uh, you know, into all this, well, you've got to be in this certain place at a certain time and, you know, if you make a mistake it's terrible and all that . . ." Also, unlike Wally, for Mary the lived experience of dance provides a vehicle to open up to the social world, what Merleau-Ponty describes as an existential "taking up," a way that "throws me outside myself." (1981, p. 363)

At the rest homes . . . we go and perform, and *that's O.K.* . . . but what we *really* need to do after the performance, go and *talk* to the people and . . . because a lot of times they'll forget about the performance but they *will* remember that somebody come and visited with

them. And some of those folks, especially in the poorer nursing homes, they don't have much of anybody to . . . sometimes they don't have anybody at all . . . you know, I think dance has a lot of health benefits, it's not only the exercise, it's the mental, because you're, uh, you're visiting with people, you know . . . you wouldn't get a chance to *know* 'em if you didn't have something in common, and you can really form friendships in that area.

Emmett: "Well, to me it's heritage"

Emmett is a 73-year-old dancer, and the only one of the three Irish céilí dancers to have actually been born in Ireland. Emmett's lived experience of dance encompasses the gestalt of céilí. He cannot discuss the dance without also reciting in Irish Gaelic, singing an Irish song, telling an Irish joke, or referring to Ireland's religious, economic, and political history. He is the embodiment of Irish culture, or as Merleau-Ponty states, "Just as nature finds its way to the core of my personal life and becomes inextricably linked with it, so behavior patterns settle into that nature, being deposited in the form of a cultural world." (1981, p. 347)

Emmett dances *loud*, because "I remembered in Ireland that the more noise you made, the better it went over, and I always used to say that I wanted to dance so that my mother would hear me . . . because my mother always said you should hear somebody dance." He continues to "believe in making noise," even though he has been told, "That is not part of the dancing we're doing *here*." Emmett does the dance of the history books, the Irish dance done at the rural crossroads, in the neighbor's small crowded kitchen, in the bedroom where ". . . one had to mind the dresser . . ." It was a time when the dancing went on all night while a relative played the accordion and the older folk gambled at cards for ". . . a bicycle, a goose or a goat." When asked why he dances, Emmett replies:

Well, to me, it's I think mostly, uh, it's good to keep active, but it's *heritage*. It is something that ties me to, not just Ireland today, but to Ireland—it is something that we did in the past. I know the Irish dancing as we do it today was not always the same, but it is an *unbroken chain* back for centuries, at least. And even though the dances are different, it is *something I am*.

So, a dance for Emmett has *both* cultural and personal significance:

Now the Stack of Barley . . . this is one we used to do back home, and uh, my mother played button accordion, and uh, she used to play, and then we danced, and the Stack of Barley was one of her favorites. And it started out that we went around the field, and then the square kept getting smaller, and as we got into the center of the room, then

you stopped and, uh, just kind of . . . battering, stomping, and uh, that was the *thrashing* of the barley . . . and uh, it explained the whole thing, because we did it for her once . . . we got close to my mother's house, we stopped and danced . . . she had a small place. But we tried Stack of Barley, and at that time she would still get up and tell us what we were doing *wrong!*

Emmett's nostalgia is wistful at times and at times touches on loss:

. . . people say to me, "Why don't you go back?" Uh, I keep singing songs and doing the dances but I've never been back. And, I keep saying, "It's *in the back of my mind*, but *you can't go home again.*" And I know that if I went back, it wouldn't be the Ireland that *I* lived in, because my daughter went back and, uh, I asked her to get a picture of the clothesline where my house was . . . well, the *house* wasn't there, the two big fir trees that held the clothesline up, *they* wasn't there . . . and these things are the things that you remember that makes it, uh, it would be hard to go there.

Yet, even though Emmett's dance embodies his past, he, like Mary, uses the dance as a vehicle to reach out to others in the present:

The dancing is a means to an end when you come right down to it because when we get through dancing the important thing is to socialize with the people, and whether these people are destitute or whether they're the top of the rung, it's the visiting after the dancing is what they really look forward to . . . One thing we get them to do is join in singing. *And they love that!*

## Conclusion

Even from these brief interviews, it is evident that Irish céilí dance has rich and varied meanings for elderly dancers, ranging from its perceived health benefits, its stimulus to reminiscence, its connection to culture, and its usefulness as a vehicle for socialization. Using Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment as a lens for interpretation provides one way to understand the lived experience of dance for elder dancers. Additional studies of the use of dance by other ethnicities, as well as the use of dance by other elders regardless of ethnic background, can provide a valuable contribution to the therapeutic use of dance. By increasing our understanding of what elders themselves think is meaningful about activity such as dance, we who work to promote healthful lifestyles for an aging population stand a greater chance at being successful in our endeavors.

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