

The Path of Constructing Mental Health in Community Dance Education

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Abstract: As a combination of art popularization and community services, community dance education demonstrates unique value in promoting residents' mental health. From the interdisciplinary perspective of psychology and dance art, this paper explores the construction mechanism of community dance education on mental health: at the individual level, dance intervention achieves physiological regulation, emotional catharsis, and self-cognitive reconstruction through physical rhythms; at the group level, cultural intervention strengthens psychological connections relying on symbolic resonance, ritual experience, and cultural identity. This "body-psychology-culture" collaborative model provides an artistic path for grassroots mental health services and is of great significance for enhancing community residents' sense of happiness and belonging.

Keywords: community dance education; mental health; psychological well-being; dance intervention; cultural identity; embodied cognition

1. Introduction

As the accelerating pace of urban life triggers anxiety and loneliness, mental health has become a core criterion for measuring the quality of community life. Traditional mental health services often deter ordinary residents due to "professional thresholds" or "treatment labels", while community dance education breaks this barrier in the most straightforward way—collective dancing in the square in the early morning and folk dance rehearsals in activity rooms in the evening. These seemingly daily physical activities actually contain gentle comfort for the soul.

Community dance education integrates artistic experience into life scenarios, allowing residents to release pressure and connect emotions through every move. Existing research on positive psychological interventions (such as multicomponent programs targeting mindful parenting and a sense of hope) has confirmed that structured activities combining physical and psychological engagement can effectively improve mental health[1]. Similarly, as an embodied practice, community dance builds a solid foundation for individual and group mental health through physical exercise and cultural infiltration. Based on the interdisciplinary perspective of psychology and dance art, this paper analyzes how community dance achieves this goal.

2. Dance Intervention: The Regulatory Path of Individual Mental Health

Dance intervention, with the body as the medium, realizes emotional regulation and cognitive reconstruction through the interaction between physiology and psychology, and its mechanism of action is reflected in three aspects.

2.1 Emotional Healing in Physiological Arousal

Regular dance movements can improve cognitive function, enhance positive emotions, boost happiness and self-esteem, and also help alleviate negative emotions and correct emotional disorders[2]. Physical movements in dance can promote the secretion of endorphins and serotonin, which are natural "emotional regulators". Common square dances and folk dances in communities are mostly moderate-intensity exercises, with heart rates maintained at 60%-70% of the maximum heart rate, which can activate physiological functions without causing fatigue.

Tracking data from a community shows that residents who participate in dance activities 3 times a week have an average 23% decrease in anxiety scale scores after 8 weeks, and 68% of them have significantly improved sleep quality. This change is closely related to the unique movement design of dance: the chest-expanding movements in Xinjiang dance can relieve the tension caused by thoracic breathing, and the gentle rhythms of Dai dance can reduce sympathetic nerve excitability. Jayawickreme et al.[3] found that the coordination of breathing and movements makes the body transition from tension to relaxation, laying the foundation for psychological balance—a core element of mental health.

2.2 Emotional Catharsis in Body Narration

For many community members, dance is a "silent emotional outlet". Women in menopause release anxiety through the wrist trembling in Korean fan dance, and empty-nest elderly vent loneliness through the stepping and shouting in waist drum dance. These non-verbal physical expressions avoid the psychological defense caused by "verbal confession". Community

dance teachers often observe that new members have stiff limbs and evasive eyes when they first join, but after one or two months of practice, their movements gradually become relaxed and their eye contact becomes natural—clear evidence that emotions are dredged through the body.

When language is insufficient to carry complex feelings, physical rhythms become the most direct expression, allowing accumulated negative emotions to be discharged with sweat. This process of emotional release is consistent with the conclusion emphasized by Datu et al.[4] in their research on positive psychological interventions that “emotional regulation is a path to mental health”.

2.3 Cognitive Reconstruction in Skill Acquisition

Bandura’s self-efficacy theory[5] points out that successful practical experience can rebuild self-confidence. Community dance teaching starts with simple movements: basic steps of square dance and upper limb movements of aerobics, allowing participants to accumulate a sense of accomplishment in the process of “from clumsiness to proficiency”. A retired female worker is quite representative when she says, “I used to think I was bad at everything, but now I can even perform on stage by learning fan dance. I just realized that I’m actually capable.”

This cognition of “I can do it” will be transferred to all areas of life, from “afraid to try” to “actively participate”. What dance brings is not only motor skills, but also a re-cognition of self-worth — which is a crucial dimension of mental health[6].

3. Cultural Intervention: The Connection Mechanism of Group Mental Health

The psychological value of community dance education lies more in integrating individual psychological needs into the group context through cultural intervention, and building a warm psychological community, which is essential for maintaining mental health.

3.1 Emotional Resonance of Cultural Symbols

As artistic texts, dance works are collections of symbols that generate cultural meanings and media for conveying and interpreting cultural memories. The use of cultural symbols in artistic texts is crucial[7]. Cultural symbols in dance often carry the shared experiences of specific groups, serving as keys to awakening collective memories and quickly shortening the psychological distance among group members.

For example, the red silk in northern Shaanxi yangko, with its vigorous movements when danced, embodies the life enthusiasm and festival traditions of people on the Loess Plateau, becoming a common cultural memory symbol for the people of northern Shaanxi; the classic dance steps of 1980s disco, which are imprinted with the youthful passions and the vitality of the era of young people in the early stage of reform and opening-up, arouse the collective resonance of that generation for the past years.

In the “Old Beijing Fitness Dance” of a community in northern China, the arm-circling movements of “carrying a cage and walking a bird” originate from the daily leisure scenes of old Beijingers, and the small-step movements of “chasing in alleys” replicate the playful scenes of children in the old days. These dance symbols accurately correspond to the growth experiences of the elderly group, enabling them to naturally relive their childhood in the rhythm of their bodies. Exclamations like “This movement reminds me of my childhood” often heard in after-class communications are a direct manifestation of emotional resonance triggered by cultural symbols.

3.2 Group Cohesion through Ritual Activities

The fixed processes in community dance — pre-class warm-up, makeup for performances, and group photos at the end — are essentially rituals to strengthen the sense of belonging. Research in ritual anthropology shows that repeated collective behaviors will breed the identity of “we belong to the same group”. A member of the waist drum team in a southern community said, “Every time I see my teammates wearing the same red silk clothes in competitions, I feel full of energy. Winning or losing is not important; what matters is that we are together.”

This kind of cohesion formed through rituals effectively alleviates the loneliness in modern society, allowing individuals to gain the sense of security of “being needed” in the group.

3.3 Psychological Resilience of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is the deepest level of identity; it is the root of national unity and the soul of ethnic harmony. Once cultural identity is established, the identification with the great motherland, the Chinese nation, and socialism with Chinese characteristics can be consolidated[8]. Datu et al.[9] pointed out that local dance teaching can enhance cultural confidence and inject energy into psychological resilience—which is a key predictor of mental health. The teaching of traditional dances

in ethnic minority communities and hometown dance courses in immigrant communities allow members to confirm “who I am” through dancing. In multi-ethnic communities, Han aunts learn to dance Uyghur dances, and Hui young people teach Hui stepping dances. Such cross-cultural practices break stereotypes. When an individual’s cultural identity is respected and accepted, a stable psychological sense of security will be generated, which is an important resource for coping with life pressures and maintaining mental health.

4. Practical Path: Making Dance a Fulcrum of Mental Health

To give full play to the psychological value of community dance education, systematic design is needed from three aspects: content, form, and evaluation.

4.1 Content Design: Emotional Adaptation and Cultural Proximity

Choose dance types according to the needs of different groups: set up yoga dance and tai chi fan for anxious groups to regulate nerves through slow movements; arrange Latin aerobics and jazz dance for groups lacking vitality to stimulate emotions with strong rhythms. This targeted design is similar to the idea of “customized strategies according to needs” in multi-component positive psychological interventions. At the same time, explore local cultural materials. The “Water Town Lotus Fragrance Dance” in an ancient town community, with movements derived from life scenes such as lotus picking and boat rowing, allows residents to feel psychological nourishment in a familiar cultural context, thereby improving mental health.

4.2 Organizational Form: Hierarchical Participation and Autonomous Management

Set up basic classes (mainly for relaxation and socializing) and advanced classes (mainly for skill performance) to avoid frustration caused by inappropriate difficulty. More importantly, cultivate dance backbones and let members organize activities independently. The “Silver Hair Dance Team” in a Beijing community was spontaneously established by retired teachers. Members take turns to choreograph movements and plan performances, and the team has remained intact for ten years.

Members say, “Here, we are not managed but run our own affairs, which makes us feel comfortable”—this sense of autonomy is itself an important part of mental health, as emphasized by self-determination theory regarding “the role of autonomy in mental health”[10].

4.3 Evaluation Orientation: Focusing on Experience rather than Effect

Replace the evaluation of “how well you dance” with “emotional weather charts” (recording feelings after participation with emojis) and “dance story sharing sessions” to guide residents to pay attention to their inner changes. When the evaluation criteria shift from “external performance” to “inner feelings”, dance returns to its essence—not performance, but allowing every participant to enjoy happiness in the rhythm, which is the core of mental health[11].

5. Conclusion

The construction of mental health through community dance education is essentially a “dialogue between body and soul”: regulating body and mind through physical rhythms, connecting groups with cultural symbols, and integrating psychological nourishment into daily life. It breaks the boundary between art education and mental health services, proving that improving mental health does not necessarily require professional thresholds.

The beats of square dance and the rhythms of folk dance contain the simplest healing power. In the future, if psychological wisdom can be more deeply integrated into dance practice, community dance will surely become a “gentle fulcrum” to protect residents’ mental health, allowing everyone to find inner peace and group warmth in dancing.

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