

Session two: Mobility, self-care and ageing

Chair: Andy Miles (Sociology, Manchester)

'Alexander Technique group teaching for people with a fear of falling' - Lesley Glover, Clinical Psychology, Hull and MSTAT

Lesley Glover presented a project she led which explores the Alexander Technique as a holistic approach for people with a fear of falling. Lesley and her colleagues investigated how Alexander Technique can be used as an intervention to teach people self-management. The evidence is that the practice of Alexander Technique enhances physical and psychological wellbeing, balance, movement and coordination. It can also be used with people in a wide range of situations and with a variety of physical and emotional problems. For this project, they selected people with a self-identified fear of falling, which was then confirmed through a standard questionnaire. They worked with 12 people all over 65 years old, during the course of nine weeks. Sessions normally lasted 1.5 hours during which the team used a range of activities including body mapping with the help of a skeleton model. This gave people a different representation of themselves as well as teaching them where their joints are and how they work. The accounts compiled from the participants point to an acquired sense of empowerment whereby people challenged their inability to perform certain tasks. At the same time, participants also showed greater acceptance of things they cannot do and of the changes that come with age. Participants noticed a beneficial change in how they carried out their everyday activities such as sleeping, hanging out washing, or going upstairs. While people did not report that their actual fear of falling had disappeared they talked about how the acquired practice was still useful helping them to become more aware of themselves and of their surroundings, and enabling them to manage situations to avoid falling.

'The Care Project: designing a 'parenting' support programme for kinship carers who look after teenagers in Scotland, including a tailored 'self-care' component of holistic health techniques.' - Jane Hartley, Scottish Collaboration for Public Health Research & Policy, Edinburgh.

Jane Hartley, who has a background in social anthropology and a PhD in medical sociology, is using yoga and mindfulness techniques when working with teenagers' health in situations of deprivation, with a focus on kinship parenting. Jane has practised yoga throughout her academic trajectory, thus she was very pleased when the opportunity arose to combine that bodily practice with research, which emerged with the project she told us about. "The care project" focuses on grandparents who have become the main carers for

their grandchildren. “Kinship caring”, a term that refers to a situation when other relatives are given the responsibility to look after children whose parents are deemed unfit carers by Social Services, has become a major issue in recent times. The context is commonly that of problems related to addiction or abuse, often in areas of significant deprivation. Usually, that responsibility is passed on to the grandparents, most often grandmothers, who take on the parenting role just as they reach the age of retirement. Consequently, the grandparent takes on an often relentlessly exhausting and demanding role. In this highly stressful context the main motto of the programme is that ‘if you learn to take care of yourself you can take better care of others’. Thus, people are motivated to share the relaxation techniques they have learned, with a family member or friend. The project organised workshops to teach kinship carers a variety of tension release, mindful movement and breathing exercises. At the end of the presentation all participants had a taster of the exercises the program teaches.

‘Understanding the Role of Tai Chi in Improving Elderly Balance.’ - Tianjian Ji, Structural Engineering, Manchester

Tianjian Ji started his presentation by referring to the popularity of Tai Chi in China, where it is practised in city squares throughout the country, with the accompanying advantage of saving money that would otherwise be spent on hospital bills. He looked into some of the barriers to the westernization of Tai Chi, and into possible reasons why it is not more widespread and included in health-related policies in this country. Is it perhaps too demanding? In his view, not enough research has been done to evaluate the benefits of regular practice. In addition, the fact that in this country there are few places where one can practise Tai Chi without having to pay could represent another obstacle. He studied two of the 24 main movements in Tai Chi focusing on the foot and related steps. Tianjian Ji undertook measurements using force platforms and insole sensors to measure the forces created by the footstep. His calculations were based on the relation between vertical and horizontal forces and their distribution. He then compared the force distribution of the right and left foot, and between Tai Chi-practising individuals and non-practising ones. While findings showed the same overall force patterns between Tai Chi practitioners and non-practising individuals, forces were less uniform amongst non-practising individuals, who also seemed to perform movements quicker. The wobble, commonly associated with fear of falling, was more evident in non-Tai Chi practitioners. He added that beginners can benefit as much as experienced practitioners from this bodily practice.

Group Discussion?

- Can ‘the wobble’ be reduced with further practice?

- Room for improvement should be the focus, rather an ideal of how one should age.
- Differences between 'embodied practice' and 'embodying practice'.
- Need for social and political will to give incentives to bodily practices such as Tai Chi.
- What are the dimensions of empowerment?
- Given the heterogeneity of backgrounds of people present in the session, the need for transdisciplinary efforts when researching mobility is of fundamental importance.