

Somatic dance, ageing and wellbeing: Fluidity and Te Whare Tapa Whā

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Abstract:

Seeking to disrupt narrowly defined understandings of health and wellness and to inform the ongoing development of community somatic dance classes in Aotearoa New Zealand, we discuss how we imagine and cultivate more expansive experiences of movement and wellbeing for women across the lifespan. Our previous ethnographic research highlighted the nuances of women's embodied experiences within intergenerational Movement for Wellbeing classes (Barbour, Clark & Jeffrey, 2019). These somatic dance classes fostered embodied awareness, ease and freedom in movement, and opportunities for creativity, agency and reflection. Consequently, this research extended our understandings of the multiple functions and nuanced lived experiences of wellbeing in intergenerational dance. These findings prompted us to critique Westernised and biomedical frameworks for wellness and illuminated possibilities for more generative models for wellbeing that incorporate values defined by ageing women dancers. Therefore, in this article, we dive more deeply into practices of wellbeing and movement that allow for greater fluidity (as material and conceptual potentialities) (Stephens, 2014) in women's embodied transitions of ageing. Thinking with and through the unique holistic wellbeing model of Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1985), drawing on insights from interviews with key experts in women's health and wellbeing in our region, and embracing the concept of fluidity, we call attention to subtleties in ageing women's experiences of wellbeing that are not often discussed in dance literature.

Keywords: dance, ageing, wellbeing, feminist perspectives, fluidity.

Prologue

Spreading my fingers on the floor, palms down feeling into wrist, elbow, shoulder joints, seeking alignment in the vertical support of my arms, remembering ... long in the back of my neck, facing the floor and sensing the earth, following gently along my horizontal spine, pausing to feel the fullness of my heart connecting invisibly to the earth beneath me ... a confident rhythm, a living pulse ... sensing the spread of my ribs either side, their span shaping the internal space for breath, connection and fluidity ... the architecture of my embodiment embracing moving ... so far so good ...

Drawing my attention along my spine further, the familiar and yet shifting spread of my pelvis now holding awareness ... some days my pelvis is unwilling, on others the curving softness of my belly supports lunar flows ... but ... holding my attention captive in my pelvis, out of sorts, legs ill at ease, grating in their acetabula homes, disagreeable and waking me with nonsense through the hot and cold nights ... no easing any more ... escaping from one argument to the next, delicately re-shaping the balance within my knee joints ... tensing in this negotiating between aligning and the ruins of now ...

My heart intervenes ... move, you are changing, you are fluid, move ...

Introduction

Within Aotearoa New Zealand (herein referred to as Aotearoa), and widespread internationally, understandings of wellbeing and wellness have prompted discussion and debate (Barbour et al., 2019; Bond, 2019; Cardinal, 2014; Dodge et al., 2012; Durie, 1998; Hone et al., 2015; Karkou et al., 2017; Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, 2019; Walsh, 2011). Multiple dimensions of wellbeing have been articulated beyond those encompassed by the common and fairly disembodied perspectives of *health* positioned within biomedical discourses as the absence of illness and injury. These other dimensions include multiple ways of understanding physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, social and other aspects of daily life and how these contribute to experiences of holistic wellbeing. In relation to dance and ageing, there is a growing body of literature contemplating the influence of dance on the lived experiences and overall wellness of ageing populations. These publications are no less complex and varied in their findings, underlining the range of experiences and perspectives to be considered when examining this topic (Fonseca et al., 2025; Krekula, 2020; Markula et al., 2022; Martin-Wylie et al., 2024).

These multiple, and at times conflicting, understandings of health and wellbeing circulating within popular and medical discourse impact the ways women make sense of, cultivate and understand their embodied experiences across the lifespan.

In this paper, we are particularly interested in exploring understandings of wellbeing as they relate to women and ageing and in the role of somatic movement practices, including dance and yoga, in contributing to more expansive or generous understandings and experiences. Ageing women are often underrepresented in popular representations of wellbeing and health and within biomedical discourse become objectified, leaving them with limited (and ungenerous) ways to imagine and understand their ageing bodies and subjectivities. In this article, we explore how dominant frameworks limit and constrain the vocabulary and forms of expression women engage to make meaning of ageing, particularly in relation to movement practices, and consider how more expansive frameworks might allow more capacious understandings. While we refer to research demonstrating the medical and physiological benefits of various types of dance for ageing populations, the significance of somatic dance that focuses on embodied awareness and the quality of lived movement experiences has received limited attention, particularly in relation to holistic wellbeing (Barbour et al., 2019). To undertake such research, we situate ourselves and our knowledge production practices within the socio-cultural context of Aotearoa and think with and through the holistic wellbeing approach known as Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1985), which we describe in more detail below. We consider the potential of this approach to provide ageing women opportunities to explore different ways of moving that are meaningful within their daily lives and to attend to the nuanced experiences of this movement.

Our thinking-moving-knowing processes are woven together throughout this paper as we draw on our own knowledges and expertise as practitioners and teachers of dance and yoga, as well as on interviews with key women experts to identify moments of *constraint* that emerge in women's experiences of making sense of their ageing bodies in relation to knowledges and environments that often prioritise youth (Coupland, 2013). Inspired by Stephens' (2014) writing on fluidity, we reveal how different cultural interpretations of wellbeing, like Te Whare Tapa Whā in Aotearoa, can make space for creative and subversive interpretations that expand beyond dominant understandings of what it means to be well and ageing.

Dance, ageing and broadening understandings of wellbeing

Participation in physical activity is believed to hold both physical and psycho-social benefits for ageing individuals (Joseph & Southcott, 2019). A review of the benefits of dance as a physical practice suggests dance has the capacity to improve physical conditioning and reduce the risk of falls and cardiovascular health risk in older adults (Keogh et al., 2009). As Humberstone and Stuart (2016) wrote about dance and yoga, there are “considerable wellbeing affects for women when physical activity provision takes account of context (the spatial, cultural, social, and sentient)” (p. 412). Participation in dance is thought to prompt positive emotional experiences, including pleasure, and facilitate social connections and feelings of belonging which have all shown to positively influence wellbeing in older age (Cousins & Edwards, 2002; Humberstone & Cutler-Riddick, 2014; Humberstone & Stuart, 2016; Krekula, 2020; O’Brien, 2016; Paulson, 2005). In addition to providing opportunities for social connections, dance brings together the mind, body and soul in ways that are meaningful to women and that hold implications for wellbeing beyond the biomedical indices of health (Humberstone & Stuart, 2016; Stewart, 2000). These broader understandings of wellbeing and dance incorporate connections with self and other, relational moments shared with the environment of practice, and a deepening understanding of affective intensities and intentions in dance that are unique to ageing populations (Jeffrey et al., 2022; Markula et al., 2023). Considering the unique dimensions of wellbeing negotiated by dancers across the lifespan, we examine possibilities for engaging culturally relevant models for wellbeing in our movement facilitation practices to accommodate broader dimensions of living well for ageing adults.

As mentioned, wellbeing is a concept that is discussed and taken up in myriad ways, resulting in a range of approaches to research and recommendations for applied practice (Barbour et al., 2019; Bond, 2019; Cardinal, 2014; Dodge et al., 2012; Durie, 1998; Hone et al., 2015; Karkou et al., 2017). Government recommendations are also important considerations in any discussion of wellbeing, as they both reflect and contribute to the production of cultural practices and policies that shape discourse and associated practices. Within our specific research context of Aotearoa, the Government produced The Wellbeing Budget in 2019, which stated, “Wellbeing is when people are able to lead fulfilling lives with purpose, balance and meaning to them” (Egan & Blank, 2020; Government of New Zealand, 2019, p. 5). While this was a progressive shift that indicated a national interest in wellbeing, following a number of significant national events, including a pivot to pandemic response in 2020 and a change in government in 2023, the wellbeing initiative was abandoned and the prioritisation of economic budget

resurfaced (Clark et al., 2026; McLure, 2021). Although these changes to policy demonstrate a national shift away from the embrace of culturally significant and holistic understandings of wellbeing, the body of literature in the field, including our own research on dance, continues to demonstrate the importance of broader conceptualisations of wellbeing that make space for diverse interpretations.

As increasingly diverse populations engage with prescriptive but dominant models of wellbeing, i.e., Five Ways to Wellbeing (Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, 2019), the limitations of these models are illuminated. For example, a noted tension arises when applying generalised models for wellbeing to a large population, as these models often take up narrow understandings and rely on normative measures that overlook a wide range of important facets of wellbeing, i.e., spirituality, community and culture (Cummins, 2018; Disabato et al., 2016; MacKay et al., 2019). Important critiques have noted how the concept of wellbeing has been co-opted into neoliberal, self-improvement projects (Barbour et al., 2019; Fullagar, 2003; McLeod & Wright, 2016). We build upon this work to further illuminate the tensions that exist between dominant biomedical understandings of health and wellbeing and other frameworks that both make space for and acknowledge the multiple dimensions of everyday life that contribute to people's understandings of what it means to live well.

While wellbeing is shaped by myriad forces, age and gender are central to our discussion. We draw attention to the lack of nuance in dominant health and wellbeing research and highlight the ways older women and the emotional and physiological complexity of ageing are often excluded from dominant discourses (e.g., Knowles, 2018; Moore, 2010). For example, feminist scholars suggest that knowledge around the transition through menopause has been largely constructed through western medical and scientific discourses as the disintegration of a physiological system and a condition that requires treatment and correction (Coupland & Williams, 2002; Niland & Lyons, 2011). These framings of menopause (and the female ageing body), as something that must be managed and *fixed*, can be further contextualised within social and medical systems that view the female body as *leaky* and *unruly* (Grosz, 1994; Longhurst, 2004; Shildrick, 2015). This management becomes especially relevant for women in midlife when it is perceived that maintaining control over one's body is paramount in the embodied processes of ageing (Dillaway, 2005; Lupton, 1996).

Finding themselves often excluded from the wellbeing literature, and as objects discussed in biomedical scholarship, ageing women are left to make sense of their everyday embodied experiences and movement practices through dominant discourses circulating within their socio-cultural milieu.

In this article, we are interested in exploring the ways that dominant frameworks limit and constrain the vocabulary, forms of expression and ways that women make meaning of ageing, particularly in relation to movement practices. Although women's experiences of ageing are often described as socially and corporeally challenging (Christoforou, 2018), here, we recognise the complexity of women's embodied experiences and suggest that embracing multiple and more expansive interpretations of wellbeing (e.g., Te Whare Tapa Whā) has potential to yield more generous spaces in which women's embodied experiences of ageing can be framed and understood.

Theoretical framework: Fluidity as feminist politic and embodied process

To enable this turn to multiplicity, we think with the concept of fluidity to consider the inter-relationships between the conceptual, experiential and material, and between different ways of knowing and thinking about women's experiences of ageing. The concept of fluidity invites us to consider how transitional experiences of ageing (e.g., menopause) can be experienced and expressed in ways that exceed dominant frameworks and discourses about women's ageing bodies. As discussed above, women's experiences of ageing are often conceptualised and narrated as difficult, messy, constraining and as socially and corporally challenging (Longhurst, 2004; Shildrick, 2015). To provide space for more generous possibilities, we embrace fluidity as both concept and materiality and bring its sensibility as a felt and embodied performative quality to our thinking and knowledge production (Stephens, 2014). Importantly, the term fluidity is increasingly used within scholarly and public dialogues seeking to disrupt and upend the binary systems of thought that shape how gender is constructed within contemporary society (see Richardson, 2007). This dialogue advocates for more fluid understandings of gender and for greater attention to be paid to the interconnections between sexuality and gender. It makes explicit the ways binary dualisms constrain and harm. We similarly take up the concept of fluidity in efforts to move beyond categorical thinking (e.g., young/old, social/material). However, given our interest in embodiment in movement we embrace it as both a theoretical concept *and* a movement quality that we seek to enact in our thinking. For example, fluidity is often talked about in relation to dance movement, a term referring to the movement quality of free flow and smooth released transitions between movements, typically from the centre outwards (Koch, 2011). In contrast to bound flow, fluidity is imbued with low tension and the potential for change, for shifts and transitions of weight within flowing movement (Koch, 2011).

We seek this quality in our thinking and our engagements with our research topic and theoretical concepts so that knowledge might not be constrained by rigid systems of understanding (themselves always produced through and enmeshed with power relations).

The link between fluid/ity and women's ageing bodies is not lost on us. In movement, and we argue in processes of knowing, fluidity is desirable, signalling agility and a sensitivity and responsiveness to one's social and material context. Stephens (2014) elaborated on the work of Irigaray who explored fluidity as both a philosophical concept and an embodied materiality. Stephens takes care to note that while Irigaray highlighted the capacity of fluidity for disrupting constraining binaries and boundaries that privilege the masculine over the feminine due to its diffuse materiality, it only takes on these capacities in a system that excludes the feminine from the *proper order* (Stephens, 2014). Thus, feminine materiality and biology are not embraced as an inherent or unproblematic source of resistance; they are also the rationale for women's historical silencing and exclusion. Nevertheless, Stephens (2014) sees great potential in fluidity for thinking in ways that "transgress and confuse boundaries", as it embodies a "potentiality whose outcome, by its very nature, can never be determined in advance" (p. 199).

We therefore embrace fluidity in our conceptual and methodological approach. Rantala (2019) suggested fluidity could be a paradigm unto itself that embraces novel uses of methods, theories, concepts and analyses that are created in response to the inquiry at hand. Such an approach embraces open ended engagement with different belief systems, knowledge frameworks and processes (Koro-Ljungberg, 2012). In the context of this research in Aotearoa, acknowledging belief systems, ways of knowing and processes that are potentially less constraining, supports us to move fluidly outwards, from the nuanced perspectives of people of this place and the holistic understanding of wellbeing through *hauora* (an Indigenous Māori perspective of wellbeing) and Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1998). The framings of fluidity in relation to hauora has particular relevance to our situated research context of Aotearoa as feminist dance scholars.

Context: Somatic practices and Te Whare Tapa Whā

The empirical material that informs this paper was gathered during a project that analysed intergenerational experiences of Movement for Wellbeing classes hosted by the Karen Barbour at the Academy of Performing Arts, Hamilton, New Zealand. These classes featured Shin Somatic movement practices such as *Land to Water yoga* which facilitate clearing of tension through human developmental movement patterns, towards ease and

connection within the body (Fraleigh, 2025). Findings from our previous scholarship (Barbour, et al., 2019) demonstrated how somatics, as movement practices that prioritise deep observation of felt sensory experiences, offer women the opportunity to connect and experience wellbeing beyond individualised notions of living well. Understanding the potential for somatic practices to facilitate embodied experiences of wellbeing that are both relational and continually unfolding inspired us to consider how broader conceptualisations of wellbeing might be negotiated alongside women's experiences of dance. Situated in the context of dance in Aotearoa, we were curious about the potential for Te Whare Tapa Whā to complement understandings of wellbeing through somatic practice. How might somatic movement and culturally significant framings of wellbeing that are underpinned by flexible and holistic ways of being generate understandings of women's experiences of ageing that exceed those afforded by more dominant models?

Within Aotearoa, *hauora* grounds understandings within education and health. Hauora, understood through Te Whare Tapa Whā, is an understanding of health and wellbeing embraced as useful for all people, and through which Indigenous ways of knowing are centred within mainstream educational and health discourses. This concept of hauora is one of four philosophical foundations of the Ministry of Education's Health and Physical Education curriculum, the others being attitudes and values, health promotion and a socio-ecological perspective (Collins, 2021; Dyson et al., 2018; Ministry of Education, 1999, 2010). As a framework that has been broadly applied and accepted in health promotion policy of Aotearoa, and as a model for wellbeing that offers flexibility in its interpretation, Te Whare Tapa Whā offers a relevant model for wellbeing that expands beyond individualised and biomedical markers for health and is culturally significant in the research context.

First developed by Māori psychiatrist Mason Durie (1985), Te Whare Tapa Whā offered a Māori perspective of health, incorporating Indigenous knowledge to provide "Māori a voice in health care services" (Heaton, 2015, p. 166). In this representation, a person's health is presented as a *whare* (a building, commonly as a house) standing in strength and symmetry (Durie, 1998) in the *whenua* (environment). To be well, a person, like a simple house, requires four walls to provide balance and stability, and these four walls represent our physical, spiritual, mental and social aspects (Durie, 1985, 1998). In *te reo Māori* (Māori language) these aspects are expressed as: *tinana* (physical); *wairua* (spiritual) (Egan and Blank, 2020); *hinengaro* (mental); and *whānau* (extended family) (Durie, 1998). The unique support provided by each aspect is equally important but is always experienced in relation to and enabling the others.

Thus, health, strength, symmetry, integrity and balance are relationally involved in the embodiment of wellbeing (Durie, 1998; Heaton, 2015) and the interconnectedness of mental, social, physical and spiritual aspects of wellbeing is emphasised (Dyson et al., 2018).

Throughout this paper we think through this way of knowing wellbeing and reveal opportunities for movement and fluidity as ageing women finding spaces within and through this structure. It is important to mention our positionality explicitly as this influences our understandings of Te Whare Tapa Whā and its application. As a *Pākehā* (non-Māori) woman and two Canadian women, all of whom were working in dance, yoga, movement and wellbeing in Aotearoa when we undertook this research, we recognise our understanding of Māori Indigenous cosmology and practice will only ever be partial, as we are not Indigenous Māori ourselves. However, as our students and research participants have emphasised, Te Whare Tapa Whā offers a way of thinking that is embedded in wellbeing discourses here in Aotearoa and has generated some interest in dance research (Thorp, 2011). Therefore, we acknowledge the importance of critically reflecting upon engagement with this approach to wellbeing. To do this, we highlight the arguments for the embeddedness of Te Whare Tapa Whā and some of the critiques of the use of Te Whare Tapa Whā throughout.

Methodology: Thinking and moving towards fluidity

We contextualise the insights of the key experts we interviewed with and through Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1998), appreciating the impact of this approach in re-shaping the discourses of wellbeing in Aotearoa over the last 20 years. In this particular instance, we reveal expert perspectives on ageing, wellbeing, and the potential of alternative movement and dance practices. We reveal how these experts, whose expertise spans disciplines of health, wellbeing and movement practice, hear women's frustrations and desires as they mature and transition into older age, struggling with situating themselves in physical activity programmes often designed for young athletes.

For this research, we interviewed six women with diverse cultural backgrounds and expertise in various professional capacities related to the overarching topic of women's health, wellbeing and movement. Nina is a general practitioner specialising in women's health; Ella is a dance, somatics and yoga practitioner; Janis is a nurse and mental health educator; Carole is a women's wellbeing and fitness researcher; Simone is a women's sport and health researcher; and Billie is a yoga teacher. These six women are also culturally diverse as *Pākehā* (non-indigenous), Māori (indigenous), American, Australian and Sri Lankan. From this point forward, we refer to the participants as the

experts, indicating their expertise in their careers and fields of study as well as in their own understandings and perspectives of health and wellness. At the time of this research, all of the experts lived on the North Island of Aotearoa in areas surrounding our Waikato research home and were interviewed in person using a semi-structured interview guide and prior to the global pandemic of 2020. (Note: we do not address issues specific to dance and movement in the era of the global pandemic in this article.)

The process of analysing interviews and writing through fluidity became influential to the inquiry and findings shared through this article. Engaging with key experts alongside our own expertise in the areas of women's wellbeing in health, fitness, yoga and somatic dance research, we located further movement and depth. Here, we write into and between the women's words, entwining our own emerging understandings of wellbeing and all while moving with and through Te Whare Tapa Whā. This analytic process involved iterative engagements with scholarly literature as well as our own somatic experiences and insights as we sought insights and resonances.

As we feel and think through these fluid experiences, we present our paper in three sections but imagine these as simultaneously becoming alongside and informing each other as we move through both our guiding concepts and our empirical material (Barbour et al., 2019; St. Pierre, 2019). In each section, we imagine and articulate our explorations as qualities of movement being expressed through and with the women. Drawing upon Sheets-Johnstone's (1999) description of movement qualia, each section of our discussion relates to lived experiences of qualities of movement:

A dynamically attuned body that knows the world and makes its way within it kinetically is thoughtfully attuned to the variable qualia of both its own movement and the movement of things in its surrounding world – to forceful, swift, slow, straight, swerving, flaccid, tense, sudden, up, down, and much more. (pp. 516–517).

Inspired by movement qualia, we think with and through qualities of movement (like tension, ease and connectedness) as they describe the complexities of ageing and moving in worlds that do not necessarily offer ease, generosity and space. Here, through movement, we reimagine possibilities and find new potentials for women's experiences of ageing and dance.

Findings as movement qualia: Tension, ease, connection

Our discussion is separated into three sections that are each centred around a type of movement qualia: tension, ease and connection. These sections are not written with the intention that they are linear or discreet, rather, that these movement qualities are all being experienced and lived by women in an ongoing and cyclical process of discovery that is continually changing in ageing.

Tension

Through this section, we discuss the tensions that ageing women experience as they move in spaces that typically cater to young athletic male bodies. Adding to the tensions women experience as they grapple with locating themselves in exclusionary spaces, we reveal ways discourses of wellbeing and health in research further alienate women through the development of practices and models for wellbeing that do not allow for the physical and social complexities of ageing (e.g., menopause).

As discussed, dominant biomedical discourse lacks qualitative nuance and frequently excludes the experiences of ageing women (Knowles, 2018; Moore, 2010). Many of the women experts we spoke to reflected on the rigidity of the models for movement, health and wellbeing they most commonly experienced in their working lives. As doctors, specialists in mental health, sports scholars and experienced physical activity facilitators, they understood the development of knowledges in isolation and discussed the limitations these *silos* present in holistic understandings of wellbeing and health. Below, Carole and Simone discuss the silo effect of discipline-centric research, where specialists offering advice drawn from studies from within their own areas of expertise lack a holistic understanding of both health and wellbeing:

Carole: I think from a biological perspective, I can totally understand that we have had a silo approach to health. And the silo approach has been the medical, the biological model ... and therefore, we have a lot of specialists in all those areas. So we are not looking at the body as a whole, the connectedness of everything as a whole. I think that's been a real issue.

Simone: When you have the physical research people, and the nutrition research people, they are in their silos and they don't interact. And I'm [saying], no, you can't have one without the other. You can't have good physical movement and activity without really good nutrition.

Their critique is one that has been addressed by more recent studies on wellbeing that appreciate both the importance of collaborative research and the inclusion of a wider range of influences that are not only physical and cognitive, but also social, emotional and material (Barbour et al., 2019; Hone et al., 2015). Although the dominance of discipline-centric research was mentioned by the women, it was often discussed in contrast to how they personally embodied and prescribed wellbeing in their daily lives and professional practice. Below, Nina and Ella share insights on health and wellbeing drawn from their experiences with women in their working lives:

Nina: I tend to see a lot of women and learn about their problems ... and not just the medical health but the overall health of them as well ... there are a number of influences. Like social, and the family dynamics going on, and their mind has a part in how the physical symptoms come about. This is included in their description and in my diagnosis as well, so to some extent you need to know a little bit more than their physical and mental health to give them proper care.

Ella: I haven't got a finite definition of wellbeing. But in relation to, say, yoga practice, it's a sense that when a person walks into a class, they leave and they might feel better. And that might be a reduction of fatigue, a release from external daily stresses, or it might be that ... a teacher said something that made a lot of sense on both physical, emotional, spiritual level. And then, I really like the idea of wellbeing or wellness as being that holistic, kind of multi-pronged, you know, financial wellness, societal wellness, family wellness, all those other aspects.

The experts' understanding of wellbeing as complex, multifaceted and interconnected challenges the wide-spread, homogenous health models and reminds us of the importance of adapting any *prescription* to suit individual needs.

Thinking of the application of Te Whare Tapa Whā, we appreciate that this understanding of wellbeing has multiple uses as an analytical tool in the development of social programmes, in state schools and healthcare professional training, as a clinical diagnosis tool and as a therapeutic tool in working with individuals (Egan & Blank, 2020; McLachlan et al., 2017; Rochford, 2004). Clearly, in Aotearoa, Te Whare Tapa Whā, is influencing mainstream discourse. However, there are nuances yet to be discussed that many of our experts reflected on in their interviews.

Te Whare Tapa Whā includes physical, spiritual, mental and social dimensions as important parts of the holistic experience of living well, of hauora. Importantly, although this approach is imagined as a house, there are possibilities for movement within and through the whare. As the women discussed their own and clients' experiences of ageing and transitioning, they recognised the importance of allowing for motion, particularly when moving within seemingly rigid structures. As Carole mentions below (referring to menopause), structured programmes can bend to accommodate for ageing women's complex experiences:

Carole: We are not integrating the whole person ... Not sleeping is the greatest stressor on a woman's body. And not sleeping night after night is exactly what happens to women as they enter perimenopause and menopause, and what happens when women overtrain, and we know this from all the research on women athletes. One of the first markers of overtraining syndrome is not sleeping, so it is very complex ... I think that we have got to get right back to understanding complexity. By marrying up the biological and the medical with not only the social and cultural but also the subject as well.

Carole's reflection reminds us that although recommendations for wellbeing may feel constraining when rigidly prescribed, these approaches may be re-thought as they are lived through the experiences of women in different stages of life. Previous research on ageing and dance has revealed that these movement opportunities can increase social, emotional and physical wellbeing (Humberstone & Stuart, 2016; Joseph & Southcott, 2019; Keogh et al; 2009; Krekula, 2020). These experts expanded upon these understandings as they reflected on their years of moving, living and working in different communities, and as they considered the complexity of wellbeing, their wisdom revealed itself in the creative and subversive solutions they were finding through their own explorations.

Interestingly, many of the expert women we spoke with described their processes of learning to adjust their understandings of wellbeing and attributed the tensions to both a lack of research featuring the experiences of ageing women and an overwhelming influx of popular (potentially ill-informed) sources online. Below, Carole and Simone reflect on the places and people who are informing ageing women on best practices for health and wellbeing:

Carole: I am looking after women who are coming through perimenopause and menopause. And as I say we are sort of the forgotten generation, although we were the first women who were going through the fitness industry. But the fitness industry is still 18–35 athletes and males. And there really is no research on hormonal health and how we need to look after ourselves as we come through perimenopause and menopause ... And so, I have become a little bit cynical. I think, no, I'm not going to talk to men who don't understand menopause. Because they don't understand what we are going through.

Simone: From the physicality side of things, the expectations from what you see on social media and all these Facebook images, you see things you want to attain. And you take the advice and it doesn't work. And you can attain a part of it so you are like, I am not quite there and how do I get there?

Both Carole and Simone describe the confusion and frustration that women face when searching for answers from people and places that do not cater to their needs. Many described the tensions they felt when attempting to fit within gym and studio environments that predominantly cater to young consumers and are filled with “all sorts of things that pull you away from yourself” (Billie).

The most popular settings for women's movement practices are often accessed through commercial gyms that include various distractions (i.e., televisions, music, bright lights). In contrast, wellbeing practices offered in spaces that minimise distraction and prioritise connection can support women as they breathe life into and find ease in their complex experiences of wellbeing at all stages of life (Barbour et al., 2019; Bolwell, 2017; Cardinal, 2014). As we continue to transition through age, we shift in many ways. To accommodate for this, the structures we move within must also change. (The narrative contained in the prologue of this article evokes somatic movement engagement with ageing, the menopausal transition and embodiment of the structure of *Te Whare Tapa Whā*.) As we continue to dance – with and through the whare, in bodies that are ageing, and amidst spaces and places built for physical activity – we acknowledge the importance of seeking opportunities for movement with ease.

Ease

As outlined above, fluidity, in relation to both movement and thought, signals an ease of transition from one position to another. To be fluid requires both sensitivity and responsiveness to one's social and material environments and the capacity to refuse

rigidity, to perform instead a variety of embodied transitions. In Sheet-Johnstone's (1999) discussion of movement qualia, she referred to the ways the improvisational practices of trained dancers require and support them to be attuned to their own movement and to the movement of the world around them. Here, we argue that attuning to, maintaining and experiencing a fuller range of movement is valuable for everyone, and particularly beneficial through the process of ageing.

Engaging in (certain forms) of dance practice can be one way to encourage and maintain extended range of motion for ageing bodies. Molloy et al., (2015) articulated the benefits of a dance mobility (DM™) programme developed for ageing populations, writing that:

Through practising dance sequences that change slightly throughout the term, the participants notably experience an improved ability to move. They express pleasure in being able to adapt and achieve movement in relation to cognitive challenges with increased ease. (p. 171)

Our earlier research examined women's embodied experiences in intergenerational somatic dance classes and aligns with the thinking of Molloy and colleagues (Barbour et al., 2019). Our analysis suggested women's experiences of wellbeing were shaped (and sometimes constrained) by changes in their relationships to their bodies, such as transitions in motherhood, menopause, and ageing, and were challenged by the demands of family, community and working lives. The women in this research were reflective in their understandings of wellbeing as a *dynamic dance* and as a continual fluctuating experience (Barbour et al., 2019; Dodge et al., 2012).

Extending these conversations, the experts in our current study discussed their own complex embodied experiences of this shifting and sometimes challenging dynamism as ageing women in professional fitness, movement and health communities. Below, Carole and Ella offer personal reflections on the many challenges and possibilities contained in their processes of ageing:

Carole: What is the right activity for me as I transition into my next chapter of my life, which is my old age? And who do I believe? Do I believe the sport science people and their prescription of the model they give? Do I believe the personal trainers who may not have the background necessarily around the knowledge? Do I believe the weight loss industry? So what is truth and how do we disseminate that truth? And that is what personally I had to work out for

myself. And so I spent hours and hours of my own learning and study and research trying to work that out because there is not a lot out there.

Ella: I am coming up to my 60s, where there is kind of this ambivalent space, where women in their 60s are ‘old’. So I am a grandmother ... But I am not old. I am still working full-time and I am still able to say yes to everything. But there are different things now. Increased fatigue. I am aware that my body muscle mass is shifting. And a lot of that I really love, but in terms of self-image it is an uncomfortable space ... I would like to [say], “I am good with how it is going.” So that is a kind of position that is of interest to me, this balance of shifting self-image alongside societal image as well. That increased invisibility and increased internal self-reflection that is going on at this time.

For both Carole and Ella, their experiences of ageing included negotiating both social belief systems and their own changing embodiment. Coupland’s (2013) research with ageing professional ballet dancers revealed the tensions they felt while moving in changing bodies that were challenging dominant, often ageist, ideologies. The women experts we spoke with mirrored similar experiences of tension as they acknowledged they no longer fit within the dominant ideal of youthful athletes or dancers and were moving towards ease in accepting their processes of ageing while considering what constraints or possibilities this offers. To navigate these tensions, both women engaged in active self-reflection and tuned into bodily movement in efforts to create and achieve a greater sense of ease in both their understandings and embodied performances of ageing.

Tension surfaced for Carole and Ella when they encountered dissonance between their own embodied histories and embodied present (what their bodies *used* to do and what they’re able to do now) as well as their lived experiences, desires and social narratives of women’s ageing bodies. We understand this as tension that emerges through the relational encounters between two seemingly distinct and incompatible forces. For Carole and Ella, this tension prompted new modes of reflection, bodily practice and movement, and ways of relating to their bodies that in turn gave way to a greater sense of ease with how women moved through their daily lives.

While we acknowledge tensions when Te Whare Tapa Whā is applied generally as a wellbeing model, a deeper appreciation of and engagement with Māori practices offers insight when considering issues related to embodiment and transition through ageing. A *wharehau* (larger communal meeting house that is central to community relations) is

understood as the embodiment of a significant ancestor. The *tāhuhu* (ridgepole) that runs the length of the roof is likened to a spine, a structural and ancestral line that connects and supports all within. Spanning from the spine are the *heke* (ribs) of the house, and the *pou toko manawa* (central vertical pole) is the heart (Heaton, 2015). Rather than the westernised Christian and dualistic metaphor of the body as the self-contained and bounded house or temple of the soul, Te Whare Tapa Whā offers an embodied understanding of our organic structure as always in relation, connecting and expressing potential for wellbeing through movement, balance and symmetry, integrity, strength and meaning. Our embodiment is necessarily located within genealogical, kinship and social relationships, and in our place to stand in the environment of the world.

Here we think with the deep materiality and relationality of this structure to consider the ways tension can be productive; relational forces exude energy when they encounter (and resist) one another, but tension can also prompt movement towards ease as the discomfort of emotional or physical dissonance is navigated and overcome. In our example, the tensions described by Carole and Ella prompt a search for, and reclamation of, ease through a desire for freedom and pleasure in both movement practices and understandings of wellbeing (Humberstone & Stuart, 2016). We relate this to our previous discussions of movement, flow and fluidity (Koch, 2011; Stephens, 2014), where multiple qualities can exist in relation with one another. Below, Billie describes what she imagines as important elements to be included in movement for wellbeing classes catered to women that might provide *easeful* and more generous ways of relating to one's body:

Billie: a sense of freedom of movement, a sense of taking up space in a room and feeling valid in that space, a sense of daring in the body and creating a bit of trusting your body, doing things that are slightly out of your usual. You know, out of the ordinary, and when you trust your body you are more in your body ... and playing around with the ground and stillness and lots of movement.

The women experts we interviewed also discussed the ways their reflective approaches to working with and negotiating wellbeing have shifted to allow for continual movement. This movement both unfolds alongside and prompts new experiences of their ageing bodies as women reconnect with and explore their shifting bodily capacities. This consideration extends beyond assessments of movement in relation to biomechanical function in ageing (Keogh et al., 2009) to consider how women's moving bodies can be

sites for great insight as they witness their changing bodies through movement. Many of the experts spoke to changes they noticed in their values and the meanings they found in movement practices. Below, Janis discusses an approach that offers hope for alternative ways for collaboration around enhancing wellbeing between professionals and ageing community members:

Janis: A friend of mine has done research for years with the frail elderly. And, you know, there are exercise programmes and there are movement experts in the rest homes and in the hospitals. What one professional did was talk to people about their big goals. And one person wanted to fly in a hot air balloon. They were immobile, so they had to start by getting up and down from the chair, build continence, build balance, get in and out of a car, and be able to walk across a paddock (with help), and they did it. So I think about the purpose for movement rather than exercise.

In this example, practices that support wellbeing have shifted from being about following rules of exercise and nutrition in order to achieve ideals of health, to larger goals that support meaningful and pleasurable lived experiences, such as walking with ease; feeling grounded standing in front of others; relaxing in sleeping; and sustaining weekend hobbies. Thinking fluidly about wellbeing means beginning from women's felt experiences of movement, undoing tensions, and finding ease while moving towards a greater range of movement and activities that support their connectedness in their families, communities and the world around them.

Connection

A lived experience of wellbeing for ageing women, as discussed above, may arise through addressing tensions between embodied experience and health prescription, and discovering movement practices that foster ease. Additionally, as inherent in Te Whare Tapa Whā, connection with the social, family and natural environment is a significant contributor to wellbeing:

Janis: I guess when I think about health and wellbeing, I start from a place of connectedness. So health and wellbeing, it is not necessarily about the actions of wellness, but it is about living well in your space, and that connectedness to other people. And whatever else that matters to you.

Connection emerged as a salient theme in women's stories and can also be understood as a materiality; in Te Whare Tapa Whā connection is both necessary and created as corners and joints mutually support the structure of a whare. Connections are also embodied in a person, in the sense that physical aspects affect emotional and conceptual aspects, family and community belonging, and experiences in nature influence spiritual wellbeing, and so on.

Through this paper, we recognise and identify the way that Te Whare Tapa Whā brings attention to connectedness. We also acknowledge the critiques that mainstream interpretations of Te Whare Tapa Whā often lack the nuance and inherent spiritual meanings that bring deeper meanings and connections. However, despite debates about likely superficial interpretations of *mātauranga Māori* (Indigenous Māori knowledges) and the potential for *tapa wairua* (spiritual dimensions) to be neglected in secular education, the currency of Te Whare Tapa Whā, as an Indigenous wellbeing model, is widespread (Heaton, 2015).

For us, these critiques encourage us to become curious and allow us to highlight the spaces in-between and interconnecting lines of support embedded in this way of knowing and experiencing wellbeing. Through our unique placement as ageing dancers and feminist researchers interested in expanding understandings around what it means to live well, we appreciate the fluidity (Stephens, 2014) that is possible in wellbeing. Influences simultaneously past and present can soften the rigidity or tensions of form and allow more ease, even when all four structural dimensions of wellbeing are in place. As one of the experts describes, this approach cannot be reduced to separate walls or aspects:

Janis: So quite often ... when Mason Durie's Te Whare Tapa Whā is taught to non-Māori, they look at it and they go, there are four corners and you balance the corners. But in actual fact, you balance the four corners while paying attention to the floor and the roof that connects it all together, while also paying attention to the environment that it sits within. So it is all about how those things work together or don't work together.

A holistic approach to wellbeing, as offered through Te Whare Tapa Whā, inherently involves attention to connection. Connection is present in this model in the way in which the whare is grounded in the environment, as a woman may be grounded by place and community. Below, Billie describes the aspects of her own life that contribute to her

sense of holistic wellbeing, including the importance of connecting and contributing to her community:

Billie: [Wellbeing includes] having healthy relationships with oneself and with others, and feeling physically well, and functioning well, most definitely. Having a sense of your place in the world, and your contribution, and your part in it, and feeling a sense of community and connection with people. I think that is a very important thing.

In addition to connections found through community and place, the women expressed the importance of re-establishing connections with their bodies that some mentioned had been lost after years of prioritising external advice over internal guidance. Here, we recognise that developing what might be described as critical wellbeing requires re-gaining trust in embodied knowledge, and, as we have argued, attuning to the quality of lived movement experiences. As Simone remarks below, there are tensions arising in connecting with the voices of others, and we need to balance this with tuning in again to our own experiences:

Simone: I think you have a small subset of people who think about what they need, but the large majority of people are doing something because they are told they have to. And it would be good to get into that population and say, “You don’t have to, these are some options and then you choose.” So, putting the power back to them ... it’s been taken away, because you are bombarded with so much information ... people aren’t especially aware and they don’t know what it feels like to be in their own skin. They don’t know what it feels like to stand on one foot and balance. They are like “I don’t understand this feeling”. But the more you are in tune with how you are within space with more perception of how you feel, the more in tune you are.

In the context of physical activity prescription, as Simone notes, a focus on the feeling of being in one’s own skin, is largely absent. However, somatic dance classes and yoga classes offer practices that support awareness and attuning to the sensations and experiences of movement and, when offered in community environments that do not overwhelm women with information about what they *should* be doing, may provide an alternative context for enhancing wellbeing (Barbour et al., 2019; Humberstone & Stuart, 2016). In explicitly considering how movement supports wellbeing, Janis

describes a sense in which awareness in moving provides access to other aspects of wellbeing, including emotional and mental wellbeing, both offering insight to challenges and opportunities to experience pleasure:

Janis: I think that the movement practices help people stay in touch with their bodies ... I think that people taking pleasure in their bodies, and what their bodies can do, is an antidote to constantly [having] to perform, or not being the winner at things. So being actually able to celebrate, so I think the physical side is important.

The women's experiences of playful and connected movement offer new experiences as well as allowing embodied memories to arise, providing moments of celebration in reclaiming movement qualia from years past. Ella's description of the potential of dancing to reignite embodied intelligence reveals the connectedness of movement with social and emotional experience:

Ella: I work with an individual who hadn't done ballroom for 40 years, but there is something about body intelligence at a cellular level that just reignites that feeling. That body skill and body capability and grace and feeling and being able to move in those ways and it's quite amazing and quite emotional ... There is something about being in your physical body that is very deeply satisfying.

As expressed by ageing participants in other somatic movement contexts, "a sense of wellbeing is connected to how we 'feel' and feeling good is largely associated with pleasurable experiences which emerge through our senses" (Humberstone & Stuart, 2016, p. 417).

Investigation of the tensions within the structures and discourses of health and wellbeing in general, and specifically in relation to the limited considerations of the changes ageing women experience, have prompted us to question and critique previous understandings of wellbeing as a neoliberal achievement attained through formulaic approaches. Where previous research on dance and wellbeing suggests connections between body, mind and soul (Humberstone & Stuart, 2016; Stewart, 2000), here, we expand on the importance and breadth of connection as established through culturally meaningful practices and materially experienced sensibilities (as environmental, physical, inanimate and animate elements). Connections identified by the key experts we interviewed have supported our sense that awareness in moving allows exploration

of the in-between, moving in the joints and corners and spaces. Fluidity has offered a greater range in the quality of our movement and our thinking as we flow from a sense of wellbeing outwards to connect with others.

Conclusion

In this paper we acknowledge the social belief systems that constrain the way women's ageing bodies and embodied experiences are constructed and made meaningful, and are prompted towards the notion of fluidity (Stephens, 2014) – as both a concept and embodied enactment – for its creative and disruptive potential. We have sought to enact fluidity in our thinking about wellbeing and in our efforts to extend dominant, biomedical Western approaches, and have centred Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1985) as a nuanced, culturally-specific and place-based approach that may offer more generous ways of understanding wellbeing across women's lives in Aotearoa. As somatic dancers and movers we respond to the embodied sensibility the concept of fluidity evokes; an alternative to remaining fixed or still, a dynamic/vital response to tensions encountered. Fluidity not only signals movement qualia but moves us towards different and responsive ways of knowing that allow for more movement, thus enabling us to imagine more generative and expansive understandings of women's ageing bodies.

From this enactive process, alongside insights from expert interviews, we suggest women may benefit from increased opportunities to move in personally meaningful ways in carefully cultivated social and community spaces. Our experts and our somatic dance participants emphatically noted the tension and unease women encountered within typical gyms. A desire to explore their physical capacities in ways that accommodated their changing embodiments was expressed, without framing them as *unruly* or *diminished* (Shildrick, 2015). Further, choice and play in movement, as well as reflection and rest, provided opportunities for our somatic dance participants to explore and express individually meaningful interpretations of wellbeing, alongside other women (Barbour et al., 2019).

While Te Whare Tapa Whā offers an approach embedded in wellbeing discourses here in Aotearoa, we do not suggest this understanding as a replacement that can offer an alternative prescriptive model. Instead, we consider its creative potential as a nuanced approach with and through which we can acknowledge and enact the intricate connections between the physical, social, emotional and spiritual aspects of wellbeing as felt through our moving bodies. With Te Whare Tapa Whā we were given the opportunity to recognise qualities of ease, tension, flexibility, connection and strength existing as the walls and corners of the whare, but also, as sensibilities being embodied

by ageing women and processes inspiring our research. Thinking with Te Whare Tapa Whā as an approach to wellbeing, but also as a metaphorical structure, we found parallels between the materiality of the whare and the ways that similar qualities were materialising both in the women's lives and in our own conceptual understandings. Through our process of moving with and through Te Whare Tapa Whā, we found ourselves inspired by the potential for fluidity in our thinking and in our exploration of the in-between spaces of connection in wellbeing; both proved insightful in our own experiences as researchers and as ageing women.

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