

*I now understand why boys have historically claimed to hate dancing. . .*

### **The Impact of Gender Roles on Social Dance: Why Boys Hate to Dance and Girls are Left Waiting.**

Dancing USA, April/May 1999.

When I was a child in elementary school and junior high, we were instructed in social dancing where the couple touched; usually the waltz, fox trot, and swing. Boys made fun of the activity. We've all seen the scene at school dances: boys lined up along one side of the gymnasium wall; girls lined up and waited along the other side of the room. Only a few mixed-gender and girl-girl couples danced. The non-dancing boys squirmed and said they hated to dance. The girls sat patiently waiting for boys to ask them to dance.

Remember going to your high school reunion or to a wedding? Usually there were only a few couples who danced. A small group of men danced with many of the women and wives while most of the other men and husbands sat complaining that they didn't like to dance. Again, women waited for men to ask them to dance. Only when they played music where couples did not have to touch, would the floor fill up.

As a public school teacher in the 1990s, I observed many more boys now danced at school dances than in my youth. And there is much more group dancing. The freedom of non-touching dance seems to reveal one of the clues as to why boys have historically said they hated to dance and why women were left waiting to dance.

I began to participate in ballroom and western dancing. Although I enjoyed disco and club dancing, my age worked against me and I felt I was being treated like an old troll. A friend suggested I try western dancing. Although I initially disliked the music, I saw the couples touched, laughed, could talk to each other because the music was not too loud, and very few participants smoked. All that appealed to me and I decided to try.

Being a gay male in Los Angeles, I alternately went to the two gay western dance clubs for lessons. The instructor had us line up as ÅgleadersÅh and ÅgfollowersÅh without regard to gender. Not knowing what I was doing, I decided to follow. After a few months, I began to lead. I learned to enjoy both leading and following. I noticed the better dancers both lead and followed, thus, I purposely switch between the two roles every lesson. I also joined a lesbian and gay ballroom dance organization called Shall We Dance. Here, I saw the same phenomenon I had seen in the western dance classes. Most beginners began by following and then, sometime later, progressed to leading.

At the classes I befriended a heterosexual couple. I asked them why they came to our small gay classes when there were hundreds of other places they could go. Their story was revealing.

Michael and Maggie were accomplished ballroom dancers with many years experience, but Maggie wanted to have the opportunity to lead. She was also tired of men manhandling her and she did not want to continue risking being injured. At their straight ballroom classes, if Maggie got into the lead line-up, she and Michael were asked to keep out of rotation or leave. At dances, if Maggie led Michael, they got disapproving looks from the other couples and the men would joke that, obviously, a particular member of Michael's manhood had fallen off. At one particular dance, while Maggie

was leading, another man abruptly broke in, gave Michael a verbal rebuke for not leading, and roughly shoved Maggie across the floor. They observed that only at the large dance conventions, did they see women in the lead line-up, but never had they seen a man in the follow line-up.

I decided to ask the newcomers to Shall We Dance why they decided to take-up ballroom dancing. Besides commenting they wanted to dance in same-sex couples, many of the women reported they wanted to have the choice between leading and following instead of being forced to follow. Many of the men said they had matured out of their dislike for dancing and they, too, wanted to have the choice between leading and following.

As a life-long ballet dancer, I did not think in terms of leading and following while dancing. Ballroom and western dancing opened my eyes to the pervasive gender roles in social dancing and the consequences those roles have on the appreciation for dance. I now understand why boys have historically claimed to hate dancing.

Males are expected to lead in our culture. When men engage in couple dancing that involves touching, they are proving their masculinity by leading women. However, everyone is initially a novice and that means that when males first learn how to dance, they will prove themselves incompetent in front of women. This humiliation is too great for many, if not most boys, and they take a defensive role by dismissing and denigrating the activity. Thus, forcing boys to lead touch couple dancing in a lead position is not promoting dance, but rather causing many males to reject dance altogether. Girls, on the other hand, are left waiting. With men being hesitant to lead, the pool of available partners is small. Maggie commented another reason she was interested in leading was because often the number of women far surpassed the number of men at dances and she was tired of waiting for men to ask her to dance.

I now understand the popularity of rock, disco and club music for dancing. Since couples do not have to touch, there is no skill required on the man's part. Anyone can bounce and have fun. I love it myself. But there is a level of communication and intimacy missing when couples do not have to touch and this explains the visceral drive toward touch couple dancing found in ballroom and western dance forms.

Much later in life, men may take up couple dancing; but usually at the insistence of a wife or girlfriend, or as a way to meet women. Recently, I took a single male police officer friend of mine to swing dancing at the clubs to help him meet women. He overcame his shyness and danced a couple of times, but complained of feeling inadequate. At my home, I showed him some basic steps; but I had to pull the blinds so that no one could see him dancing with another man. I took him swing dancing a few more times, but his frustrations overcame him and he responded by saying he really didn't like to dance—and this was from a man who went through college on a sports scholarship.

I believe a nurturing environment can help men relearn the pleasures of touch couple dancing. Even then, some men are not good leaders and become frustrated by the experience and turn off to dance. Ultimately, some men should follow and, similarly, some women should lead. So how do we solve the problems gender roles impose upon the enjoyment of dance?

Both women and men should have the choice to either lead or follow in touch dancing. Most beginning ballroom dancers should initially follow and more skilled

dancers should lead; regardless of gender. This makes sense. Those more experienced should be teaching those who are less experienced. But now we are faced with having same-sex couples dancing together. Thus, people would also need to overcome their opposition to same-sex couples dancing. However, we live in a heterosexist culture and businesses and schools could face a severe backlash from students and parents if same-sex coupling were encouraged.

I have a number of solutions that apply equally for children and adults. For large dance groups, separate students between leaders and followers (let them choose), and then by gender to accommodate the sensitivities of heterosexuals (the lesbian and gay members are more accommodating and are mostly indifferent to dancing in same-sex, or opposite-sex couples). In smaller groups, those who do not want to conform to heterosexual standard should not be excluded, but they need to be kept out of rotation. Ballroom instructors need to be aware of students who are unduly struggling with their lead or follow position. Perhaps these students would dance better and have greater fun if they took the other role. In a neutral gender role environment, instructors could gently suggest to these students to switch roles; and students would feel safe to try.

One last phenomenon I have observed concerns people (mostly men) who insist on leading. Without exception, I have found these people to be poor leaders and often resort to shoving their partners around the floor. From comments I hear from other dancers and from my direct experience, I believe these people are leading because it is part of their identity to control; and for the men, it is part of their ÅmasculineÅh identity. They are leading to prove themselves and not for the pleasure of dancing with another person. Thus, they are insensitive to the needs of their followers.

My perspective allows me to dance with Lois, or Bob, or Tim, or Judy — sometimes leading and sometimes following — and they are unique individuals each with something enjoyable to share. Most boys don't touch couple dance because of gender roles. Most girls are restricted in touch couple dancing because of gender roles. Dance is for everyone. Let's not alienate or exclude people by conforming to gender roles.

Word count: 1552

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Chuck Stewart danced and taught ballet for many years. He is now an academic writer on education and gender issues and has recently completed the book, *Sexually Stigmatized Communities: Reducing Heterosexism and Homophobia, An Awareness Training Manual* for SAGE Publications. Visit him at <http://members.aol.com/ckstewart/CStewart.html>.

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My Original Article. Dancing USA needed to trim the word count by about 400 words.

### **The Impact of Gender Roles on Social Dance: Why Boys Hate to Dance and Girls are Left Waiting.**

I began dancing ballet when I was eleven years old. That was the early 1960s and the boys at school mercilessly called me Ågsissy, Åh Ågtwinkle toes, Åh or worse. I did not understand their attacks. I wondered how it was that boys were supposed to be physically inclined, yet they demeaned ballet; a physical activity I found to be more demanding than any sport I ever played? I ignored their comments and continued to dance. I was fortunate to win scholarships and dance professionally with many companies until I retired from ballet 27 years later.

In my forties, I turned my attention toward ballroom and western dancing. There are a number of social phenomena surrounding dance and gender that I have only recently gained an understanding. Let me share my observations.

Every child loves to dance. But something happens. When I was a child in elementary school and junior high, we were instructed in social dancing where the couple touched; usually the waltz, fox trox, and swing. Boys made fun of the activity. We've all seen the scene at school dances: boys lined up along one side of the gymnasium wall, whereas girls lined up and waited along the other side of the room. Only a few mixed-gender and girl-girl couples danced. The non-dancing boys squirmed and said they hated to dance. The girls sat patiently waiting for boys to ask them to dance.

In mine and earlier generations, this phenomenon became more pronounced as the years went by. Remember going to your high school reunion or to a wedding? Usually there were only a few couples who danced. A small group of men danced with many of the women and wives while most of the other men and husbands sat complaining that they didn't like to dance. Again, women waited for men to ask them to dance. Only when they played music where couples did not have to touch, would the floor fill up.

Before the late 1950s, ballroom, western, square dancing, and other forms of couple dancing dominated the social dance scene. Males had to know how to lead women, and women needed to know how to follow men in order to participate in social dancing. But things changed. Rock-n-roll, the hippie counter-culture, disco, and club music allowed other forms of couple dancing that included non-touching styles.

I observed as a public school teacher in the 1990s that many more boys now danced at school dances than in my youth. And there is much more group dancing. The freedom of non-touching dance seems to reveal one of the clues as to why boys have historically said they hated to dance and why women were left waiting to dance.

A second clue to the puzzle came to me as I began to participate in ballroom and western dancing. Although I enjoyed disco and club dancing, my age worked against me and I felt that I was being treated like an old troll. A friend suggested for me to try western dancing. Although I initially disliked the music, I saw that the couples touched, laughed, could talk to each other because the music was not too loud, and very few participants smoked. All that appealed to me and I decided to try.

Being a gay male in Los Angeles, I alternately went to the two gay western dance clubs to attend lessons. The instructor had us line up as ÅleadersÅh and ÅfollowersÅh without regard to gender. Not knowing what I was doing, I decided to follow. After a few months, I began to lead. I learned to enjoy both leading and following. I noticed that the better dancers both lead and followed, thus, I purposely switch between the two roles every lesson.

At the same time, I joined a lesbian and gay ballroom dancing organization called Shall We Dance. Here, I saw the same phenomenon I had seen in the western dance classes. Most beginners began by following and then, sometime later, progressed to leading.

At the ballroom classes I befriended a heterosexual couple. I asked them why they came to our small gay classes when there were hundreds of other places they could go. Their story was revealing. Michael and Maggie were accomplished ballroom dancers with many years experience, but Maggie wanted to have the opportunity to lead. She was also tired men manhandling her and she did not want to continue risking being injured.

At their straight ballroom classes, if Maggie got into the lead line-up, she and Michael were asked to keep out of rotation or leave. At dances, if Maggie led Michael, they got disapproving looks from the other couples and the men would joke that, obviously, a particular member of Michael's manhood had fallen off. At one particular dance, while Maggie was leading, another man abruptly broke in, gave Michael a verbal rebuke for not leading, and roughly shoved Maggie across the floor. They observed that only at the large dance conventions, such as those held at Catalina Island, did they see women in the lead line-up, but never had they seen a man in the follow line-up.

The final clue to the puzzle came while in discussion with the newcomers to Shall We Dance. I asked these men and women why they decided to take-up ballroom dancing. Besides commenting that they wanted to dance in same-sex couples, many of the women reported that they wanted to have the choice between leading and following instead of being forced to follow. Many of the men said that they had matured out of their dislike for dancing and that they, too, wanted to have the choice between leading and following.

As a life-long ballet dancer, I did not think in terms of leading and following while dancing. Ballroom and western dancing opened my eyes to the pervasive gender roles in social dancing and the consequences those roles have on the appreciation for dance.

I now understand why boys have historically claimed to hate dancing. Males are expected to lead in our culture. When men engage in couple dancing that involves touching, they are proving their masculinity by leading women. However, everyone is initially a novice and that means that when males first learn how to dance, they will prove themselves incompetent in front of women. This humiliation is too great for many, if not most boys, and they take a defensive role by dismissing and denigrating the activity. Thus, forcing boys to learn touch couple dancing in a lead position is not promoting dance, but rather causing many males to reject dance altogether.

Girls, on the other hand, are left waiting. With men being hesitant to lead, the pool of available partners is small. Maggie commented that another reason she was

interested in leading was because often the number of women far surpassed the number of men at dances and she was tired of waiting for men to ask her to dance.

I now also understand the popularity of rock, disco, and club music for dancing. Since couples do not have to touch, there is no skill required on the part of men. Anyone can bounce and have fun. I love the fun myself. But there is a level of communication and intimacy missing when couples do not have to touch and this explains the visceral drive toward touch couple dancing found in ballroom and western dance forms.

Much later in life, men may take up couple dancing; but usually at the insistence of a wife or girlfriend, or as a way to meet women. Recently, I took a friend of mine, who was a single male police officer, to swing dancing at the clubs to help him meet women. He overcame his shyness and danced a couple of times, but complained of feeling inadequate. At my home, I showed him some basic steps; but I had to pull the blinds so that no one could see him dancing with another man. I took him swing dancing a few more times, but his frustrations overcame him and he responded by saying that he really didn't like to dance and this was from a man who went through college on a sports scholarship.

I believe that a nurturing environment can help men relearn the pleasures of touch couple dancing. But even then, some men are not good leaders and become frustrated by the experience and eventually turn off to dance. Ultimately, some men should follow and, similarly, some women should lead.

So how do we solve the problems gender roles impose upon the enjoyment of dance? The most direct action would be to eliminate gender roles. Both women and men should have the choice to either lead or follow in touch dancing. Most beginning ballroom dancers should initially follow and more skilled dancers should lead; regardless of gender. This makes sense. Those more experienced should be teaching those who are less experienced. But now we are faced with having same-sex couples dancing together. Thus, people would also need to overcome their opposition to same-sex couples dancing. However, we live in a heterosexist culture and businesses and schools could face a severe backlash from students and parents if same-sex coupling were encouraged.

I have a number of solutions that apply equally for children and adults. For large dance groups, separate students between leaders and followers (let them choose), and then by gender to accommodate the sensitivities of heterosexuals (the lesbian and gay members are more accommodating and are mostly indifferent to dancing in same-sex, or opposite-sex couples). In smaller groups, those who do not want to conform to heterosexual standard should not be excluded, but they need to be kept out of rotation.

Ironically, the stereotype of heterosexual men in our culture being strong and unemotional crumbles when they are faced with dancing with another man. It is heterosexual men who complain and resist the most to changes in dance roles. Of course, if people could get over their heterosexual hang-ups, then the problems of rotation would become mute and everyone would enjoy their chosen role.

Ballroom instructors need to be aware of students who are unduly struggling with their lead or follow position. Perhaps these students would dance better and have greater fun if they took the other role. In a neutral gender role environment, instructors could gently suggest to these students to switch roles; and students would feel safe to try.

One last phenomenon I have observed concerns people (mostly men) who insist on leading. Without exception, I have found these people to be poor leaders and often

resort to shoving their partners around the floor. From the comments I hear from the other dancers and from my direct experience, I believe these people are leading because it is part of their identity to control; and for the men, it is part of their masculine identity. They are leading to prove themselves and not for the pleasure of dancing with another person. Thus, they are insensitive to the needs of their followers. This is another example of gender roles interfering with the pleasure of dance.

I gained a new perspective on the impact gender has on dance through my participation in lesbian and gay ballroom and western dancing. I found that the gender of the person I danced with was unimportant. Instead, I now dance with Lois, or Bob, or Tim, or Judy] sometimes leading and sometimes following] and they are unique individuals each with something enjoyable to share. Most boys don't touch couple dance because of gender roles. Most girls are restricted in touch couple dancing because of gender roles. Dance is for everyone. Let's not alienate or exclude people by conforming to gender roles.

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