Change Partners!:
Male Followers, Female Leaders, and Gender Performativity in Modern Lindy Hop*

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Tutorial Group 5
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On a dancefloor full with experienced dancers, it is rare that anyone stops and watches – we’re all mostly focused on finding someone to dance with or enjoying a dance with our current partner. There are three events that attract attention on the dancefloor, however: a jam circle, a solo routine widely known by everyone else but you, and, I thought, an all-male couple. Seemingly, whenever a man grabbed another man for a dance, at least some cheering and swooning was bound to happen. And the boys seemed to enjoy the attention – glances over to the audience, magnificent swivels, Mariane-trench-deep dips were a standard.

Thinking about it, I was getting irritated at what I thought of as excessive performativity and feminisation of the follower's role when men, who outside the dancefloor were conforming to a masculinity stereotype, suddenly adopted ultra-effeminate ways of movement when dancing as a follower. My frustration is shared with others. My friend S., a young female dancer from Bristol, who both leads and follows, told me of a time when she and a friend of hers entered a Jack'n'Jill competition, swapping their conventional roles – S. signed up as a lead, her friend as a follow. "I was pretty excited to showcase that local dancers weren’t held to gender norms, until he showed up to the competition in a dress..." S., while highly amused by the sight, was much like me – unhappy with the fact that her friend thought the only appropriate way to show up as a follow was 'in full drag'.

My own involvement in swing dancing began about two years ago and since then I have been an active member of the swing dance community. I was attracted by the music it is danced to – big band jazzy tunes with a 1920s and 1930s feel, as well as the relaxed aesthetic of the dance, which differed quite starkly from other types of dance I’d tried before. As I was getting more involved, I started appreciating it for the various little freedoms that swing dancers were entitled to – frequently switching partners during classes as well as social dancing, asking whoever they desired to for a dance (girls included!), and stepping out of their conventional dance roles (male leader and female follower). And then came anthropology.

This paper is a product of about a month’s worth of focused research, including interviewing dancers that I met on dance weekends in the UK (in Leeds, Aberdeen, and St Andrews), as well as dancing friends of mine that I’ve known for longer, observing dancefloor behaviour during those weekends, and dancing as both a lead and a follow myself. My deep involvement into the community caused me some headache when I was preparing to conduct and write out my research, that has been somewhat soothed by reading the works of Jonathan Skinner (2012; 2008) and Eduardo Archetti (1999) and their own reflections on ‘auto-ethnography’. In spite of my best effort, this paper has inevitably been skewed by my opinions, by my involvement in the swing dance scene and my own role as a female dancer that occasionally leads, as well as by the relationships that I have with my informants. I have tried to keep my interviews as informal and open as I could, while still informing everyone involved of my ongoing research, following many of Jonathan Skinner’s guidelines (2012). Finally, I am aware that this analysis is leaving many gender and identity issues in lindy hop untackled.

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1 All quotes are from personal communication, written or otherwise, and have been reviewed by their authors. People's initials have been used to ensure confidentiality.
Anthropology sent me on a quest to make sense of the phenomenon of traditional dancing role swapping that I originally saw as a marker of the liberating and emancipatory nature of swing dancing, but later came to appreciate as a clumsy struggle against, if not perpetuation of gender normativity. In this, my findings come somewhat close to those of Leslie Gotfrit's in her feminist analysis of Canadian club culture, where she sees dancing as simultaneously a form of resistance to and reproduction of dominant gender practices and ideologies in Western society (1991:175). There are, of course, instrumental differences between the study of club culture, where dancing is essentially solo and does not involve specific steps or attending classes, and a partnered dance like lindy hop, that consists of a community of learners for whom social dancing is part of the practice of a particular skill. In his study of female salsa dancers in Belfast, Skinner, too, uses Gotfrit's insights with an awareness of the differences between club dancing and partnered salsa. Interestingly enough, for women in Skinner's research, dancing and actions during nights out 'transgress daytime behaviour, but transgressions are within a carefully expected and accepted boundaries' and there is no full dis-identification with conventions of behaviour (2008:72-76). Among my own informants, there is much more preoccupation with breaking gendered boundaries or dancing in spite of them. Additionally, lindy hoppers seem to be much more concerned with the learning, than with the 'passion' that Skinner and Gotfrit explore in their studies of dance. Nonetheless, their writings on female sexuality in dance were an important starting point for me to start thinking about gendered roles in lindy hop and to nest these reflections in the larger theme of femininity and masculinity, borrowing from Judith Butler (1995) and Eduardo Archetti (1999).

The Context: Lindy Hop

Lindy hop is a partnered social dance that originated in the 1930s in New York and experienced its recent revival in Europe and the US since the 1990s. It is part of a larger family of swing dances, including the charleston, shag, balboa, blues, etc., but the terms 'lindy hop' and 'swing dancing' are often used interchangeably. The practice of lindy hop is often related to a vintage culture including clothing, make-up, and hairstyling to complement the dance. As a partnered dance, lindy hop habitually has 'leaders' who, through their own body design the dance by communicating to their partner different movements, and followers, who react to those signals. Both partners are encouraged to introduce variations in the dance to match it best to the music and to each other's energy, although the follower has less opportunity to influence the fabric of the dance and is more or less limited to variations that do not disrupt the leader. Female dancers habitually take the role of a follower, while male dancers usually assume the role of a leader. Unlike swapping partners, the practice of swapping roles while learning to dance and in a social context is not something that is purposefully encouraged, except for in specific classes when leads, much to their amusement, are asked to try out following for educational purposes. However, female dancers who lead and male dancers who follow are not entirely unusual especially among more advanced dancers.

“You lead really well... like a guy!”
Among my friends and informants, including myself, female leads often saw something emancipatory in being able to lead, as well as follow. It is usual for lindy hop events to have the female, typically following, dancers outnumber the male leading dancers. At casual social events, being able to lead allows you to dance to all the songs you want to, even if the balance between male leads and female follows is not good. At workshops and classes, being able to lead is an almost certain way to secure a place and jump the waiting list that is usually set up for followers. Learning to lead is also seen as a good way to improve your dancing as a follow, by putting yourself in the lead's shoes: “You start appreciating what leading is like and understanding better what it takes to lead – that helps you to be a more patient and sensitive follower.” (D.)

But simply learning to lead is not the hardest part about being a female lead. S. talks about the difficulty of asking other female dancers for a dance: “They always look at you a bit startled, and probably tell themselves, oh what the hell, and dance with you for the fun of it, and then they tell you 'You lead really good... like a guy!'”. S. believes she is a good lead, regardless of her gender. When discussing female leads with C. she reminds me of an all-female dance couple that teaches:

“E. was teaching a class that R. was attending and there were too few leads... So she started leading regularly, E. thought R. was pretty good, and now they're dance partners. R. has quite some problems though, when guys come and ask her for a dance and she says 'I don't follow' and they laugh and say 'Ok, I'll follow then' and then she has to lead around these guys that have never followed just because they think it's fun”.

Some other female dancers in the relatively small scene of St Andrews, who have had to learn leading by necessity, to keep class ratios acceptable and save themselves and other follows from waiting, find the opposite a problem. They are wary of being branded as leads and not having the opportunity to follow as often as they'd like to. L., a dancer in St Andrews, occasionally leads at classes and workshops, but is increasingly reluctant to do so. “I could lead, but I'd really like to follow this time... I like following. But if I have to, I guess I'll lead...” Especially in a small scene, followers seem to appreciate the extra lead and enjoy dancing with female leads. The St Andrews scene is a very good example of that, with pretty much all of the more experienced female dancers having learned to lead, as well as follow. As a lead, I often get asked for a dance by female dancers who'd come to me with the words 'But you're leading'. Same goes for the Edinburgh scene, which is also relatively small. It usually takes me a couple of dances in a new venue to be noticed as a lead. I have not noticed that my leading discourages male leads for asking me for a dance as a follow. Occasionally, they would come forth and ask me to lead them, too.

“I saw you leading some mean blues last night, would you mind leading me?”

In my circle of dance friends, and on every swing dance party I attend, there are a few male dancers that like to occasionally dive into the adventure that following is. Covert compliments like the one quoted above, that a male dancer paid me at Herrang Dance Camp last summer, are not the most popular scenario in which male dancers decide to experience following. T., a male dancer that

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3 You can see E. and R. perform if you follow this link: http://youtu.be/ZjRmPAIGIYM
typically leads, explains why he likes following other male dancers:

“[Sometimes] I get bored dancing with girls, there is still a challenge when I'm dancing with a guy – I am way more inclined to accept that I made a mistake when I'm dancing with a guy. I would have to dance with a very good follower to see that I was majorly the reason why something went wrong. For me as a leader, on a learning level, I prefer following because I still have a lot to learn.”

S., another male dancer, explains that he likes following because it's fun, it's a different way to enjoy the dance and it lets you understand the follower's role much better. “It’s a pity, on a workshop, I sometimes really want to dance with some of the [male] instructors, I really wanna know what it feels like to be led by someone that good, but we don't get the chance…”

But if the reason for male dancers to decide to follow is for the sake of learning and to rise up to the challenge of learning to dance 'from the other side', where does the spectacle come in? And, coming back to my frustration, why is the dance between two male dancers so often turned into a highly sexualised show?

These two videos triggered many of my reflections. M. and T. are famous dancers from France–these are videos of one of their routines dancing together as a lead and follow, while they both habitually lead. This used to be one of my favourite performances, until I saw the 2013 version and, perhaps with my new gender norms awareness, found it distasteful and offensive. I found in the exaggerated swivels and the artificially intensified sexual tension a mockery of what a real dance between partners should be, implying either that the only reason why two male dancers could dance together is to grab onto each other’s genitalia or that dancing with a female is necessarily a sexual act.

When I introduced my frustration to my dance friends, they reacted quite differently. T. laughed understandingly, saying he could see why I wouldn't like it and blamed it all on a culture of machoism: “Men assert their virility by acting gay.” T.’s point here resonates with an idea that “masculinity without femininity […] is perhaps unthinkable (Archetti 1999:xviii). Masculinity and femininity are seen here as “opposite poles of the same axis”(Sedgwick 1995:15), and thus, when the archetypal carrier of femininity in lindy hop, the female follower is absent, someone needs to take her spot. Responding to my protest at the bordering on grotesque performance from 2013, he continued:

“A guy following automatically is grotesque... Following is essentially a feminine practice – it has been designed by girls, girls have made it what it is today, girls have put the technique in it according to how their bodies work...Every man that wants to try being a follower has accepted that following is feminine.”

And while T. pushed all my feminist buttons, he seemed to be onto something. While still portraying all men as necessarily masculine, he was referring to the fact that in an all-male couple dance, performing as a follower is turned into performing the feminine gender (Butler 1995:31). P., a male dancer that typically leads, and does not indulge in following socially as much as T, responded in much the same way:

Video 2: [http://youtu.be/1L5uQ4r28ZY](http://youtu.be/1L5uQ4r28ZY) M. and T. in 2013
I think following is a traditionally female role. Men follow very rarely, the dance is in that way sexist in itself. If men followed more often, it would be less of a deal when a man does follow. Because it’s not done much, men try to imitate people who they see following all the time, maybe through mockery – mocking something is easier than actually doing it right.

There is an important nuance in P.’s account of male dancers following, which starkly contrasts with T.’s. Both P. and T. talk about male dancers imitating the typically female follower figures during their dance, because female dancers have been defining following for a long time in lindy hop. However, while T. suggests that mockery and over-exaggeration are a result of some male desire to assert their masculinity, P. says something quite different:

Followig can be intimidating for a guy, mockery is an easy way to acknowledge that this person is not typically a follower. Guys have only girls as an example of what a good follow is. Mockery is an easy option until someone starts to develop following as a male role.

In other words, exaggeration and mockery are tools for male dancers to hide their inability to replicate following as they see it done 'right' by female follows. After Butler, they perform the perceived femininity of the follow in order to become the follow. What is even more interesting, A. and to some extent T. seem to see some sort of future where following could be not exclusively feminine⁵: “Dancing is expressing yourself... And if you want to make your dance feminine you will; if you don't want it then you probably won't.” (T.)

Another aspect of all-male couple dancing that my informants don't really talk about is the extra attention they get. My impression of a lot of all-male dances has been, much like T. and M.’s performance, that they are often intended for an audience and delivered accordingly. When asked about it, both T. and S. reflect that indeed, the additional attention, while not the main incentive, is “definitely in the equation”. T. goes on to say:

“I won a second place at a Jack'n'Jill competition as a follower – there were better followers around me, but no one got as much applause as we did... I guess some guys may realise the attention they get as a good lead is not enough, so they take the next step.”

Male follows, however, much like female leads, encounter difficulties when looking for a partner and tell me of mainly dancing with [male] friends of theirs, and not just any lead.

So why dance as a female lead and a male follow? Both male and female dancers that I interviewed enjoy dancing in their non-conventional roles because it enhances their dancing, it allows them to push it beyond the conventional limits and to learn with their bodies in ways that they wouldn't normally be encouraged to. When female leads speak of their experience, they mostly point at difficulties they face getting into and out of the role of a lead, as well as being taken seriously as one – in other words how their perceived gender affects people's expectations of their dancing role. When male follows speak of their experiences, the most prominent topic is performing femininity in their dancing and how it is used, according to some, to conceal their inability to 'do it properly' or

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⁵ I find it interesting that male dancers following is seen as some sort of modern innovation in the context of this famous performance of iconic dancers Al Minns and Leon James filmed in 1961 (they start partnered dancing around 2:40): http://youtu.be/KJsBa2u9aMQ
alternatively, to secure their masculinity – in other words, how the expected gender role that comes in with the position of the follow affects their desired gender performance. And, after all, it turns out I was wrong to rage against male followers over-performing, as this exaggeration seems to be part of an effort to perform to a standard of femininity that is commonly attached to following. Thus, the issue falls much beyond the scope of lindy hop and into a larger discussions of gender normativity and gendered expectations.

A photo of me, doing an (failed) airstep with a female follower.


