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# The emancipatory promise of the habitus: Lindy hop, the body, and social change

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## Abstract

Existing research about the role of the habitus in social change emphasizes inertia. Individuals in new contexts are understood to face disadvantage, making disruption of a hierarchical status quo difficult. Recent theory regarding our ability to strategically change and use our bodily habits, however, suggests that the habitus may not be condemned to a purely conservative role. Here I examine a community of lindy hoppers who are re-shaping the collective body towards feminist ends. Control over bodies is essential to partner dance. However, these dancers revision the lead/follow dynamic. Instead of an active/passive binary, partners happily negotiate power. This negotiation is decidedly corporeal and cooperative and occurs spontaneously and constantly. My findings add empirical weight to theory regarding the role of the habitus in wide-spread social change, suggest that the habitus has emancipatory potential, and offer a template for how the habitus could be used by social movement actors.

## Keywords

body, Bourdieu, culture, dance, gender, habitus, inequality

Bourdieu (2001) is decidedly pessimistic about our ability to end masculine domination. However, insofar as it is possible, he argues that it requires both cognitive liberation and a re-education of the body. Some scholars argue that the habitus, as theorized, is deterministic and that, therefore, such a re-education is impossible (Alexander, 1995; Butler, 1999; Jenkins, 1992; Shilling, 1997). Bourdieu and others, however, argue that the habitus can be targeted by

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individuals seeking to alter their bodily habits (e.g. Bar-On Cohen, 2006; Bourdieu, 2000; Crossley, 2004; Tarr, 2008). Existing examples help us understand how reflexive relationships to the habitus develop and progress, but the body projects they describe remain largely individualistic and apolitical. They tell us little about the role of the habitus in furthering the goals of progressive social movements.

This article addresses this gap in the literature. Drawing on one year as an 'observant participant' (Wacquant, 2004a), I describe a community of dancers who, in the process of attaining a lindy hop habitus, are socialized – both cognitively and corporeally – into an alternative, feminist gender regime. Derived from the Charleston, a jaunty dance that accompanied the first wave of the feminist movement, lindy hop involves a liberatory aesthetic that is used by contemporary dancers to challenge and usurp masculine domination.

I show that lindy hoppers learn a set of bodily tools that, as they become increasingly skilled, undermine and re-fashion the gendered body and the bodily relationship between men and women. More specifically, leaders and followers alike learn to use their bodies to do control, submission, and cooperation. Power becomes something that is negotiated as dancers strategically draw on these bodily resources, making moment-to-moment choices on how and whether to impact the trajectory of their combined movement. Through teaching, learning, and practicing a lindy hop habitus, patriarchy loses its grip on their bodies.

My data suggest that a community ideologically committed to undermining gender inequality, combined with the teaching of bodily skills that not only allow but demand the embodiment of equality, can change the status of femininity relative to masculinity, the enactment of gender, and the very way in which men and women relate to one another as embodied agents. These findings add empirical weight to theoretical expositions as to the role of the habitus in widespread social change, suggest that the habitus has emancipatory potential, and offer a template for how the habitus could be used by social movement actors.

## **The habitus, gender, and social change**

As articulated by Bourdieu (1990, 2000), the habitus is the (mostly) unconscious result of a lifetime of physical repetition that shapes our bodies, tastes, knowledges, competences, and way of thinking. Since the habitus develops in context, individuals develop a set of practices appropriate to their circumstances. In this way, social structural hierarchy becomes embedded in bodies.

Gender is one facet of social life that the habitus helps us understand. Alongside other influences on our habitus, we develop a more-or-less unconscious habitualized body language with which we enact masculinity and femininity. Gender, Bourdieu (2001) writes, is '...laid down in the form of permanent stances, gaits and postures which are the realization, or rather, the naturalization of an ethic' (p. 27). This idea reminds us that, while the maintenance of a gender binary requires constant performance and policing, much conformity with gender norms is habitual (Adkins, 2004; Fowler, 2003; McRobbie, 2004). Bourdieu's concept,

then, helps us avoid overestimating 'the extent to which [we] . . . are able to reshape identity' at will (McNay, 1999: 113).

Given his emphasis on the body, Bourdieu's (2001) discussion of social change predictably involves a critique of cognitive consciousness raising (though a somewhat misguided one; Chambers, 2005; Kraus, 2006; Witz, 2004). For Bourdieu, one cannot think oneself out of inequality because our unconscious bodily habits will betray our conscious desire for liberation. Re-educating the body, then, must be a central part of any project for progressive social change.

This, of course, requires that it is possible for us to consciously and purposively teach bodies new habits, perhaps even ones that are well outside of convention. Whether such an agentic relationship to the habitus is possible has been the subject of much debate among sociologists. While some have asserted that the habitus is not compatible with the notion of individual agency because it directly embodies the social structure (Alexander, 1995; Butler, 1999; Jenkins, 1992; Shilling, 1997), Bourdieu and others have made a good case that the habitus is determining, but not deterministic. There are two lines of thought on this.

First, the habitus can be the target of conscious manipulation. Awareness of one's bodily habits, achieved through what Crossley (2005: 2) calls 'reflexive body techniques', inevitably leads to a personal training of the body that exists alongside the influences of social structures (Crossley, 2001, 2004). Bourdieu (2000) notes that many bodily habits are consciously and routinely monitored, such as those of gymnasts. Tarr (2008) makes similar observations while studying followers of the Alexander Technique, who attempt to 're-educate' their bodies (p. 478). The possibility for reflexive analysis and purposeful adjustment means that we are not always passive in the face of our habits. Instead, just as the habitus is revised over time in response to a shifting environment (Bourdieu, 1977, 2000; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Wacquant, 2004b), we can choose to make new practices habitual through conscious, purposeful revision.

A second approach to reconciling the habitus and individual agency so as to allow for purposive justice-oriented social change involves a reconceptualization of the social structure itself. Kraus (2006), McNay (1999), and Sewell (1992), for example, argue that social structure has been misconceived as composed of 'a vast series of strictly homologous structures', when it is, in reality, 'multiple, contingent, and fractured' (Sewell, 1992: 16). If society is understood to be monolithic, then the habitus will be as well. However, when we understand that society is not so seamlessly consistent, then we can imagine the habitus to be uneven. Individuals, then, can have a 'versatile' habitus with 'heterogeneous arrays of resources' and are capable of using their habitual tools in strategic ways (Sewell, 1992: 17).

The notion of a multiplicitous social world that creates a fractured habitus may be especially relevant to gender. Because gender is not a field in itself, there is no monolithic influence on our gendered selves. Instead, all fields are gendered and inculcate different, even contradictory, gendered habits (Chambers, 2005). Indeed, in a world in which most women travel daily between public and private spheres,

a more or less fractured gendered habitus seems inevitable. If, as Sewell, Kraus, and McNay argue, a fractured habitus can be a source of agency, then the body may be a source of feminist opportunity, as well as patriarchal reproduction.

Bourdieu himself does not emphasize this particular emancipatory possibility when discussing masculine domination. Instead, as McNay (1999) argues, he '... significantly underestimates the ambiguities and dissonances that exist in the way that men and women occupy masculine and feminine positions' (p. 107). Further, research using and extending the concept of the habitus has tended to emphasize its role in reproducing social inequality, as in Bourdieu's discussion of his own 'split habitus' as a working-class child who became an intellectual elite, Lawler's (1999) discussion of working-class women who became middle class, and Desmond's (2006) discussion of how a lack of a 'country boy' habitus undermines fit among wildland firefighters.

Because of this focus on habitual inertia, there has been little empirical research on the role of the habitus in social change and, more specifically, its progressive potential. While the habitus is often understood to work against the out-of-place individual, the same phenomenon can also be seen as an opportunity to diversify their bodily tools. I begin to fill this gap with a study of a partner dance, lindy hop. Partner dancing not only mobilizes gendered bodies but involves direct bodily communication. Some scholars of partner dance have concluded that it necessarily involves an embodiment of gender hierarchy (e.g. Picart, 2002; Polhemus, 1993; Walsh, 1993). He, literally, dominates her body with his. Others, especially scholars who are dancers themselves, articulate a more complex relationship between dance partners (Novack, 1990; Savigliano, 1995). Bourdieu (2001) himself saw dance as an especially fruitful source of insight. Indeed, to teach and learn dance is, in some ways, to bring the habitus to consciousness. Accordingly, partner dance is an excellent place to look for the relationship between individual autonomy, collective action, and the habitus that is required for purposive social change.

## Lindy hop

Lindy hop is an athletic partner dance invented by African Americans dancing to big bands in 1930s Harlem, popularized during the Second World War, and revived in the late 1980s (Card, 1998; Malone, 1996). It transitions between an open position (in which the leader's left hand holds the follower's right hand), a closed 'waltz' position, and a return to the open position. The basic move occurs within eight-counts (a step each for counts one and two, a triple-step for counts three and four, a step each for counts four and five, and a final triple-step for counts seven and eight). Despite the 'basic' eight-count move, any two counts can be cut up and rearranged to create unexpected yet coordinated movements.

Because lindy hop is spontaneous and often danced at very fast tempos (up to about 300 beats per minute), the body is the primary mode of communication. High tempos do not allow for dancers to pay attention to their partner with their conscious mind. Instead, dancers must pay 'attention with one's body'

(Csordas, 1993: 138). With the scaffolding of the dance in place as shared knowledge and a somatic mode of attention, the dance is potentially not so much a series of moves that both the men and women 'know' with their mind as it is an organic, unpredictable, yet cooperative sequence of movements done by and to the body. For this reason, at the highest levels of skill, lindy hop requires a mode of bodily practice and attention that is highly coordinated and precise. It is in this potential, actualized only among dancers with a great deal of training and repetition, that I am interested.

Lindy hop enjoyed a resurgence in the 1980s and, ever since, dancers have enjoyed a national scene with internet websites, workshops, competitions, and city-wide social events occurring year-round across the US and, increasingly, around the world.

The data for this article are drawn from an embodied ethnography in which I was an 'observant participant' (Wacquant, 2004a) of this resurgence for 14 months during 1999 and 2000. My first and most direct source of data was my own body as I 'deploy[ed] the body as a tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge' (Wacquant, 2004a: viii). As the start of this inquiry I had been dancing lindy hop intensely for three years. My dancing, then, was one mode of data collection. My ability also offered me some cultural capital with my informants and the ability to interpret and make insights available only to those whose body has achieved a high level of specialization. This approach has been called for by a range of scholars (Boddy, 1995; Buchholz, 2006; Csordas, 1993; Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987) and usefully brought to bear on a wide range of topics (most famously, boxing: Wacquant, 1995, 2004a; and, most relevantly, lindy hop: Hancock, 2007).

Alongside this deep data on the body designed to tap into how it *feels* to do gender as a lindy hopper, I *watched* how dancers used their bodies (recording my observations in fieldnotes), and I *listened* to dancers describe how they dance. I held 11 one-on-one interviews, and eight focus groups (more accurately described as conversations and hanging-out) at regional and national dance events. Each of the interviews and group sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The principal individuals that inform my argument are 13 elite lindy hoppers (eight men and five women, not including myself, two of whom I spoke to only in focus groups and several who were in more than one focus group). Lindy hoppers, especially elites, tend to be middle-class young adults (usually between 16 and 25) who have free time to practice and young bodies that lend themselves to physical athleticism. Nine of my informants were in college. The remaining four had day jobs that left them free to participate heavily in the 'swing scene' at night. One had dropped out of college to focus more intensely on dancing. All but one of my informants was between 19 and 29 years of age (one dancer was 32). Six lived in the Midwest, five on the West Coast, and two on the East Coast. Eleven of the dancers were white; the remaining two were African American. All were given pseudonyms for the purposes of publication.

I focus on elite dancers for three reasons. First, these dancers embody the greatest potential range of bodily resources. Second, since they have been dancing

(and thinking, talking, and teaching) for a long period of time, they are more likely than other dancers to be able to describe what they do. Third, since they are leaders of the scene, it is their understanding of the dance, and way of doing it, that is shaping the entire dance community (see Crossley, 2004, on sociability and the habitus). These dancers were all active in organizing events in their home towns, in charge of large national online discussion forums, teaching, and/or competitive at a national level. When the community follows their lead, the opportunity to practice new ways of interacting bodily are created allowing for the development of new habits to develop through practice and repetition.

In my results I emphasize the ways in which the voices and bodies of my informants agree instead of, as with much ethnography, the ways in which they diverge. A range of positions is often used by the ethnographer to best capture the depth of their story. Here, instead, I want to make an argument about one potentiality of lindy hop, instead of its varieties. I do not mean to assert that my description accurately captures the experiences of *all* lindy hoppers, nor to assert that *only* lindy hop has the potential described here. I am simply explicating the experiences, perceptions, and activities of one group of dancers in a particular time and place. Other academic work on lindy hop describes substantially different scenes (see, for example, Doane, 2006; Hancock, 2007; Renshaw, 2006).

Because I am especially interested in the gendered lead/follow dynamic, I choose to focus on gender at the expense of race and class. Lindy hop is historically a working-class African American dance (Card, 1998; Malone, 1996). Race and class played a vital part in shaping the lindy hop habitus and play an important role in its resurgence (Hancock, 2007). My interest here, however, is in the contemporary 'how' of the habitus instead of the historical 'why' (Desmond, 2006). That is, instead of examining the way in which histories matter via the long-term inculcation of habits that manifest themselves in activities like dance, I am concerned with how the habitus is shaped in daily, ongoing interaction. The race and class history of lindy hop is part of why the gender dynamics take the form they do, yet my main concern here is the contemporary gender dynamics themselves.

My findings are organized so as to walk the reader through the experience of learning lindy hop as a beginner who must first learn to lead and follow and then, in the process of becoming an intermediate and then an advanced dancer, acquire bodily tools that denaturalize the relationship between gender and power and enable men and women to share power. First, I discuss the introduction of lindy hop to new dancers who learn how to lead and follow in a straightforward way while being prepped ideologically and physically for a disruption of the lead/follow dynamic they are being taught. Second, I discuss how intermediate dancers learn, through disconnection, how to be a leader without being overbearing and how to be a follower without being passive. And, third, I discuss how advanced dancers embody the ability to undermine the lead/follow dynamic altogether, often with an abdication of ultimate control to the music. These three contradictory skills – the ability to lead and follow, to disconnect and negotiate the lead/follow dynamic, and to connect in a way that allows a partnered dance without a leader or

follower at all – do not replace each other, but are all used by advanced dancers. A single dance, then, involves a constant negotiation in which partners move back and forth across all of these strategies. Power, as measured by control over the trajectory of movement, flows across and between the two dancers, constantly negotiated, taken, abdicated and, ultimately, shared.

### **Beginning dancers: Leading, following, and the lindy hop body**

Individuals who start lindy hop classes are often physically awkward and inexperienced, especially given that lindy hop attracts a young group of devotees. Thus, beginner classes start from the beginning, teaching men and women how to lead and follow within the structure of the dance. In these early classes, dancers learn that to lead and to follow is to act or be acted upon. This is an important first skill.

Alongside this early training, however, beginners are also socialized into a feminist-friendly community and discouraged from using their bodies in ways that conform to a gender binary. In this section, I first discuss the way that dancers are ideologically prepped to question the gendered lead/follow dynamic (through performance, language, and the disentangling of sex and role) and then describe how, even at this early stage, dancers are taught to embody a certain degree of androgyny.

#### *A feminist-friendly community*

Competitions are stages on which dancers collectively shape the future of lindy hop by serving as exemplars for the rest of the community. Many beginning and intermediate dancers attend competitions to watch, compete in amateur divisions, and take advantage of the many hours of social dancing offered each day and evening. Further, videos of competitions, like vintage clips, are pored over for years afterwards by dancers all around the world. Thus, performances by high-status lindy hoppers at these events are important measures of and contributors to the state of the lindy hop. In the competitions I attended during my fieldwork, dancers used these high-visibility moments to perform women's empowerment. These performances, and the positive reaction to them, are public displays of a collective commitment to a real (if underdeveloped) feminism.

The most high-profile examples of this trend among lindy hoppers occur in routines choreographed for competitions. For example, in the team division (where teams consist of eight dancers or more) at the American Lindy Hop Championships, a team dramatized their performance, making a statement about relations between men and women. Their song began with a train whistle and the sound of a slowing train. Four women in vintage dress waited in the imaginary train station with their suitcases. Four men in high-waisted pants approached the women and, without asking, reached to help them load their suitcases. Snatching them back, the women theatrically slapped the men's faces as punishment for their insulting chivalry. Then they made nice and danced.

In a similar dramatization, another team began their routine with men offering to teach women how to play baseball. The women proved themselves to be superior players, taught the men some tricks instead, and showed them how to dance as well.

Making a similar statement at the North Atlantic Dance Championships, the flexed female bicep was the symbol of the year. The bicep was flashed to punctuate a particularly difficult move performed by a woman, held up in direct opposition to men, or displayed in symbolic victory over him (twice complete with him on the floor on his back and her foot on his chest). In one routine with a single pair, the lead/follow for an aerial was reversed so that the man was thrown and the woman threw. The lindy hoppers erupted in cheers.

In these cases, the feminist lesson – the rejection of male chivalry, the insistence upon women's independence from men, or the demonstration of women's strength and power – was gratuitous to the actual routine, but met with loud appreciation from the audience of lindy hoppers. The degree of delight that audiences display in response to these performances was second only to their appreciation for reproduction of or references to vintage performances with which the audience was collectively familiar.

In addition to this symbolic support for female independence and strength, lindy hoppers are degendering the lead/follow dynamic. In classes, and in general, the conventional language for referring to roles is not 'men' and 'women' or 'guys' and 'girls' but (the grammatically incorrect) 'leads' and 'follows'. The language is not simply a statement about how lindy hop could be, it reflects how lindy hop is.

While essentially all men learn to lead and all women learn to follow, intermediate and advanced leaders, as illustrated in Figure 1, often also learn to follow and many similarly skilled followers also learn to lead. This teaches even beginner dancers, who are often busy learning one part, about the relationship between gender, leading, and following. For example, dancers take classes to learn the 'opposite part' and so many beginning dancers are in classes in which (because partners are rotated) they will dance with both men and women. On the dance floor, this practice is manifested as 'role switching'. According to my observations, approximately 15 percent of men and a quarter of women would occasionally follow or lead respectively. Beginning dancers, then, in addition to dancing with same sex partners in classes, may do so socially and will certainly be exposed to others switching roles.

This is widely accepted and also contributes to the ideological support for a disentangling of leading with men and following with women. Jack described to me how he liked to dance with one of his favorite dancers. He says:

When I'm dancing with Rebecca, we switch off all the time. I lead, she follows. She leads, I follow. Sometimes she initiates the switch and sometimes I do. Sometimes it looks like she's following, but she's leading, and vice versa.

For Jack and Rebecca, who dance together frequently, one of the best parts of the dance is the ability to switch roles spontaneously.



**Figure 1.** Two women dance together as lead and follow (credit: Dorry Segev).

An appreciation and respect for switching roles is upheld even among dancers who do not (yet) know how to both lead and follow. For example, Richard initially began to learn lindy hop in order to participate in a heterosexualized activity, but came to subordinate that interest to an interest in the dance itself. He explains:

When I first started dancing I thought, 'Wow, what a great way to meet chicks'. But after a while I learned to appreciate the music and now I go out dancing because I enjoy watching the more advanced dancers. There are times I will be watching a guy and say to myself, oh, I wish that I knew how to follow so I can [*sic*] dance with him.

Many students of lindy hop find that, like Richard, their motivations inadvertently become translated into a non-gendered appreciation for what happens on the dance floor.

An incident revolving around the Virginia State Open illustrates the commitment of lindy hoppers to the right to switch roles. The competition was organized by practitioners of a different kind of dance (west coast swing), but featured a lindy hop division. In the official instructions, the organizers stipulated that, in all divisions, the leader *must* be male and the follower *must* be female.

This rule exposed the different logics of west coast swing and lindy hop. For the west coast swing dancers, preserving the *gendered* component of the performance was important enough to formally institutionalize it as a rule. In contrast, as this incident demonstrates, *opposing* the gendered component was important to lindy hoppers. On lindy hop discussion boards and by word of mouth, an outcry emerged over these rules. They called for a boycott. Only three couples, out of an expected 15 to 25, signed up. As Mitch explained: 'Lindy hoppers as a whole aren't ones for those types of definitions. Whereas in the [west coast swing] world, they wouldn't even bat an eye'.

This boycott was *on principle*. It is likely that all of the couples that would have signed up would have been male leader/female follower couples, yet these couples refused to support a competition that codified this norm. Other couples may not have had any qualms about the rules, but did not sign up for the competition for fear of reprisals from other members of the lindy hop community. The incident, then, served as a symbol of the values to which the community adhered, reminding *all* dancers of the collective commitments of the group (whether or not any given individual ascribed).

The discursive commitment to degendering the lead/follow dynamic and an active culture of role switching send a message to new dancers. Even as beginners are struggling to learn one part, they may very well dance with someone of the same sex and would certainly see same sex couples, switched sex couples, or a 'traditional' pair switching back and forth. More so, they are expected to be comfortable both watching and participating in same-sex dancing. Further, the pro-feminist performances and incidents like the boycott make a mark on the collective imagination of lindy hoppers, shaping their identities and preparing them ideologically to take on a lindy hop habitus.

### *Teaching and learning the lindy hop habitus*

Role switching, and its endorsement, is possible in part because there is a press away from strongly gendered bodily comportment. Role switching is easier if one does not need to use their body in an entirely different way to do so. This press towards androgyny, then, is not straightforwardly androcentric (in that it encourages women to be more like men but not vice versa) as the performances discussed above might suggest, but involves bodily lessons for both men and women.

For men, dancing at all is breaking gender rules. But men are also encouraged to shake off both hypermasculinity and fear of femininity. In leading, for example, they are told to refrain from using brute force in favor of weight shifts and they are taught to adopt many feminized body movements, including intricate footwork, spins, body isolation, and extras like shimmies, hip movements, and flairs with their arms.

Women, too, are taught to abandon hyperfeminine performance and there is an even greater effort directed towards defeminizing female dancers (this is likely due to some degree of androcentrism sneaking in, but also about the demands of the dance described below). Lindy hop is directly derived from the Charleston (Malone, 1996). Emerging during the first wave of modern feminism, the Charleston challenged the notion that women must be fragile or immobile and was characterized by angular and awkward movements (all knees and elbows), high-tempo movement, short hair, and boyish fashions.

Lindy hop retains elements of the Charleston and also its liberatory aesthetic. As part of introductory lindy hop classes, instructors teach women to drop many feminine habits such as the pointing of toes and narrow stances. Both female and male lindy hoppers, when they kick, are taught to kick from the hip with flexed feet, as if they were kicking a door open instead of from the knee with a pointed toe flipped forward. Followers are told to dance like they 'just climbed a tree' and move like 'an athlete'. Their stances are widened and their knees are bent in ways that bring their center of balance down to their hips for a posture that facilitates stability during high-velocity movement. Thus, from the very first classes, women are encouraged to embody athleticism, strength, and responsiveness.

Teaching men to avoid bodily aggression and women to eschew fragility may be partly an ideological commitment, but it is also a physical requirement of lindy hop. While lindy hop is danced to a wide range of tempos, at least some of the time it is danced fast and hard. Both leaders and followers, then, are taught to practice a physical connection that is capable of coping with physically demanding high-impact movement. Counterbalance – the practice of sitting weight away from each other in order to create a shared center-of-balance – is required to maintain connection at high speeds. It also, literally, allows dancers to move faster than they could on their own accord. When both leaders and followers put their weight into it, they can use gravitational physics instead of their own energy to accomplish the wild whirling characteristic of fast lindy hop.



**Figure 2.** Leaders and followers jump into the air with knees bent in a choreographed team performance (credit: Brent Keane).

Women who are just learning lindy hop often have insecurities about their body and want to seem 'light'. They are encouraged, instead, to sit (situate and shift) their weight backwards away from the leader. Followers are told that offering him weight is a form of communication. Weight has a direction and a torque; it reveals her stance. Weight tells the leader what, in the next second, is possible. A leader, then, needs to know where she is if he is going to get her somewhere else efficiently and with precision. A good follower gives the leader someone present, significant, and consequential with whom to dance. The leader, in turn, must use his weight to move his follow because brute strength is rarely sufficient in the face of counterbalance and centripetal force.

Another bodily comportment that is taught to beginning dancers involves the upper body connection. The dancers' 'frame' – the connection between the partners' hands, arms, and upper back – must be incredibly strong in order to sustain the sorts of pressures the two dancers exert upon themselves and each other when counterbalanced. Physics bests aesthetics when connection is established in flat, waist-level, straight lines and right angles that are strong in the face of g-forces, as seen in Figure 3, instead of a grasping of hands held at a ballroom-style 45-degree angle at the level of the face or higher that would be ineffectual or cause injury under pressure. Similarly, leaders avoid holding followers by the small of their backs in favor of their upper back and shoulder blades. Pressure on the small of the back forces a feminized arch that brings the follow onto her toes and forward such that she requires support and has limited mobility. In contrast,



**Figure 3.** The connection between lindy hop partners is designed to withstand pressure and torque safely (credit: Laura Malischke Photography).

connection with the upper back creates an even squared-off connection and allows the follower to maintain balance and use her lower body as she likes. Describing the dance in a way that reveals the strength and possibility found in this form of connection, Malone (1996) writes: ‘... the body appears to “hold” the fine line of balance in calm contrast to the headlong rush of the feet’ (p. 101).

It is the physical demands of the dance that require such carefully calibrated use of weight and connection. The athleticism means, also, that most women choose not to wear high heels. Instead, almost all lindy hoppers, as you can see in Figure 2, wear tennis shoes (usually Keds, Adidas, or Vans) that are ‘sueded’ (a strip of leather or suede applied to the bottom of the shoe). The tennis shoes allow dancers to use their bodies in ways that dress shoes (for men) or high heels (for women) simply would not. The flat bottom allows dancers to create connection by sitting their weight backwards, the suede allows them to slip on the floor for slides and spins, and the support allows them to dance fast and energetically. Teresa attests to this when she informs me that she always wears tennis shoes because she and Derrick dance ‘too hard’ and dance shoes just would not ‘hold up’. An easy way to spot a beginning follower is to look for high heels. The lindy hop community breaks this habit very quickly.

In sum, though the rules of leading and following are taught to beginners, both men and women are told that to dance lindy hop well they must be athletic, strong, and physically substantial. Women, especially, are focused on in this regard since they often come to the dance with a feminine habitus that emphasizes grace and fragility instead of power and strength. For this reason, even before they become skilled enough as dancers to manipulate the lead/follow dynamic, they are being taught that good lindy hop diminishes difference between men and women. The presence of role switching (especially the equal opportunity for men and women to do so) and the public display of collective commitment to women’s empowerment further contributes to a degendering of the hierarchy.

These strategies genuinely reflect a rejection of some conventional rules for gender performance, but there is still always a leader and a follower and, therefore, still a hierarchical component to the dance. In this sense, role switching is little more than a ‘regulated liberty’, a practice that, through inversion, serves largely to affirm the structures it references (Chambers, 2005). However, despite the limited transformative power of inversion, when following is no longer conflated with women and leading with men, the fact that a man and a woman are dancing together no longer implies that one is leading and one is following. The de-gendering of the hierarchy, then, is the necessary precondition for the emergence of non-hierarchical partner dance. Below I discuss how my informants are, indeed, destabilizing the hierarchy. They do this in two ways that correspond to skill level. Intermediate dancers use *disconnection* – the suspension of leading by leaders and the ignoring of leads by followers – to create space for individuals to dance as they like. More advanced dancers also use *connection* – the melding of two bodies into one – to create a single dancer that cannot be fragmented into a leader and a follower at all.

## Intermediate dancers: Using disconnection to disrupt the hierarchy

As dancers become more skilled they become concerned with more than simply the mechanics of lindy hop. In particular, dancers become concerned with pleasing their partner or being a 'fun' person with whom to dance. Among intermediate lindy hoppers, this means giving each dancer 'space' or 'enough room' so that their followers can 'play'. This reflects a pejorative discourse amongst lindy hoppers about leaders who are egocentric and use the follower 'like a pole' to hang onto while they show off. Heidi says, critically: 'Don't make it a one-person dance routine'. Being an overbearing leader is a great sin in lindy hop.

The tool given to intermediate dancers to address this sin is *disconnection*. In disconnection, dancers make decisions to suspend leading, temporarily 'steal' the trajectory of the dance, 'suggest' a direction, or 'respond' to their partners' movements, or not. For example, a man may opt out of leading by purposefully offering a period in which he does not. In other words, he will lead his partner into several counts of improvisation during which, though connected, the man and woman are moving their bodies independently. A man may lead the follower into a turn, but leave it up to her which direction she turns, how quickly she turns, and what she does with herself as she comes around. Joy explains: 'He's going to give you something and it's up to you to complete it, but there are lots of different ways to complete it'.

Another way to disconnect is for the follower to disregard an otherwise unambiguous lead. Sarah explains:

The leader can suggest something to the follower. But I pay attention to how strong the lead is. If it's not very strong, I may do something different. I'm still not breaking what he wanted me to do because I sensed how strongly he meant it.

Here Sarah uses the word 'suggest' to redefine the lead/follow relationship when she explains that she evaluates each lead and sometimes does 'something different'. Heidi, who also uses this language, agrees: 'Take the suggestion that the lead gives you. If you don't like it, you can change it once you have it'. Heidi's comment implies, intriguingly, that the lead is not something that is done to the follow, but is given to the follow like a gift. Once she 'has it', it is hers. From there, she can do what she likes. Joy, too, supports this notion when she explains: it's not like 'it [the lead] belongs to him. It doesn't. It's really half-and-half'. These women, like the one in Figure 4, seem to experience the dance as a partnership in which her desires matter as much as his. Thus they feel perfectly justified in picking and choosing which 'suggestions' they will respond to and how they will respond to them.

Many men, too, are full participants in this embodied challenge to the lead/follow hierarchy. Jonathan believes that it is important to accept and respect his partner's contribution. He says: 'Flow with your partner. Whatever they do – adjust'. Will explains, the 'dynamic is a lot more complicated [than] that the lead



**Figure 4.** Lindy hop involves a great deal of give-and-take between the lead and follow (credit: Laura Malischke Photography).

leads and the follow follows'. Marcus comments to me: 'You are a follow but, it's still like a team sport, you know'. Tim describes his strategy: 'I back-follow so she's kind of leading a little bit and I try to make it something that all flows together. She may put in a break where I wasn't expecting one'. When Tim says that he 'back-follows', he is playing on the phrase 'back-lead' which has traditionally meant, in dance language, to follow badly by disrupting the lead/follow dynamic. By suggesting that to 'back-follow' is a good thing, Tim is saying that disrupting the lead/follow dynamic is not in itself a problem. In fact, to 'back-follow' is to deliberately give up the lead to the follower.

Why would leaders give up control? My male informants explain that they enjoy a follower who 'lead[s] a little bit' because it is more interesting. Unexpected things can happen when the leader and follower are dancing as a 'team'. Tim prefers a dance in which the follower is an active participant that shapes the movement. 'It's nice', he says, 'when both people are contributing'. Perfect control, because it would amount to perfect predictability, is undesirable.

This disruption of the lead/follow relationship is not simply asserted by some dancers and embodied on the dance floor. It is also taught in classes and is, thus, formally institutionalized. For example, Tim and Joy teach a class designed to socialize dancers into this egalitarian ethic. In this intermediate class, called 'Hi-Jacking the Lead', they explain that women should have the right to interrupt the system of leading and following in order to make personal choices as to how to dance. They give followers permission to make the dance a conversation instead of

a monologue and they explain to leaders that they are mistaken if they think that they get to do all the talking. The leaders' task in the lesson, then, is to become sensitive to the followers 'hi-jack', learn how to adjust to and appreciate what their follower has to offer, and encourage becoming comfortable with the loss of control.

In sum, intermediate leaders, who have gained a level of skill that allows them to perform the mechanics somewhat automatically, are taught to concentrate on dancing with a *partner* instead of with a follower. Importantly, when women's bodies interpret leads as 'suggestions' instead of instructions, the men and women here do not identify the women's behavior as not following, but instead redefine what a good follower does. Being a good partner to a leader means carefully judging 'how strongly he meant it' and measuring that up against how strongly she wants to do something else. So the partners are negotiating sometimes contradictory desires, but not in a way that necessarily creates conflict. Instead, the fact that the dance involves two independent visions makes it more exciting for everyone.

### **Advanced dancers: Using connection to destabilize the hierarchy**

In a strategy in direct opposition to disconnection, advanced dancers also learn to use *connection* to destabilize the lead/follow hierarchy. This occurs only at very high skill levels and marks a real shift towards cooperation. In this instance, destabilizing the hierarchy relies on the intense physicality of lindy hop to connect the dancers' bodies such that they share control over the trajectory of the dance. We see a hint of this in Figure 5.

At the highest skill levels of lindy hop, especially at very fast tempos, it is not possible to 'cue' a follower; that is, for the leader to move his body in such a way that the follower can identify what he wants her to do and then do it. Instead, the constant refrain from instructors to leaders is to 'lead with your body'. Leading with the body means to think of the follower as connected to the leader's whole body, not just his hands or arms. If the partners are connected with counterbalance and a solid frame, when he moves (or leads with) his body, her body moves too. The lead is not *communicated* to her so much as it is *done* to her. Thus far this sounds like the traditional lead/follow dynamic. However, by connecting his body to hers, a leader's body is also, inevitably, subject to influence. Once connected in such a way, all of *her* bodily movements will have an impact on *him* as well.

Once the partners *become one body* there is no leader and no follower, just one very complicated, cooperative dancing machine. Consider, for example, what Joy says as she tries to explain this new ethic of partner dance:

Someone's got to initiate, but it's not that one person is leading and one person is following. Both are leading and following. I don't even like those words. I use initiating and following through. Both leads and follows do both...



**Figure 5.** Once dancers' bodies are connected to each other, the lead/follow dynamic begins to break down (credit: Laura Malischke Photography).

Like Sarah and Heidi did with the word 'suggest', here Joy changes the language to reflect a different dynamic altogether, one that is both degendered and non-hierarchical. She replaces the words 'leading' and 'following' with 'initiating' and 'following through'. Whereas the words 'leading' and 'following' layer onto two distinct roles, 'initiating' and 'following through' specify two actions available to both partners. With the latter language, Joy is trying to explain how a dancing partnership can transcend the lead/follow dynamic.<sup>3</sup> Having two bodies 'initiating' does not disrupt the dancers' ability to complete their task. The connection between the two partners means that every 'initiation' is simultaneously a 'follow-through' in that your initiation is shaped by what your body is reacting to. Since everything each does has a direct and physical effect on their combined balance and motion, both partners have the opportunity to shape the trajectory. This may sound potentially frustrating and uncomfortable, but the dancing couple can rely on all four legs to support the movement. The dancing pair is far more flexible and responsive than a two-legged person could be and, so, can comfortably accommodate two independent visions.

This accommodation is facilitated by music. Advanced dancers are familiar with jazz patterns and have often heard any given song (many times) before. The song, then, can emerge as a primary force behind the trajectory and specifics of any given dance. The most straightforward example of this is tempo. Leaders do not get to decide at what tempo they want to dance. They defer to the music. Correspondingly, the follower does not get her cue for what beat to follow from her leader, she gets it directly from the music. This is true for many other elements of any given song (e.g. whether the song calls for the embodiment of sadness, soulfulness, silliness, or sexiness) and musical changes over the course of one song (e.g. breaks, the rise and fall of energy, moments of transition, and things like drum solos). Like tempo, all of these things are dictated by the music and a highly skilled dancer will respond to them. When two excellent dancers are dancing together, the fact that both partners are reacting to the same sounds adds just enough predictability to allow for complex cooperation in the absence of a rigid lead/follow dynamic.

In fact, in my conversations men often abdicated the lead not to women but to the music. It is not uncommon for men to say that the music is the 'true' or 'real' leader or to refer to the 'triangle of swing dance': two dancers and the music. Tim explains:

Ideally, not all leads and follows react the same way to music because they're two different people. Watch a movie together and there are different opinions. Dance explores these same kinds of differences. When I dance with Joy, I try to listen to her [with my body] and I think, 'Oh, I've never heard that song that way before'.

Heidi, for example, says: 'My idea is to just let the dance flow and get lost in the music'. In this instance, her partner, far from dominating her, is actually left out of her description of what she is doing on the dance floor. Joy, in contrast, explains

that, in addition to listening to the music herself, she tries to listen to her leader listening to the music. She says: 'The best dance is when you just listen to the music through your partner and have your partner do the same'.

These comments help us better understand what leaders mean when they say that it is more 'fun' when followers make a contribution to the dance. Both leaders and followers want to *feel* what the other *hears*. Followers who *only* follow allow leaders to build a dance to a song based on their own independent vision (or perhaps the better metaphor is audition). But this, ultimately, is not very interesting, so leaders happily trade control for spontaneity and unpredictability. For my informants, then, the music and the dancers are more than the sum of their parts, they are the embodiment of a unique conflation of individualities: the musicians, the dancers, and the moment.

The power of lindy hop, as these dancers embody it, to challenge conventional gender rules lies in the fact that more equal, negotiated relationships between men and women are not only allowed, they are conflated with what it means to be a great dancer. Ascendance in the hierarchy of this community means abandoning the old gender regime in favor of the new. Here, then, is an art form that is not only against feminine subordination ideologically and bodily, but one that punishes the habits of female passivity and masculine domination. In this sense, the degree of pressure to embrace gender sameness and equality is able to compete on more equal terms with other pressures to embrace gender differentiation and hierarchy.

In sum, at the highest levels of skill, these dancers are actively experimenting with a non-hierarchical partner dance. Notably, this requires and receives the cooperation of men as well as women. For both, lindy hop is not a zero sum game in which one partner's gain is the other's loss. Instead, sharing the lead offers an element of surprise that makes the dance interesting. Music adds a degree of predictability to each other's choices because they can count on those choices being informed by the music that they both hear and often both know well. This bodily conversation between dancers about the music is a dramatically different articulation of partner dance than we have heard from other dance scholars (Picart, 2002; Polhemus, 1993; Walsh, 1993; but see Savigliano, 1995) and, also, very different than the lessons about leading and following that are offered in beginner lindy hop classes and taught to intermediate dancers.

## Body first

I have described a community of dancers who reject a hierarchical gendered binary in which men act and women are acted upon. Instead, both men and women learn a de-differentiated bodily aesthetic and practice or accommodate role switching. More than simply a 'regulated liberty', the lead/follow dynamic itself is also broken down so as to begin to strip hierarchy from the dance as well. We see, and dancers feel, a bodily breaking of the gender binary. The woman learns to be 'heavier' and the man to be 'lighter' until gendered power, if only for one fleeting instant, disappears. And, though the instant may be fleeting, it is not forever gone.

It is a learned and habitualized mode of embodiment that, with the cooperation of another dancer, is well within their corporeal capacities to bring alive again and again.

That dancers bring to each dance the ability to embody control, submission, and cooperation undermines the embodiment of feminine subordination and masculine domination by teaching dancers that power is something over which they negotiate. For these lindy hoppers, every dance is no less than a series of decisions about whether to do domination, subordination, or cooperation. The bodily relationship between two dancers is *always* under negotiation. Partners share the burden of directing their trajectory, can choose to direct the movement for a particular effect (with the other's cooperation), can allow the other to control the dance, or suggest an interpretation of the music that the other can choose to copy, enhance, or interrupt, and so on. Autonomy, cooperation, and control can vary significantly across the three minutes and move from partner to partner and back again. The character of each dance builds organically according to the contribution of each partner and is unpredictable and emergent.

The result is a feminist model of male/female relations that is, though theoretically naïve when performed (e.g. in competitions), quite sophisticated at the level of the body. The fact that the embodiment of gender equality was so much more developed than its articulation suggests that consciousness raising at the level of cognition may not necessarily always be 'ahead' of changes in the body collective. That is, targeting of the body is often understood to follow from cognitive consciousness raising, but it may be possible for the modes of liberation to alternate or, even, to target the body first and let the mind follow.

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