

When Boys Dance: Moving Masculinities and Cultural Resistance in Dance Training and Education

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For today's presentation I will summarize and extend the chapter I contributed to Sherry Shapiro's book, *Dance in a World of Change* (Shapiro 2008) and I will update the piece with new data and findings from my current national study of boys and young adult males in pre-professional dance training in the United States. *When Boys Dance* (Risner 2008), Chapter Five of the Shapiro anthology, explores dance education and training experiences of young males—looking specifically at how boys' dancing is both a form of cultural resistance and also an important means for males to share a more common humanity through movement and expression. A society's dominant ideas about gender and masculinity play large roles in shaping boys' lives in dance.

Although research in 2007, at the time the chapter was written, indicated that 50 percent of male dancers in the United States were non-heterosexual (Bailey and Oberschneider 1997; Hamilton 1998, 1999), the dance community, until recently, had been relatively silent on the subject of gay males in dance. The chapter documents previous research on male youth in dance, though limited, that indicate prevailing social stigma, narrow definitions of masculinity, heterosexist explanations for males in dance, and internalized homophobia in the field itself. I argued that the *experiences* of dancing males provide an important vehicle for challenging dominant notions about gender, privilege, masculinity, sexual orientation, and the male body.

A brief summary of the chapter will bring us to my current study: While dance in many cultures has and continues to be viewed as an appropriate male activity, the Western European cultural paradigm situates dance as primarily a female art form, and has done so since the 18th century (Hasbrook 1993). Researchers in dance education have gleaned considerable energy from the area of social foundations in education, especially in the realm of 'schooling' and its effect on gender identity. Gender and its social construction play significant roles in students' participation in and attitudes toward dance study.¹ Beginning dance training as early as three years of age, girls, unlike boys, often grow up with dance as a taken-for-granted activity of childhood.

The crux of the chapter then, revolves around the key notion that studying gender and dance means understanding "the 'feminization' of theatrical dance in the west" (Thomas 1996, 507). Because dance is viewed as a feminine activity, all males who dance (whether gay or straight) are always in danger of being classified as effeminate, girly, not 'real men.' Approaches for confronting gender bias and inequity in dance teaching and curricula have been identified.² Central to most of these strategies has been a concerted effort to make gender a conscious variable in all aspects of dance education (Ferdun 1994) and the affirmation of individual differences in gender and culture (Bond 1994; Kerr-Berry 1994).

In order to cultivate larger male participation in dance, normalizing strategies over the past five decades have overly emphasized 1) noteworthy heterosexual male dancers (Hanna 1988); 2) masculinist comparisons between sport and dance (Crawford 1994); and 3) have minimized the significant number of male dancers who are non-heterosexual (Risner 2002b,

2003; Spurgeon 1999). However, and despite these efforts, participation in Western European theatrical dance remains a culturally suspect endeavor for male adolescents and young adult males (Gard 2003b; Leihikoinen 2005; Risner 2002a; Sanderson 2001; Stinson 2001). Even with the best of intentions, these attempts to encourage young boys and men to pursue dance frequently reproduce narrow, derogatory stereotypes of non-heterosexual male dancers (Bond 1994; Crawford 1994).

In previous work and in this chapter, I have criticized these kinds of hegemonic (unquestioned/unexamined) approaches (Risner 2002a, 2002b) and have advocated, with others (Crawford 1994; Gard 2001, 2003b), for more rigorous questioning and better understanding of homophobic prejudice, dominant notions of masculinity, and societal stigma directed toward boys and male youth in dance. Although postmodern feminist theory has greatly expanded our understanding of multiple and diverse femininities or ways of being female, contemporary masculinity has become more narrow, as Michael Pollack describes, like a “gender straightjacket” for boys and men (Pollack 1999, 6). We need only think of the very short-lived ‘metro-sexual’ image for males in the U.S. to see the constricting power of the ‘gender straightjacket.’ Most importantly, I have advocated that dance researchers conduct meaningful and relevant research about the experiences of boys and young males *currently* in dance training and education (Risner 2007, 2009a, 2009b). Although literature has been limited, the majority of studies have focused on professional male dancers and renowned choreographers in the field.

Therefore, let me turn to my national study in the U.S. that addresses current male experience in Western theatrical dance training and what the empirical findings of the study tell us about boys’ meaning and motivation in dance, as well as the ways in which their dancing challenges gender stereotypes and enlarges ideas about what it means to be male. The purpose of this national study, the largest of its kind in the U.S. to date, was to better understand the experiences of male adolescents and young adult males pursuing dance study at the pre-professional level. As an under-represented population in Western concert dance training, boys’ experiences were investigated in terms of entry, access, retention and progression in the field, as well as through wider social lenses of gender, masculinity, and homophobia. Male privilege presents another set of unique social challenges to deconstruct: when boys are privileged as male, but marginalized by homophobic stereotypes or non-heterosexual identity.

Admittedly, there are obvious social and cultural limitations to this study; my focus on Western concert dance omits a wide range of dance forms and contexts, including ethnic and social forms, creative dance, folkloric, ballroom, recreational dance, hip hop styles, as well as club, party, and exotic dancing. Without denying the significance of these forms or the male involvement they garner, I purposely focus on Western concert dance because of its numerous conflicts with dominant Western masculinity.

Procedures for this two-phase, three-year study included an extensive online survey, interviews, focus groups and field observations of 75 male participants (ages 13- 22) actively pursuing pre-professional dance study across the United States. Participants were recruited from dance academies, conservatories, private studios, performing arts high schools, and university programs. A comparable group of female dance students (ages 13 to 22) engaged in pre-professional dance training was also constituted for comparative analysis where applicable.

Findings from the first phase of the study indicate that males in dance, especially adolescent boys, continue to experience social isolation and stigma. Parental and family support emerges as pivotal to the entry, retention and progression of boys and young adult males in pre-professional dance preparation, while performing, self-expression, and dance-as-a-creative-outlet are seen as critical for boys' personal satisfaction and continuance in dance study. The full findings of the first phase of the study are published in my book, *Stigma and Perseverance in the Lives of Boys Who Dance: An Empirical Study of Male Identities in Western Theatrical Dance Training*, currently in press (Risner 2009b).

This project will turn to a longitudinal, case-study format in its second phase, following closely the lives of eight participants over a three-year period. The format allows closer investigation of gender in relation to race/ethnicity and socio-economic status. The findings will be published by Cambria Press in 2012, tentatively titled, *Dancing Boys' Stories: Case Studies of Moving, Motivation and Meaning*.

Let me spend the remainder of this time sharing two critical findings from the research data at opposite ends of the spectrum: first, the stigma boys' dancing garners and second, the perseverance males evidence in order to continue dancing.

Stigma

The stigma associated with boys in Western concert dance is longstanding and generally linked to dominant attitudes about dance and gender. More specifically, stigma is tied to males who dance, stereotyping them as effeminate, homosexual, and not *real* men. In order to better understand this phenomenon, as well as the social isolation that often accompanies it, the survey included a number of questions related to boys' social experiences as male dancers.

Participants were asked to complete the sentence, "I think more boys would study dance if..." choosing from a number of different answers based on previous research findings on males in dance. With instructions to select all applicable choices, responses included: if boys weren't teased and harassed so much about dancing (85%); if parents were more supportive and encouraging (72%); if boys knew more male friends who dance (68%); if there were more male role models (58%); if there were more male dance teachers (40%). Only 8% indicated that more boys would study dance "if teachers made dance more like sports."

Based on a similar methodology, participants were then asked to complete the sentence, "I think that some boys stop studying dance because..." The most cited responses were: because boys were tired of teasing and harassment as a male dancer (80%); because some people thought they were gay because they studied dance (76%); and, because their parents were not supportive (61%).

Stigma as an experienced phenomenon was addressed directly in the survey question statement, "As a male who studies dance, I have experienced..." With four possible responses listed and instructions to select "all that apply," 96% said teasing and name calling; 70% reported verbal and/or physical harassment; 33% experienced verbal threats or threatening behavior; and 15% reported physical harm or injury.

To summarize data on stigma and social isolation, findings indicate that most males in dance study experience a predominantly female environment with few male peers; encounter a social environment of teasing, and verbal and physical harassment based on their status as males in dance; report insufficient support and affirmation for their dancing from parents and

male family members; and, that their sexual orientation is questioned and repeatedly surveilled.

Meaning and Perseverance

At the other end of the spectrum, my research team and I were interested in learning more about how participants view *themselves*—what motivates them and what meaning dance brings to their lives in the context of the stigma and isolation they experience. When asked to complete the sentence “I think of myself as...,” 32% identified themselves as a ballet dancer; 29% as a dancer; 21% as a modern dancer; 11% as a jazz dancer; 4% as a tap dancer; and 4% as someone studying to be a dancer. More specifically, adolescent (13 to 17-year olds) data indicates a leaning toward identifying as a ballet dancer (at 51%), with being a modern dancer registering significantly lower (21%). Male adolescents may identify themselves as ballet dancers due in part to the popular notion that serious dance study in the U.S. is often training in ballet technique and performance. Identifying as a ballet dancer may also reflect the kind of professional training available for adolescents in general. For young boys studying in the pre-professional ballet environment, seeing themselves as anything other than a ballet dancer may be difficult.

Data gathered on identity, in terms of sexual orientation, corroborate previous findings from previous studies. For 16 to 22-year-olds (13 to 15-year-olds were not included in this portion of the survey), 45% self identified as gay, 39% self identified as heterosexual, 13% self identified as bisexual, and 3% chose to pass on the survey question.

To understand what motivates young males to pursue and continue serious dance study, the survey asked participants to complete the sentence, “I dance because...” by selecting all appropriate answers that apply. The vast majority of participants said: I like to perform (95%); I like to move and the physical challenge (79%); dancing is one place that allows me to be myself (76%); and it’s a creative outlet for me (74%). The least selected answer was because “it’s a lot like sports” at 4%.

In comparison, survey data from the female comparative group indicate that girls and young women’s motivation for dance study are prioritized by the following five highest responses: Dancing is the one place that allows me to be myself (87%); I like to perform (77%); It’s a creative outlet for me (69%); I like to move and the physical challenge (39%); and I’ve danced all my life (25%).

Although female respondents were somewhat more conservative in the number of choices they indicated than the males, the overall data appear to indicate striking similarities between males and females in their motivation to study dance—motivations that are closely tied to self-expression, performance and creativity. The similarities between males and females in motivation run counter to previous discourses over the past 50 years that have positioned male participation and recruitment in traditionally masculine ways—explaining and then encouraging male participation in dance by drawing close parallels between sports and dance, often emphasizing competitive athleticism and analogies between sport activity and dance, while *concealing* boys’ motivation for self-discovery and meaning in expressive artistry.

However, there are gender dissimilarities in the desire for moving and physicality made possible in dance. Males reported “I like to move and the physical challenge” at twice the rate of the female group. At the same time, boys in the study also articulated that dance is

not a sport, although some did discuss how dancing and dance training require far more skills and expertise than sports activity. These boys, on the other hand, proudly see themselves as dance artists. While “dance as sports” discourses may be effective in the general population, these strategies in the pre-professional realm appear to be unfounded and may be detrimental for young males’ sense of identity and self concept as dance artists. While boys indicated the importance of physical challenge and their desire “to move,” reducing this kind of satisfaction solely to sport activity reinforces and reproduces narrow masculinist stereotypes. As one of the participants in this study stated, “Dance is nothing like sports, and male dancers know it.” Like their female counterparts, male students are also interested in the creative and artistic aspects of the field.

One final comparison from the data is also very important. When asked to describe their overall satisfaction with the amount of care and support they receive for dancing, 58% of males reported “Very satisfied” or “Satisfied”; 19% indicated they are “Somewhat satisfied,” while nearly one in four males reported they were “Dissatisfied” or “Very dissatisfied” (23%) with the support their dancing garners. Comparative data found females’ overall support higher than males, with 72% reporting they were “Very satisfied” or “Satisfied”. Overall dissatisfaction for females (“Dissatisfied or “Very Dissatisfied”) was significantly lower (3%) than their male peers.

In sum, male adolescents rely heavily on support from their best friends in dance and best friends in school, with additional affirmation from their mothers and favorite dance teachers/directors. In contrast, female peers receive most of their support from the family core (mothers and fathers). As a stigmatized and isolated group, males are eight times more likely than females to report their social support dissatisfaction.

In closing, these findings challenge traditional “boys will be boys” reductive discourses, which reproduce and over-valorize a single way of being a ‘boy.’ This research indicates an important shift in male adolescents’ beliefs regarding masculinity and dance, although they still find themselves limited by social and cultural limitations imposed by family members, male peers, and dance teachers and directors.

Teachers are encouraged to use this information regarding boys’ overall desires. Rather than focusing solely on narrow definitions of “physical challenge,” like jumping higher, turning more, and taking up more space, males are also interested in moving with greater expression and self-discovery in the rehearsal studio and on the concert stage. As teachers and directors, we may need to investigate our own gendered teaching and language, and look carefully at whether or not our pedagogies encourage or discourage expressive and physical male dancing in our studios and programs. Greater awareness of the “hidden curriculum” in our own teaching and choreographies reveals that we *are* teaching gender, as well as dance and gendered ideas about movement. I hope you will read the entire study and its recommendations for more humanizing and equitable dance training and education for all girls and boys.

Notes

1. Social construction of gender in dance education is explored chronologically in the following works: Stinson, Blumenfeld-Jones, and Van Dyke 1990; Flintoff 1991; Van Dyke 1992; Cushway 1996; Sanderson 1996, 2001; Stinson 1998a, 1998b, 2001; Gard 2001, 2003a; Green 2001, 2002-03, 2004.

2. Approaches for confronting gender bias and inequity in dance teaching and curriculum are articulated by Arkin 1994; Bond 1994; Clark 2004; Crawford 1994; Daly 1994; Dils 2004; Ferdun 1994; Kerr-Berry 1994; Risner 2003b; Stinson 2005.

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