

Contemporary American Folk Theories of Dancing—Part 4

Sam Gill

Dancing as a social activity is one of the most popular, yet unacknowledged, forms of dancing that is done in America today. I teach and dance salsa of various forms. In the Boulder/Denver area there is rarely a night when there isn't a venue that offers salsa dancing and often to live music played by one of a number of salsa bands in the area. I have had periods when I'd go dancing nearly every night of the week. I know that this addiction is common particularly among those who have just begun to dance salsa. Many of the venues are large and most are often crowded. A good many of the students I teach are eager to learn salsa so that they can enter the salsa social dance scene. The dance is done not simply by Latin American people, but by all ethnicities and ages. Here is a group dancing rueda socially. You'll notice that the moves are called and there is a very relaxed social atmosphere.

For many years I have taught salsa, particularly in the form known as *rueda de casino*, to local high school students. While it is a social dance it can be developed for performance as you will see in this video of a group of high school women whom I coached and went to international competition.

Many single adults find social dancing a more bodied and personal way of meeting potential partners than online dating sites. One venue in Boulder commonly draws over a hundred dancers to their "beginner salsa lesson" which features a huge circle with partner rotation about every 60 seconds. I see this as a form of power dating. Salsa is but one of many social dance forms—tango, swing, country, contra—that have similar popularity and interest even in this local area. Ballroom dancing often fills a similar social function as do a wide variety of "folk" dancing groups, where, interestingly, the dancers all tend to share Eastern European cultural roots. Add to these dances the rise in popularity of hip hop, breakin', reggaeton, and Sufi dancing all with dedicated venues and regular events. Then there is a large group of dances that are done largely for social purposes yet are confined primarily to class and instructional venues such as contact improvisation, tap, and many ethnically associated dances like hula, Bollywood dancing, African dancing, Middle Eastern dancing, and on and on. Dancing clearly is one of the most popular forms of participatory bodily active social forms. Unlike sports, which are also highly social, dancing perhaps embraces a broader diversity of gender, age, ability, and experience and does so in a non-competitive environment.

Dancing for Exercise and Fitness

Hip hop dancing and breakin' entered Boulder in the early '90s through health clubs taught in classes with such names as "cardio funk" and "street dance." Mostly white participants many who would not be interested in an activity that was actually called "dance" flocked to these classes to move to the groove of popular music. The dress was spandex and thong leotards with head sweatbands. Short segments of energetic dance routines were taught. We certainly weren't aware at the time, but the style of movement was drawn from hip hop developed in the ghettos of NYC most commonly by African American males and Latinos. In Boulder it was more a young white women's dance and none of them

knew anything about the roots of the dance form. Jazzercise was taught at that time and celebrity exercise gurus like Richard Simmons were teaching dance-based exercise programs to a largely television based audience. Interestingly Jazzercise continues today.

Now there are a wide variety of exercise and fitness dance programs offered almost exclusively in fitness clubs. Zumba is currently the most popular. It is comprised of rather simple add-on dance routines choreographed to select pieces of music selected and choreographed to provide similarity among Zumba classes wherever they are taught. It was originally described as Latin-based movement and music, but currently it covers a wide variety of music and movement styles. Interestingly dance fitness is an almost exclusively female activity. I'll have much more to say about this later, because it certainly reflects cultural values about gender and dancing. I regularly attend Zumba classes and it is a rare occasion when another male is present. I find it quite an interesting experience because the Zumba choreographers clearly lean toward movement styles that are more common to women. As a man it is an interesting and sometimes challenging gender experience both to dance as the sole representative of your gender among a large group of women and to do styles of movement more common to women. Here is a video of a segment of zumba.

Social dance forms also offer fitness and health benefits. I've known a number of salsa dancers who have lost significant weight and gained in cardiovascular fitness levels through salsa dancing.

Dancing as healing

One often hears the expression that dancing is healing and it has been incorporated in somatic psychology as a form of therapy. It is possible to get degrees and certifications in dance therapy. I often think that the term "movement therapy" might be more appropriate, because the movement is often designed to emphasize cross-lateral movement and other balancing movements.

Dancing as spiritual

I have often found the identity of dancing as spiritual rather interesting since this term spiritual so commonly associated with non-materiality is used to describe the character of an action so thoroughly bodied, so material. What is perhaps the sense and intent of this understanding of dancing is that there is a transcendent quality commonly experienced in dancing. Dancing simply takes us out of and beyond ourselves. I'll be concerned with how we might more fully understand and appreciate this transcendence in sections later in the course. When we understand that the term "spiritual" is often used to refer to an individual and personal understanding of the world, reality, and human life in the largest frame, often opposed to the more doctrinal and explicitly organized sense of traditional religions, to see dancing as spiritual then aligns nicely with dancing as self-expression. This is quite different from "liturgical dancing."

Conclusions about Folk Theories of Dancing

Dancing plays many and varied roles in contemporary American culture involving millions either in participation or in spectator observation. There are other interesting and, in some sense disturbing, things to be said about American understandings of dancing. Among all of these forms of dancing "ballet" and "modern" hold a place far above all others in terms of the acknowledgement of their

importance and, it is well known, that even these dance forms appeal to a tiny cultural elite and persistently struggle to survive. Ballet is considered “the dance” and it is frequently argued that ballet is the foundation for all forms of dancing. I don’t contest this claim in any major way; however, having taught and been involved in thousands of hours of dancing including dozens of dance forms from around the world, I know that dancers trained in ballet find forms like African quite alien. I used to teach a course to 90 students involving studios in which dance forms from around the world were taught by dancers from those cultures. I always used to find it so interesting during certain African dances that focused strongly on flat foot on the floor and a squat and bend at the waist I could simply look across the room and identify the individuals with ballet training because they found it almost impossible to allow their bodies to be in this “get down” position. Ballet dancers often do poorly on non-ballet dance forms in settings like “So You Think You Can Dance.” Also associated with the art and high culture forms of dancing is a sense of exclusivity. In these segments of dance culture the term “the dance world” means something entirely different from “world dance” a term to designate the encompassing of all dance forms throughout the world and history.

Build into the very terminology that allows us to indicate a taxonomy of dance forms is an unrecognized valuation. We are used to terms like “ethnic dance,” “primitive dance,” “folk dance,” and “social dance” and clearly all of these align below “the dance.” Clearly even these simple and ubiquitous terms carry a major sense of evaluation that has a rather clear hierarchy.

There is a very strong gender identity in modern America with dancing and dancers. I have mentioned this with respect to dance fitness programs and my own personal experience with a former colleague. It is commonly perceived that “white men don’t dance” and that dancing men are “gay.” The film and Broadway musical “Billy Elliot” (in which Elton John was involved) deals with this issue. Here is a video clip of the Swan Lake scene of the stage show.

Among most of the dance forms that are widely practiced females are the primary dancers in most genres. Even the clear exception, breakin’, once exclusively male has in recent years moved much more towards a balance between genders. The dance troupe that my granddaughter is part of has 50 girls from age 6 to 16 and no boys. At a recent competition I attended where similar groups were present there were no more than half a dozen boys dancing among literally hundreds of girls. It is widely perceived, as I’ll discuss in more detail later that dancing is of little value to human, social, cultural, intellectual, or personal development. At this point it is essential to understand that such attitudes are, when placed among understandings of dancing found throughout history in cultures around the world. Northern hemisphere western largely Christian influenced cultures have distinctive views of dancing that are quite different from those in the rest of the world. We will next turn to the consideration of the place of dancing in European and American Christian traditions and in western public and higher education.