

I'd rather Throw like a Girl than Dance like a Guy

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In 1990 Iris Marion Young published a provocative piece titled “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality” that continues to attract interesting discussion. At issue is coming to terms with why girls tend to throw objects in a style different from boys. The potential to go either way wrong or into insensitive territory here is fairly high. The essentialist argument about gender and gendered attributes—that is, that girls are just made to throw in an “awkward inefficient” style, while boys are essential strong efficient throwers (to state the position rather baldly, for effect, but in the very language still so commonly used)—is one few would dare state these days, yet I think it rather clear that a fair portion of the general population would continue to believe this. And, despite Young’s express intent to dismiss the essentialist position, I believe that she believed this as well while justifying it by proposing that it is the result of the situation of girls being raised in a male-dominated patriarchal society. I’m rather astounded that Young framed her entire consideration by privileging the type/style of motility associated with males as the standard without analysis or criticism, even limiting the kinds of movement she considers to those in the movement category that might be labeled “throwing like a boy”.

While Young went strongly in the direction of situational explanation, kinesiologists have resorted to body mechanics (bone length and muscle strength) which is fairly safe grounds given that since Title IX girls have had by law opportunity in sports equal to boys, yet girls’ activities are rarely merged with boys’. The Olympics continues to honor gender (if it can be determined) as a major categorical factor. There are other avenues of discussion as well.

My developing perspective comes from somewhat different interests. I’ve been fascinated that in dancing and in demanding self-movement whole bodied activities girls/women are, on average, far more adept than guys. I’m surprised and concerned that the bulk of the studies done on this “throwing like a girl” issue fail to evaluate movement style in the context of its relevance and importance to contemporary culture. Also yet to be done is to consider this issue in light of the recent alarming information about the massive and quite sudden shift in gender positions throughout the world.

Some personal context. I have taught salsa dancing for years. In the thousands of people I have taught, the girls/women far out-perform the guys in ability to move to rhythm, in the complexity of their awareness and control of their many body parts, in their ability to use body parts simultaneously to do different things (like moving their feet one way while moving their arms another), in creating a sensitive responsive connection with their partners, and so on. I also teach a form of salsa called *rueda de casino*. This form is done with partners but has called moves. One dancer “calls” a move by name (usually in Spanish) and the dancers must immediately and simultaneously perform the move. It may be a complex sequence spanning anywhere from one 8-count to ten or more 8-counts. Again, on the whole women are far more adept at this than are the guys. I also regularly take a high level step aerobics class. Similar

to *rueda* in having called moves and complex ambidextrous movement to music, but done as an individual with a piece of equipment used to step on and off or over, in that it has rapidly called moves that require complicated sequences of movement (less upper body than *rueda*) that may also demand differing orientations to the room and to the “step.” In my experience it is the rare occasion when a guy even shows up for these classes and among the occasional guy to show up most don’t last through the first class. I even notice that fitness classes that focus on building strength are popular for women and it is rare for men to try them. These classes involve fast-paced movement and the coordination of movement to music. When men do come, they often seem to move with little concern for the beat in the music.

Now let’s look at a step aerobics class video that I showed before. What you should focus on is that there is only one man in the frame. He’s third to the left of the instructor. Just watch how much difficulty he has staying on the beat and doing the movements precisely and with any sort of body confidence. Still you have to give it to him ... he’s there!

Staying on a personal note for context, being confident that this is not simply personal to me or local to where I live, my 8-year old granddaughter recently auditioned successfully for a dance troupe. The troupe is comprised of nearly 50 girls from ages 5 to 18. No boys. I encounter hundreds of women who bemoan the fact that their male partners simply won’t/can’t dance.

Now, of course, there is no question that guys can dance well and guys can do step aerobics well. We’re all use to this caveat shtick. Many of the teachers are guys and I think I’m pretty good at both of these movement forms myself. I’m not trying to suggest any essentialist statement such as “guys can’t dance,” yet these observations raise an important alternative issue and it is interesting to ask why Young’s essay, and the entire issue wasn’t framed using the standard “dancing like a guy”? I’m just asking why guys tend toward some movement forms and girls others. But more importantly I am interested in which movement forms are actually best for us as human beings of either gender in this day and age and for human beings through their entire life cycle. In reading across some of the literature on these issues, I believe there remains a general bias against anyone that cannot perform some physical activity that involves the overhand hurling a small object at enormous speed and force accurately at a target. In Young’s terms:

I concentrate primarily on those sorts of bodily activities that relate to the comportment or orientation of the body as a whole, that entail gross movement, and that require the enlistment of strength and confrontation of the body’s capacities and possibilities with the resistance and malleability of things. The kind of movement I am primarily concerned with is movement in which the body aims to accomplish a definite purpose or task. ... Another aspect of bodily existence, among others, that I leave unconsidered is structured body movement that does not have a particular aim—for example, dancing. (30)

Interesting that Young considers hurling a round object has aim, whereas engaging a great many of one’s various body parts in artful movement does not. The movement indicated by the phrase “throwing like a girl,” invariably recognizes that there is a preferred style of throwing, that is, “like a

boy,” and any other throwing style is inefficient, untrained, awkward, and endless others perhaps appropriately summed by Young herself as “women in sexist society are physically handicapped.” (42)

An interesting defense of the possibility that a girl might throw well, in boy measures, is the softball pitcher Jennie Finch. Here is an interesting video of her demonstrating her abilities. What fascinates me about this example is that Jennie is measured and evaluated in terms of her ability to hurl a small object with speed and accuracy. She, of course, being a girl, hurls a softball and uses a girl style of underhand throwing, but the main point is that she can generate object speeds and force on a par with the best of the boys. The point here is how well Jennie can “throw like a boy” and there appears to be no awareness that this privileges a gender identified cultural gestural pattern and that alternatives values might even be possible. I cannot imagine any videos to demonstrate that boys can “dance like a girl.”

The point I am reflecting on here is that the unquestioned and unexamined standard that even gives rise to the phrase “throwing like a girl” come from the presumed superiority of not only boy-style throwing, but boy-style everything else. For boys and girls to be equal is for girls to become like boys, certainly not boys become like girls, nor boys and girls both change to expand their styles of movement to include something of the movement styles typified to the opposite gender. That the boy-style remains standard one need only look at a bit of the literature continuing to deal with the issues. Australian Greg Downey recently (2009) attempted to take the matter to neuroscience and ask questions about girls’ brains as part of the explanation. Let me quote just a single passage to demonstrate the unquestioned prejudice apparent in the language used. Downey writes

If women can acquire the skill to throw overhand (witness Olympic softball fielders), then the question should be, instead of why do girls “throw like girls,” why do *some* girls throw so poorly if they are capable of throwing well? Most students of the biomechanics of throwing would argue that it is a technical problem: women don’t throw properly and the technique that they put together is hampered by a number of kinaesthetic problems, some of which obscure avenues of further skill development.¹

The unquestioned use of evaluative terms pejorative to girls is shocking as is Downey’s apparent acceptance that it is the girls’ problem. Hmmm.

Well, let’s pose some alternative questions. We might simply ask, “what does overhand hurling a small object at great speeds and with enormous force accurately hitting a target prepare one for in our world?” Hmm, let’s see ... I’m thinking ... still thinking. Oh yes, to be a professional sports player in any of several sports. Hmmm. Other than that I can’t seem to think of anything. Such skill was doubtless vitally important in a hunting societies where stones or spears were the main weapon used to kill and bring home dinner to the little missus. When was that last valuable? Perhaps we could revive it as an even more manly way of hunting than archery or slingshots or rifles. We could lobby for open stone hurling or spear throwing hunting seasons. Okay, I’m being slightly silly, but only to make a serious

¹ Greg Downey “Throwing lie a girl(’s brain), Internet February 1, 2009
<http://neuroanthropology.net/2009/02/01/throwing-like-a-girls-brain/>

point. It is seriously difficult to think of any profession that is well served by this sensorimotor pattern and, thus, why should it be the unquestioned standard for “proper” throwing?

Another perspective. The physical analysis of a baseball pitch describes a highly complicated process involving something upward of 2 seconds. To accomplish this task the biomechanics are highly complicated as is the sensorimotor neurological programming that must be developed. This sort of skilled throwing, however long it might take to develop, eventually becomes a complex sensorimotor program that is operated under some vague or generalized sense of mental control and focus. This kind of activity—taking a long time to build up wind up preparation and intention for a sudden release or thrust of violent proportions at some object at a distance—does seem a fairly male type of movement. I'd suggest this general characterization is appropriate for many male movement activities and even much that might be thought of as male style. A slow buildup of energy with explosive outwardly directed powerful, even violent, thrust trajectory effect. It is a movement that is outward from the body. Even in the sensorimotor programming it requires primarily efferent (from brain to muscle) signals rather than depending on much proprioceptive feedback through the execution. It is movement that amasses the entire body to function as a single unit in effecting the action. It is a movement that is intended to impact the external world through force and power and manipulation.

Yet, consider this throwing movement compared with something like dancing or doing step aerobics, self-movement on demand to ambient music. While it seems that a 2 second act is a really short time to accomplish all that has to happen to throw an object with force and accuracy, and it is, consider putting this action alongside *rueda* or step aerobics dancing. These movement forms must be done on demand coordinated to a beat in ambient music that has say 150 beats a minute (relatively slow). Beats are coming at only 0.4 second intervals and 5 beats will elapse in 2 seconds, the duration of a single throw and it isn't done on demand. Furthermore, these dancings may involve the execution of a large number (as in hundreds of distinct named moves) of movement combinations each involving steps on every beat (thus coordination with music), turns, possible interconnection with other dancers and the movement of many other body parts (arms, hands, hips, etc.) with precision and in a constant flow of improvised on-demand self-movement and done both to the right and the left (ambidextrous). Furthermore, there is as much afferent (muscle to brain) information flow as efferent (brain to muscle) flow. The constant integration of muscles and brain is essential to this form of movement. This comparison shows that this sort of movement is highly complex and remarkably sophisticated and, when compared to the overhead throw, seems of an entirely higher order of the sophisticated use of the body.

Asking the same question we did of “throwing like a boy” what kinds of activities, functions, demands, professions, would be well served by this on-demand improvisational self-movement style of movement, our answers would span virtually everything in our culture today and the trends of movement are clearly in that direction, i.e., away from heavy strength whole bodied force of construction, war, manufacturing, etc.

So a good case can be made for the title I have chosen because I would rather “throw like a girl than dance like a guy.” In the next lecture, I want to place this issue in the disturbing context of the decline of men. However, to conclude, it is clear that, as I have done in this lecture, dancing in general and

some dance forms in particular are remarkably effective at creating the sensorimotor skills that provide the fundamental skills for productive and enjoyable activities in contemporary societies.