

Communicating Romantic Intentions through Social Dancing

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This is an analysis of how young Latino men and their female dance-partners communicate their romantic intentions while dancing, or perhaps through dancing. I find that apparent ethnic and class distinctions and levels of romantic interest affect the way these people dance, especially in three key indices of romantic intentions: eye contact, hand placement, and hip position. Because these intentions are culturally unspeakable in this context, talk is important mostly for its non-referential effects.

Keywords: Nonverbal communication, sexuality, social dancing, applied anthropology, and ambiguity.

SIGNIFICANCE

This essay focuses on a social "situation" (Goffman 1963) rather than on a particular theoretical question. However, it builds on and contributes to studies of sexuality and of nonverbal communication. Studies of sexuality generally treat practices such as flirting, dating, and social dancing almost exclusively as potential precursors to copulation or cohabitation (cf. Abelow 1992, Doring 1990, Taylor 1985). In contrast, I believe these practices have inherent significance and meaning (cf. Berk 1977; Herdt and Stoller 1990), in addition to their relationship to sex and to long-term commitment. Many analyses of nonverbal communication have been conducted under controlled circumstances and/or have arbitrarily isolated the various channels of communication (cf. Jones 1994; Mayo and Henley 1981). Several of these works also overgeneralize the functions of the various communicative channels. The more helpful studies systematically examine *communication*, that is, the integration of verbal and nonverbal communication in specific situations (Erickson and Schultz 1982). Because of its circumstances and focus, this study utilizes a method for studying communication relatively unobtrusively in an uncontrolled social setting. Moreover, it interprets in an integrated fashion both verbal and nonverbal practices, including how one practice affects another in this specific situation.

My overriding interest in this essay, however, is "applied." I want my findings to be immediately relevant to non-specialized readers in

addition to professional academics. My hope is that this study of social dancing will help people in similar situations, and that it will help them pursue pleasure and avoid inflicting or feeling discomfort. Perhaps this aspiration will appeal especially to anthropologists who study topics that have everyday importance, but that, for whatever reason, have not been enshrined in academia as "serious." In this case, I find that "romance" preoccupies many people, bringing them at times to their highest euphoria, at times to suicidal desolation, and yet the mention of 'romance' as a germane topic of study often prompts derision. As we anthropologists struggle to justify our works and our discipline both to ourselves and to others, we will need to produce studies that demonstrate to both audiences that the interpretation of all human experience has importance.

METHODS

This paper is based mostly on four nights of formal fieldwork (once a week for four weeks over a five-week period) in the fall of 1994, and on self-reflection concerning my previous experiences as a participant for a period of almost a year. My field-site was a nightclub in Tucson, Arizona, where the same salsa¹ band played the same songs every Thursday night from around 9 p.m. until 1 a.m. Free (formerly \$1) salsa-dancing lessons were taught to recorded music from 8 until 9 p.m., and some regulars continued to socialize and sometimes to dance to music played on car stereos on the sidewalk in front of the club after 1 a.m.

My recorded observations were made during the main dancing hours of 9 p.m. until 1:00 a.m. I conducted the greater part of my research on the periphery of the dance-floor (see Figure 1).

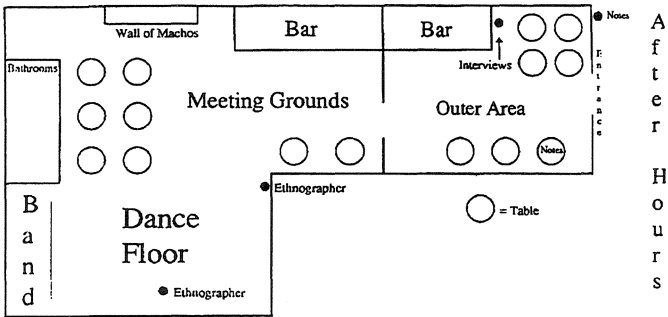


Figure 1: Map of the Nightclub

PEOPLE

The dancers² at Salsa Night included a large crowd of regulars, who constituted the bulk of attendees any particular week. Both the regulars and the non-regulars were diverse by apparent gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, romantic status, and social class. I was a regular and appeared to be a single, male, Anglo, 31-year-old university-student.

I did not survey people to determine their ethnicity, nationality, or class, so my determination of these attributes was based on my experiences with them: dancing, talking, listening to conversations, observing with whom they socialized, and analyzing their appearance. That is why I refer, for instance, to "apparent class." As one of the anonymous reviewers suggested:

You note that Latinos tend to treat women differently based on 'apparent' ethnicity. You could note in the methodology section that 'apparent' social characteristics are salient when people are meeting or deciding to meet (Goffman [1959]); in this case, such appearances are not just poor substitutes for missing survey data.

To some extent, I agree. For instance, a female friend who self-identifies as Latin but who I at first thought was Anglo told me that a Latino dance-partner had treated her like my Latin-male/Anglo-female pattern (below). On the other hand, what is apparent to one person might not be to another. For instance, my friend and I both would identify her as Latin, but her dance-partner seemingly did not (his behavior with other women had fit my findings exceptionally well). This particular example is not part of my observations for this study; however, it is possible that some of my guesses about identities diverge from my subjects' self-identifications and/or identifications of others.

Gender: The crowd was more-or-less evenly divided between men and women.

Age: Most of the attendees were in their 20s and early 30s, with a few people middle-aged and older.

Ethnicity and nationality: The crowd included U.S. and foreign citizens with a few international students from Europe and Africa. Some of the U.S. citizens were Anglos including many who had studied or lived in Latin America; however, many of the U.S. citizens were immigrants or the children of immigrants from Latin America. The preponderance of immigrants was from Mexico, but Caribbean immigrants were also numerous. The Latinos included individuals with many different shades of skin color with extremes of African-looking, Indian-looking, and European-looking.³ In sum, the crowd was at once "Latin" and cosmopolitan.

Romantic status: Most of the attendees appeared to be single, although a sizable minority arrived with a date. Those who arrived with a date commonly danced with other people.

Sexual orientation: Although the nightclub was adjacent to a gay-and-lesbian center and was one of several hangouts for homosexuals in the immediate area, it had a decidedly heterosexual ambience on Thursday nights. I did not notice any men dancing only with other men nor any women who appeared to be dancing romantically with other women. All of my recorded observations covered couples that include a man and a woman, but I make no claims about their sexual orientations.⁴

Social class: Although my intuition was the final arbiter of class designation, I considered: the formality of peoples' speech, especially the clarity of their pronunciation, and other communication patterns; their dress, especially its stylishness or formality; and, in a semi-circular fashion, who their companions appeared to be. Approximately half the dancers appeared to be college students. The rest were divided among people who looked like either professionals or proletarians. I judged my subjects to belong either to the "working class" or to the "middle-upper class" based on whether they appeared to be professionals or from families of professionals. The proletarians were almost exclusively Latinos.

Despite the diversity of the crowd, all the interactions I watched included Latin men. This grouping was against my design, but was unavoidable since very few Anglo men touch-danced. This paper, then, is about what a subgroup of Latin men and their dance partners did. I am unaware as to how widespread these practices are among other groups of people, such as Anglos or Latinos who do not dance at places such as this.

In conversations with me, the "Latinos" whom I have met at the club recognized the ethnic term "Latino" as salient in deciding with whom they would dance or socialize and how. Moreover, based on a literature review covering sexuality in Mexico (Duvall 1994), I find it reasonable to believe that Latinos and Anglos exhibit patterned differences, statistically speaking, in their romantic behavior. I suggest one difference below under the heading "Ethnicity."

However, I am against the essentialist notion that people behave a certain way because they "are" "Latin," although I recognize that they may behave that way because they feel "Latin" or want to *appear* "Latin"⁵, and that they may appear to be "Latin" because they behave that way. My notes and common sense suggest that there are considerable variations on and exceptions to the patterns I cite. Finally, I derive these "patterns" from watching several different men and women, and grouping them together by ethnicity and class. I cannot change these peoples' identities to see how their behaviors would change. Thus, I recognize

several problems with generalizing from my observations, yet I cannot disavow the patterns I have discerned during my brief fieldwork.

PEOPLE AND PLACE

People had different reasons for attending. For some, it was a place to meet people romantically or platonically; for others, it was a place to dance or to remember their homeland. Everyone I spoke with, though, mentioned or implied that the general ambience was conducive to singles meeting romantically. That is, most people familiar with the place/time studied associate it with a certain sort of romance⁶, but their attitudes toward this "fact" differ.⁷

Many factors contributed to this romantic ambience. First, the place fit into a genre of "scene," which helped guide expectations and practices. People expect that young singles and couples touch-dancing at a bar at night will concern themselves with romance. Women wearing black party-dresses, men wearing black suit-coats, and both wearing hard-soled shoes and jewelry combined with the 'hot, tropical' connotation of salsa, even among Latins, helped to propel and shape this romantic ambience.

Second, or perhaps also first, are the activities that attendees perceive and practice. Even before someone attends, friends might have told him or her about the ambience. Once there, people perform/invoke/recreate this genre of scene with patterns of eye contact, talking, dancing, meeting, and drinking. For instance, anyone going to the bathroom must pass what a female friend called "the wall" (which I call the "wall of machos" [see Figure 1]), where apparently-working-class men look up and down each woman's body as she passes.

ADDITIONAL METHODS

As my research progressed, I focused on couples about whom I already knew something, particularly, whether or not they were already romantically linked.⁸ When possible, I watched the same two people with other dance partners for comparison. In all, during two nights I took notes on 27 interactions involving at least 13 women and 19 men, almost always as they danced.

During breaks in the music, I would walk either to the sidewalk or to the outer area and record my observations. Attendees nearby could see me in either place, but those dancing could not. Some of my friends there knew what I was doing and joked about it with me and with other friends; however, I believe that none of the people I observed knew about my project. Certainly, no one paid me any particular attention as I wrote.

After one night of surveillance and two of observation, I interviewed two regular participants on the fourth night. I chose a woman and a man whom I knew were single and whom I felt comfortable approaching. Not surprisingly, they both turned out to be graduate students in their late 20s. She, whom I will call "Fulana," was from South America, and he, "Fulano," was from Mexico. I interviewed each in Spanish, generally following a questionnaire that I had prepared beforehand. I recorded the formal part of each interview at the bar in the outer area; each lasted around 10-15 minutes. Both informants were quite helpful, friendly, and expansive, although each appeared apprehensive about the elapsed time as the interview continued. I decided not to conduct more interviews so as not to impose on people as closing-time approached. I regret not having the comfort or familiarity with the apparently working-class Latin men and women to approach them for interviews. In addition to interviews, I have spoken with several friends there about my project.⁹



Photo 1

FINDINGS

Men and women manipulated, in particular, their hips, hands and eyes to indicate their romantic interest or lack thereof. Rather than serving as a metacommentary on speech or as an auxiliary to it, in this case nonverbal communication served important functions not served by speech. Talk, though, was still produced or refrained from for any of several reasons.

In the 'formal' position for salsa (see photo 1)¹⁰, taught in the lessons provided at this nightclub and mimed by my interviewees, the man and woman hold their bodies almost completely parallel to each other. The man's right hand is on the woman's left hip; the woman's left hand rests lightly on the man's shoulder. The teachers offered no instruction for the eyes, but the default is for men to look directly at their partners' faces and for women to look elsewhere (see photo 2).

PRINCIPLES

In this paper I assert that eye-contact's special, culturally explicit place as a communication channel in romantic relationships should not blind us to other channels, specifically hip-angle and hand-position.

Messages via these channels can be sent, assessed, and responded to simultaneously even though they cannot be represented simultaneously in writing. Also, we should not confuse a lack of response as a lack of communication. The failure to make an overt change or response to a partner's actions communicates something in dance, just as silence or refusal to switch registers communicates something in conversation.

The intended audience of the communicative acts in which I am interested initially appeared to be limited to a dancer's partner, but actually the dancers were aware of other eyes upon them, including those of their friends, their lovers, 'society,' and potential romantic partners. In some cases, a dancer would communicate directly in a nonverbal fashion with one person (for example, through eye contact with me) as they were dancing/communicating directly with another (and choosing not to look at him). Much more often, their concern for their social reputation constrained their actions in a general way, in case someone who cared was watching.¹¹ Given the noise-level, the ambiguity of the relationship between the dance-partners, and cultural proscriptions against explicitly voicing romantic intentions in public, nonverbal means of communication usually provided the only practical way of addressing these outside observers while dancing.

Representing and analyzing these various means of communicating inevitably destroys the flow with which they occurred when I observed them. I present more holistic accounts from my notes after analyzing the various channels separately.

HIPS

Dancers manipulate their hip positions both to iconically signal their *sexual* interest (especially) in the other person and to engage in or avoid actual physical contact. Regulars' comments suggest that others could observe hip position more easily than hand position or eye contact and that it was more compromising sexually; thus, some dancers used hip position to display a general attitude toward sexual activity.

Hip posture provides ways of closing or extending the space between dancers' crotches without changing the distance between their feet or their chests. For instance, according to my notes and my friends' accounts, by thrusting his hips forward, more than one man rubbed his

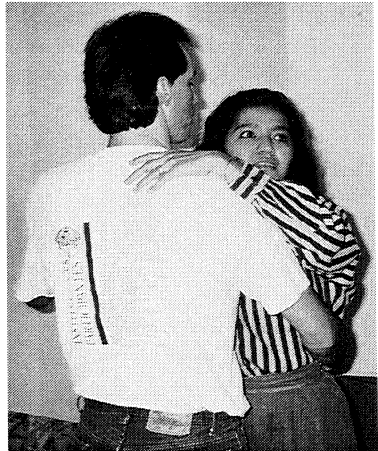


Photo 2

(sometimes erect) penis against a woman and still danced without tripping her or leaning on her. Likewise, a woman dancing with someone I labeled "the tight-gripping man" while her boyfriend socialized avoided this sort of rubbing and an explicit confrontation over dance position by withdrawing only her hips while still keeping her legs close to his and allowing him to hold her upper body close. Surprisingly, women commonly allowed chest-contact in order to protect their hips. Photo 3 reproduces the dance style of an established romantic couple that I observed. Here, the woman's posture signaled both to her partner (perhaps) and to other observers that her romantic interest is chaste; however, whether this "display" reflected her practices in less public settings is unknown. Men also avoided signaling romantic interest through hip position. The thwarted, "tight-gripping man" described above danced more formally later with another, older woman, holding his body separate from and parallel to hers. Finally, one man closed the gap between his face and his partner's face and chest by leaning forward; thus, in this moment his tactic for approaching her entailed moving his hips slightly away from her.

Some women and men did not project or protect their hips so carefully, raising the possibility that they were either disinterested in sex or comfortably familiar with it, respectively. Many established romantic couples changed positions and brushed against each other casually. This casualness itself signals both their physical familiarity and their willingness to reveal this familiarity.

HANDS

Hand position was also key in signaling romantic intentions. For the men, the first signs of boldness sometimes included their right hand shifting farther around their partner's back (see Photo 4); this both draws the woman nearer and extends the amount of her body touched by the man's arm. Women signal their attitudes with their left hand's position and firmness on their partner's body. For example, the woman caught in the unusually close clutch of the "tight-gripping man" left her hands at her sides most of the time. The same woman laid her left hand much more firmly, if still formally, on her boyfriend's shoulder while dancing. Conversely, the "tight-gripping man" helped keep his older, less desired dance partner "at arm's

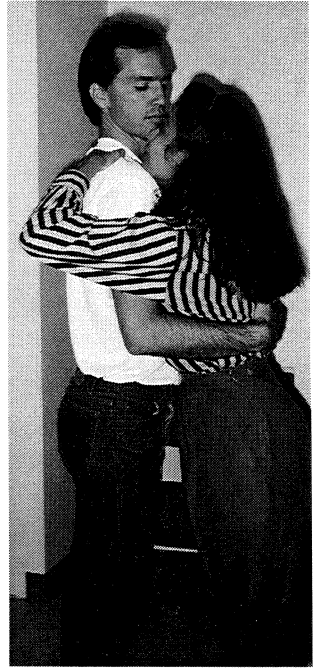


Photo 3

length" by maintaining his hand on her closest hip, in the formal position.

EYES

As I have already mentioned above, my informants recognized eye contact as key. However, as Burgoon and Guerrero (1994) point out, this recognition makes eye-contact a likely area of conscious manipulation. Eye contact is less easily observed or socially prohibited than are hand and hip position, so it is a relatively safe way to signal interest.

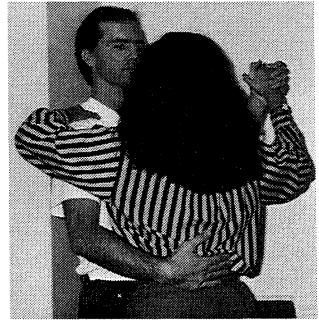


Photo 4

The most common pattern of eye contact is illustrated nicely in the Mexican movie *Danzón* (1993 [1991]). The heroine is teaching a male transvestite to dance the feminine side of the dance *danzón*; he looks directly into her eyes with feigned romantic interest. She says:

- "Don't look into my eyes."

- "Why?"

- "Listen. You have to look off into the distance at some indefinite point, just like the music."

- "How unromantic!"

- "You shouldn't look directly at anything. Looks should be very soft. They should be felt, vaguely guessed. Now watch. Let's go. [She demonstrates.] See? There it is. Once your eyes meet, everything becomes clear."

- "How beautiful."

Indeed, at the onset of the plot the heroine looks away from her long-term partner as they dance, despite his constant attention. However, after his unexplained absence helps her to recognize her desire for him, her eyes meet and lock on his as they dance, reunited.

Both of my interviewees reproduced this ideology of eye-contact. As Fulana said, "The eyes tell the truth." This attitude corroborates Burgoon and Guerrero's (1994) assertion that nonverbal cues are interpreted as stronger than verbal cues when "face" is in danger.

While interested men and women tended to look into the eyes or at least face of their partners, their uninterested partners tended to look away; most commonly, the man showed interest and the woman did not. When uninterested women did look into men's eyes, their facial expressions might be politely distant, and the duration was short. The "tight-gripping man's" partner would look from side-to-side, stopping at her partner's eyes only briefly *en route*. However, this tactic for signaling disinterest was not limited to women. The "tight-gripping man" used the same tactic when dancing with the older woman later.

It should not be surprising that both nascent and established romantic couples (that is, couples in which both partners are interested) maintained more-frequent and longer-lasting eye contact. However, the same was true for couples that had been established as non-romantic, that is, 'friends.' (I was able to distinguish between friendly and romantic couples by observing them or talking with them away from the dance floor.)

SPEECH

In this context, speech was less important for what it referenced than for what it indexed. First, how dancers talked provided clues of their interest to their partners. When the woman was not interested in romance and the man was, every brief exchange was initiated by the man. Face-saving politeness (Snow 1991; Berk 1977) and perhaps a desire to retain friendship prompted women to respond in some fashion every time. Among friends and among both nascent and established romantic couples (even the conservative, highly hip-sensitive one), the woman sometimes would initiate conversation, which tended to be more animated and longer-lasting than among failed romantic couples, although this was not universally the case. Both Fulano and Fulana mentioned this difference.

Second, speaking is a tactic for prompting eye-contact. One romantically interested man would gaze constantly and fruitlessly at his disinterested partner's eyes while dancing. When he spoke, though, he would move his face closer to her line-of-sight; she, in turn, would look into his eyes, if only briefly, while replying.

Third, speaking established a relationship that could continue past dancing. Last, conversation between two initially interested partners could help them determine whether they wanted to escalate the relationship past dancing. That is, it provided another indication of attraction.

Although both interviewees stated that what they talked about was unimportant, I found as a participant that dancing-conversations were fairly predictable among unestablished couples. The exchanges usually began with a question, such as, "Are you a student?," or "Where are you from?" and continued haltingly through similar, relatively public and innocuous information. Given that these conversations were *extremely* predictable, differences in personal style were shown mostly through vocal and nonverbal differences and a little through comments that elaborate on the genre.¹²

DISCUSSIONS AND ELABORATIONS

AMBIGUITY

Were these people to speak their intentions explicitly, very little of this activity would take place in this manner. Many of these practices fall under Goffman's category of "face-saving" (Berk 1977); that is, both partners structure their communication in an ambiguous fashion that allows for a graceful rejection, should one be forthcoming. In my observations, any rejection would be partial, given that the partners had already consented to dance with each other.

This paper provides an extension of Snow et al.'s (1991) extension of Goffman's metaphor of "cooling out," wherein the rejecter attempts to assuage the feelings of the rejected. Although Snow et al. interpret "cooling out" in bars mostly as self-protection against potential violence, in this case (and in theirs) I believe that it is related more (although not exclusively) to defining oneself as a nice person and avoiding public embarrassment. Fulana emphasized that she tries not to hurt anyone's feelings. A Mexican woman explained that girls are trained so strongly to "be nice" that, as women, many have great difficulty directly expressing rejection. I suspect, based on their stories, that this is true for many Anglo and European women as well, although perhaps to a lesser extent. Thus, women are more likely in this situation to avoid unwanted contact without using physical force than they are to say explicitly that they are uncomfortable.

Also, I conjecture that this desire to appear "nice" extends to avoiding embarrassing situations. Confronting men about their unwanted advances would create an embarrassment. This is particularly dangerous in a scene in which a mix of friends and strangers is all around. Although I have observed many obviously untoward actions and heard women complain about others at this nightclub, I have not seen or heard any woman "create a scene" by confronting the offending man.

In cases of nascent romantic couples, the effects of this ambiguity of expression are ambivalent. On the one hand, ambiguity allows for escalation without the outright, socially binding commitment that explicit words would entail. On the other hand, ambiguity makes the miscommunication of intentions more likely (especially in such a mix of ethnicities and nationalities), thereby increasing the likelihood of heartache due to excessively strong advances or to premature retreats.

ETHNICITY

The men I observed, all Latinos, tended to treat their partners differently on the basis of their partners' apparent¹³ ethnicity. In short, they tended to hold Anglo-seeming (and northern European) women closer,

with their hips more forward and their hands further around the women's waists (see photo 5). For example, I observed Fulano dancing with exemplary formality with a Latina, but, when he danced with an Anglo woman, his hand was further around her waist, and he instigated more talk and eye-contact. This is only a tendency, however: in some cases, the men did not dance differently with Anglo and Latin women. There is one outright exception: the "tight-gripping man" held the Latina extremely close but maintained his distance from the older, Anglo woman. In each of the above cases, these were unestablished couples. In summary, Latin men, *when romantically interested*, varied individually in their levels of physicality, but they tended to initiate more physical contact with Anglo women than with Latin women.

This pattern of behavior corroborates my observation (Duvall 1994) of an oft-repeated stereotype among Mexican and South American men of different classes: Anglo women are easy to establish romantic and especially sexual relations with and that Latin women are overly prudish. For example, Fulano told a story during which he contrasted the rapidity with which U.S. women make dates to that of Latin American women. Also, unlike several non-Latin women with whom I have spoken, Fulana reported that men in the nightclub respected her signals that she did not want to get closer. Thus, men might expect that interested Latin women want romance and that interested Anglo women want sex. Only one of the Anglo women whose complaints I heard noted this double-standard. Others' comments either depicted such treatment as inherent in the dance or as something that Latin men (and possibly all men) would do when dancing with any type of potential romantic partner. The dancing styles of the Anglo women I observed seem to inadvertently play into this stereotype. Compared to Latinas, they had more-frequent eye-contact and conversation, less-formal hand-position, and wider hip-movements. The women's partners, though, tended to press them further than they felt comfortable. This is revealed both in the women's complaints and in their dancing. In one instance a woman increased her formality without confrontation; then, later in the same night with the same man, she maintained a greater distance despite his efforts to move closer.

Thus far, I have spoken of ethnicity in terms of Latin men's perceptions of ethnic differences. The Latin men and women I have met at this nightclub group themselves together in contrast to Anglos, socially and especially verbally, and I find this contrast to be salient. In contrast, I cannot remember hearing Anglo men distinguishing Latin and Anglo women in the manner described above; thus, although I did not observe Anglo men, I would expect most of them to treat their dance partners with equal (dis)respect, regardless of ethnicity.

CLASS

Apparent class also makes a difference. People in same-class couples, whether middle-upper or working class, tended to dance loosely compared to when they were in mixed-class couples. By chance I did not note any couples with a middle-upper man and a working-class woman, although I do not doubt that such couples existed; thus, I have no evidence for generalizing about such cases. My notes contain two examples of middle-upper-class women whose working-class partners danced with them much more formally than had middle-upper-class partners in the same night; I did not note any exceptions. Both of the working-class couples I noted danced quite informally, including both an established couple and a non-established couple.

GENDER EXPECTATIONS

It bears noting that the "unmarked" practice in this scene was for men in non-established couples to be the instigators and for women to assess and react. Men asked women to dance, usually decided whether they would touch-dance, and initiated conversation. Indeed, one indication of a woman's romantic interest (or of friendship among established friends) was her occasional instigation of talk, eye-contact, or physical contact. Both interviews corroborated this pattern. As conversations with Anglo women suggest, perhaps Latin men misinterpret Anglo women's relatively pro-active style in this light, concluding that they are all romantically or sexually interested, when they might intend only to appear friendly.

A working-class man dancing (at different times) with two middle-upper class women provides an example of the interplay of gender roles, apparent ethnicity, and class in determining dance-styles in unestablished couples. With the Latin woman, the man danced extremely formally, and she responded in kind. With the Anglo woman, he retained some formality but their hips made occasional contact, his hand was on the small of her back, and he talked almost constantly into her ear. The Anglo woman danced much more informally than the Latin woman, although neither looked into his eyes.



Photo 5

EXAMPLES

Thus far, I have treated these various aspects of dancing separately. In this section, I will follow the intertwined careers of three subjects, including the "tight-gripping man," through my slightly-edited¹⁴ field notes. My intent is to reveal how the various aspects fit together in practice.

- A. Young, middle-class Latina, mestiza, English-speaker, great dancer, in white. Left [later] with boyfriend, holding hands. With other great dancer, Latino, Spanish-speaker. Bodies are parallel; almost no eye-contact; bored looks; brief, infrequent talking, started by him. Hand on hip, formal free hand, very loose elbows and dancing but no touch. When it's over, it's over.
- G. She [of A.] (smiles and makes eyes at me a lot, otherwise acts bored) dances with rich, pony-tailed mestizo friend [the "tight-gripping man"]. He puts both arms around waist; she barely touches him with hands and slightly withdraws waist [I meant hips, as shown in a diagram]. No eye-contact, little verbal response to him. Begin next dance, and she leaves him.
- H. He of A. danced with someone Anglo with arms around waist a bit more, a little more talk and eye-contact, but basically the same, I think.
- G₁. [same couple as G.] More distance, more talk, but he still initiates, she still looks away from side to side while talking, with fleeting, impersonal eye-contact.
- K. Pony-tail guy from G. dances with [older, Anglo woman] she makes eye-contact, he doesn't (looks from side-to-side). Parallel bodies, no close stuff, he's pretty formal. I think she initiated talk.¹⁵
- N. Woman in white from A. with boyfriend; she's still a bit formal, but puts hand fully on shoulder or arm, no eye-contact, looks bored, no eyes for me. Hips separate still, parallel bodies like with A. but less formal. Separate and join easily.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals some of the ways in which people communicate their romantic intentions to their dance partners and to a broader social audience in a specific setting.¹⁶ Gender roles, ethnic stereotypes, class relations, and ambiguous modes of communication shape the possibilities and practices that I observed. Unfortunately, in many cases the price of wanting only to dance or to meet someone romantically is considerable discomfort and potential embarrassment (see also Berk 1977); indeed, performing even the formal part of this study has been similarly

uncomfortable for me. Although applied research in anthropology is more commonly associated with economic or medical improvement, research such as this can help people avoid inflicting or receiving pains that, I assure you, are hardly trivial.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Salsa is both a particular rhythm developed among Puerto Ricans in New York and Puerto Rico and, in this case, a catch-all term for African-derived music from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, especially merengue, mambo, and, of course, salsa.
- ² I use the terms "dancer" and "dance-partner" interchangeably; I do not intend to imply different levels of agency with these terms, nor are they associated in my mind with either gender.
- ³ I do not know of a better way of expressing this. My background in things Latin American tells me that skin-color and hair-color matter among Latin Americans, although differently than among Anglos. Looking "white" is an indication of a different status than is looking "black" or "Indian" or any combination of these; for instance, the term *negrita* ('little black female') refers to African-looking women and connotes sexual promiscuity (E. Suárez, personal communication).
- ⁴ I do not refer to "apparent sexual orientation" mainly because I find sexual orientation much less "apparent." Fortunately, my analysis centers more on *how* people signal (dis)interest within a heterosexual ambience than on *why*. However, several of the people I observed at least *displayed* romantic interest in at least one dance-partner of the other gender.
- ⁵ A "display" is a set of behaviors that by convention communicates a particular attitude (Goffman 1979). Thus, in some contexts, some of these people engage in "displays" of ethnicity.
- ⁶ I am using "romance" as a catch-all term that refers to a range of attitudes and practices, including (interest in) flirting, kissing, genital contact, dancing, lusty, holding hands, dating, and so on. I use this term because I think that its connotations are appropriately broader than "sexual" or "erotic" and because I think that my subjects recognized its salience much more than that of these other terms.
- ⁷ I call this judgmental perspective on certain scenes "moral geography" (Duvall 1994).
- ⁸ In this paper, I mention several different types of "couples": "established" might be friends or lovers, but they already know each other well enough to act as one or the other; "non-established" have more ambiguity; "romantic" means that both partners are romantically interested in each other; "nascent romantic" means that a stable relationship has not developed but that each partner is

romantically interested in the other at this point; "failed romantic" means that one partner attempted unsuccessfully to establish a romance.

- ⁹ One anonymous reviewer castigated me for "a certain 'voice-over' effect" in my textual (non-)treatment of others' opinions, giving the impression, rightly or wrongly, that: 1) my findings depend on my observations of others rather than on "asking them directly" and 2) that I am "*privileging*" my "observations" over "*their insights*" (emphases in original). My response has three parts. 1) I have specified my methods, which include talking with others and reflecting on my own experience as a quasi-insider. I have cited others' comments in the paper. However, because of my relatively unobtrusive research method, I have almost no verbatim quotes that are insightful. 2) I have consciously chosen to write somewhat generally and in a non-novel-like fashion both to preserve others' anonymity and, given the topic and my methods, to protect my own privacy. 3) Most importantly, I *did* derive much of my interpretation from observation of others and from introspection about my own experience in the context studied. When I have shared my insights with others, including the two interviewees, they have expressed no significant disagreements and, more often, have stated that my "findings" are actually self-evident. (I disagree: I think that the results only appear self-evident once they have been stated.)
- ¹⁰ Thanks to Maribel Alvarez for taking these photographs, which are meant merely as illustrations, not as evidence. The photos were posed, they were not taken in the nightclub; the couple is neither dressed "typically" nor included in the study.
- ¹¹ This last statement is a conjecture based on: 1) discussions of romantic strategy with friends who do not go to this nightclub and 2) the common statements there and elsewhere that reveal that friends and strangers are indeed watching. Fulana said that she and her friends made "observations" about how and with whom people are dancing.
- ¹² It is a little bit like evaluating karaoke performances of the same song.
- ¹³ There were several women (and men) there who consider themselves "Latin" but who others are surprised to find out are not, and vice versa. Also, some people, Latin or not, disbelieve others' claims of Latinness.
- ¹⁴ They are more grammatical, for clarity.
- ¹⁵ My point here is not that she was romantically interested but that he misinterpreted her friendliness.
- ¹⁶ Future studies should distinguish between different types of romantic interest, instead of my dyadic romance/no-romance.

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