

Partnering Skills Part 1 - Social Interactive Aspects

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In the previous article, dance partnering was described as an array of skills that serve to enable both leader and follower to achieve and maintain coordinated movement

together on the dance floor. The mechanics of partnering such as dance hold, physical connection between partners and dance frame were presented. This article will highlight various social interactive aspects of partnering such as personal space, physical contact and trust.

Good dance partnering is largely about achieving the silent language of lead and follow. Each partner has the responsibility of maintaining their specific role in the dance. Many people believe that ballroom dancing only involves learning various step patterns and associated techniques. While this is basically true, there is yet another important aspect of partnering in ballroom dancing that centers on social interactive factors. Volumes can be written on this topic due to the many diverse facets of social interactions. Partnering has a great deal to do with how individuals interact with each other socially while in close space on the dance floor. I have always found this to be one of the most fascinating aspects of ballroom dancing.



Every culture in the world has socially defined spatial boundaries. This is also referred to as one's 'personal space bubble'. It defines an area surrounding an individual that represents their psychological comfort zone. The personal space bubble in our culture begins at approximately eighteen inches and extends out to about four feet. It is generally reserved for family and close friends. An even closer culturally defined spatial zone known as 'intimate space' ranges from touching to less than eighteen inches. This spatial zone is typically reserved for people in close relationships. A red flag is automatically set when an individual inappropriately encroaches upon someone's personal or intimate spatial boundaries. Most individuals value their personal space and feel uncomfortable when it is violated. Our culture has taught us to maintain an average of four feet of separation while socially interacting with complete strangers. Touching someone you do not know violates this socially defined norm in a profound way. Spatial boundaries are an integral part of a given culture that is learned and reinforced at an early age. It is so ingrained in our culture that we automatically react to social space in an unconscious manner.

Now consider partner dancing and the sudden implications to one's personal space. Individuals frequently find themselves at a social dance venue or a group dance class where they are asked to rotate partners. They are suddenly face to face with a stranger. This has the potential to create apprehension and uneasiness. Partner dancing takes people directly into one another's intimate spatial zone. It can trigger a myriad of reactions such as anxiety for one or both partners. Although contact from a closed dance hold is usually taken as the norm in ballroom dancing, it can be intimidating for some individuals. Uneasy reactions in partner dancing are usually revealed by one's body language. For example, in smooth dances such as foxtrot and waltz, the one who steps forward with their right foot has to step between their partner's feet in order to maintain connection at the hips. Properly danced in this manner, the inner thighs of both partners are in close contact throughout the step. This type of contact can intimidate some and result in uneasiness. Insecurity leading to anxiety can also be triggered in some dancers over concern about whether or not they are dancing to the expectations of their partner. Sharing close space can magnify this and many others concerns.

Everyone who enters the dance floor needs to be keenly aware that each individual is uniquely different in their ability to relax while partner dancing. Building trust in the context of ballroom dancing can seem like an insurmountable task. It involves giving up control and allowing your partner into your personal space. It is much better to replace the feeling of vulnerability with the feeling of joy. Learning to trust can foster an enhanced dance experience. When walls are put up, the quality of the dance suffers. Dancers need to be aware of the proper dance hold and basic techniques. If you feel that your partner is taking advantage in any way, you will need to gently confront the situation either verbally or non-verbally. Both dancers have to be careful not to intentionally provoke anxiety in their partner.

Sharing personal space remains a delicate situation. Everyone can enjoy partner dancing more fully by being sensitive and courteous to their partner while on the dance floor. In this way both partners can aim to make dancing a more enjoyable experience.

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