

SWINGING TOWARD SOCIAL CHANGE:
HOW LINDY HOP PROMOTES GENDER EQUALITY

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Abstract

Lindy Hop is a type of swing dance that became popularized in the late 1920's. As a dancer in the current revival, I have noticed a dissonance between the discussions of gender equality in the community and the people's actions. After conducting interviews and observations at The Snowball, a Lindy Hop event in Stockholm, Sweden, I coded my data and organized it based on common themes. I discovered that the community members' actions and experiences are not as progressive as their discussions. Furthermore, individuals have not thought much about their goals for the future of Lindy Hop. I believe that we can bridge these gaps through being accountable for our actions, creating discussion, and holding our leadership to high standards.

How I Fell in Love with Lindy Hop

My Lindy Hop journey began with a foldout table and a sign-up sheet. It was the second week of my freshman year at Appalachian State University, and my friends had just dragged me to Club Fair. It was a chance for new and returning students to find and join clubs at the beginning of the semester. Wading through the overwhelming crowds inside Holmes Convocation Center, I had no idea what I would sign up for. After a few minutes of tunneling through the chaos, I appeared in front of a poster that proudly proclaimed, "Swing Dance Club." I had always loved the idea of learning to dance yet had never had the chance. I was also hopelessly klutzy to the level that my childhood nickname was literally Mrs. Oops (thanks Mom and Dad). Still, the club seemed at least worth a chance. I put down my email on the sign up sheet and promised to attend the first class. Upon the insistence of my friends, I also signed up for Shag Dance Club. I figured that I could try out both and stick with the one that I enjoyed more.

When I first started, I attended weekly lessons for both West Coast Swing and East Coast Swing. After the first few lessons at Swing Dance Club, I was hooked. Even though I struggled to learn even the most basic of moves at first, the people, the music, and the dance kept me coming back. Even more enticing was the challenge of it. I saw the more experienced people dancing and could not believe that everything they did was improvised. How did they know where to step, when to turn, and how to accent the music? I was obsessed with unlocking the secrets of the dance. My friends, not so much. They liked shag dancing more and tried to convince me to ditch Swing Dance Club for Shag Dance Club. That was the beginning of the end--of my friendship with them--not the dance. There was nothing better than the feeling of throwing down to a groovin' jazz song.

For the first few months of swing dancing, I barely knew that Lindy Hop existed. While East Coast Swing can be taught as 6-count Lindy Hop, it was not the case for my first set of dance teachers. After a few weeks, my first Lindy Hop teachers, Kayla and Russell, took over teaching. Though I had become hooked on dancing before they started teaching, Lindy Hop was what made me fall in love with dancing. It was like the feeling of wearing sunglasses in a dim room. Yes, I could see everything decently before; yet, after taking them off, things were suddenly bright and crystal clear. Lindy Hop felt revolutionary to my dancing because it was so dynamic and vivid. East Coast Swing and West Coast Swing suddenly felt flat and lacking in comparison. Every lesson with Kayla and Russell was the highlight of my week. They taught me how to start unlocking the mystery of the dance by learning to listen and work with my dance partner.

After just a few weeks of Lindy Hop lessons, Kayla convinced me to go dancing with her two hours away in Asheville, North Carolina. Michael Gamble and his Rhythm Serenaders were playing, and she promised that it would be well worth the trip. Kayla was right. I credit dancing to live music as the number one reason why I still dance Lindy Hop. There is nothing more magical than dancing your heart out, looking in front of you, and seeing the band throwing this lively energy back at you. There is a special partnership between the dancer and the musician. You feel this need to honor the musicians' passion and dedication by matching it with your own.

After that fateful night in Asheville, I had caught the travel bug. I started signing up for dance events, mainly outside of North Carolina. Imagine getting the opportunity to meet hundreds of new dancers from all over the country and the world. I could not believe how talented everyone was and how different every single dance could be. At the same time of this period of growth, I reached a point of stagnation back in Boone. Russell, my Lindy Hop teacher,

had graduated, and Kayla did not want to teach without him. Although Lindy Hop was flourishing throughout the world, it was dying in Boone. I had two choices: let it die or save it.

I started teaching Lindy Hop after less than a year of dancing. It was a sometimes-overwhelming learning curve, and I could not have done it without my teaching partner, Tristan. I met him the spring of my freshman year yet did not talk to him much because he, at first, preferred to dance West Coast Swing. Luckily, Tristan came to his senses after a summer of taking Lindy Hop lessons. Together, we could and had to save Boone's Lindy Hop scene. It was an uphill battle against the President of Swing Dance Club, who only liked West Coast Swing and was determined to replace Lindy Hop with poorly taught, emotionless East Coast Swing lessons. After months of pleading and persistence, Tristan and I were granted permission to finally bring Lindy Hop lessons back to Swing Club.

What Tristan and I lacked in experience, we made for it up with passion and enthusiasm. When I first started teaching, I did it more out of necessity than desire. I never joined the dance with the intention of doing more than learning and dancing. Yet, once I started teaching, I realized how much fun it was. I got to share my love and knowledge with others and help grow the legacy of Lindy Hop. It also helped me grow as a dancer. I had to understand, evaluate, and then articulate all of the movements in the dance.

I began leading Lindy Hop because I reasoned that it was unfair to expect new leads to learn something if I could not do it myself. Through leading, I have reached a deeper understanding of the dance. It is now much easier to help all of my students grow as dancers and to sympathize with the challenges that both leads and follows face in their dancing. Leading is also how I began to narrow down the topic for my thesis.

As a lead, I experienced the challenges of being a woman in a man-dominated role. Although other women lead Lindy Hop, leads are mainly men. As I occasionally took lessons as a lead and listened more closely as a follow, I realized how important it is to use inclusive language. When teachers referred to leads as exclusively “guys” or other male-gendered words, it made me feel less welcome as a woman. Although it did not stop me from leading, it definitely discouraged me and made me feel less included. As I experienced this again and again, I started to wonder how inclusive the Lindy Hop community truly is. Although some teachers and people talk about inclusivity and take up practices that follow these ideals, not everyone does. Through conversation both in person and on social media platforms, people are trying to be more welcoming, yet, through my personal experiences, it has become apparent that the actions have not caught up to the wishes and goals of the community. After noticing a gap in research relating to inclusivity in the Lindy Hop community, I began to develop my own thesis. My research focuses on the intersection of Lindy Hop and gender inclusivity and questions how welcoming the community truly is. The next section introduces the reader to the relationship between gender and Lindy Hop and the necessity of examining this relationship in the context of the dance.

Chapter 1

The Ghost of Dancers Past:
How the History of Lindy Hop Influenced My Research

The Intersection of Lindy Hop and Gender

Lindy Hop is revolutionary in its attention to gender equality. Many traditional and older partnered dances, such as ballroom-style dances and Latin dances, relegate men to a leading position and women to a following position. They are based off of age-old ideas that men should be dominant over women. In Lindy Hop, any gender is open to dance any role (i.e., women, men, or any other gender can dance either as a lead or follow or both) at any time. It is important to note that, from my experience, women and nonbinary genders are more likely than men to learn how to both lead and follow.

I have been involved in the Lindy Hop community, both as a dancer and a teacher, for over three years. While our community is by no means perfect, in my experience Lindy Hoppers are working to be more inclusive and open. For example, many dance events have recently changed the name of a common competition, the Jack and Jill, to an alternative name, such as the Mix and Match (Competition, 2017). Their point is that the name Jack and Jill implies that the man leads and the woman follows. In the modern age of Lindy Hop, the lead does not have to be a man, and the follow does not have to be a woman. By changing the name, they hope to be more welcoming and make all genders feel comfortable dancing any role. This aspect is important not just to the Lindy Hop community, but to society in general, because the dance has the potential to provide a safe space for people of all genders. Lindy Hop is a place where people can have fun and learn how to be a better and more inclusive person. The community is consistently, especially recently, discussing issues such as sexism, careful language choices, and how to stay true to the positive spirit of the dance. Many of these discussions occur either in person or in online forums, such as Facebook or blogs. Lindy Hoppers want to honor the origin of the dance,

which started as a revolutionary street dance among African Americans in Harlem, New York (Unruh, 2011).

To explore the status of gender minorities within Lindy Hop, I ask whether how values of gender inclusivity play out in the community, and to what effect? Additionally, I explored the concept of all genders dancing all roles and how that promotes empowerment. My main question focuses on how the idea of gender is accepted and acknowledged within the Lindy Hop community. Through my research, using interviews with people active in the community, observations at dances, and my own experiences within the Lindy Hop community, I examined the intersection between the conversations surrounding gender in the Lindy Hop community and how welcome gender minorities actually feel in the community. I found that there is a gap between the discussion of community members and what gender minorities are experiencing.

History of Lindy Hop and Gender

Lindy Hop is a lively swing dance that is paired with fast, syncopated,¹ swing-era jazz music. It is danced in both an open position, which consists of the lead's left hand in the follow's right hand, and a closed position, which keeps the hand connection but is closer and adds the lead's right hand on the follow's back (Wade, 2011). The basic beat, also known as the structure, of the dance is eight counts: a step on both the first and second count, a syncopated triple-step on the third and fourth count, a step on both the fifth and sixth count, and a syncopated triple-step on the seventh and eighth count. The dance also includes a six-count structure: a step on both the first and second count, a syncopated triple-step on the third and fourth count, and another syncopated triple step on the fifth and sixth count. Although these two types of moves make up the majority of the structure of the dance, any two or more counts can be added spontaneously to

¹ Syncopation is the uneven splitting of the beat.

the dance (Wade, 2011). Due to the fast nature of both the dance and the music (up to 300 beats per minute), the leader and follower need to be able to quickly react to the music. Accomplished through practice and repetition, Lindy Hoppers are able to both lead and follow precise movements through muscle memory and an agile mind. All of this would not be possible without the original Lindy Hoppers. Thanks to their spirit and efforts, the dance has evolved from the nooks and crannies of Harlem, New York.

The Origin of Lindy Hop

In 1927, Charles Lindbergh made his famous trans-Atlantic flight. While he was making history in the air, African Americans in Harlem were busy making history on street corners and in dance halls. Evolved from the Charleston, Lindy Hop started as a street dance. It most likely got its name from a catchy newspaper headline for Lindbergh's voyage: "Lindy Hops for St. Louis." Shorty George is commonly credited for naming the dance (being a street dance, historians have to rely on oral histories for information) and is known for being one of the first Lindy Hoppers (White, 2013). Though created in the late 1920's, the dance was not popularized until World War II (Wade, 2011). During this time, Shorty George's dance group and he were the first Lindy Hoppers to ever appear on film and to set the stylistic foundation for Lindy Hop in the 1930's (White, 2013). Named Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, they were also famous for their appearances in Hollywood movies. Directors liked to showcase the dance due to its nature and style, which were considered shocking for the time (Crease, 2012).

Swing-era jazz began in New York City in the late 1920's. It rose to popularity around 1932 and peaked for about a decade. Though its growth and popularity was mainly fueled by the rise of Lindy Hop, its success was largely contingent on the rise of media technology. The birth of audio recordings in the mid-1920's led to precise and authentic recordings of swing-era jazz

(Spring, 1997). Through this medium, the music was able to develop stylistically and be heard throughout the country.

Lindy Hop's jazz music featured an original and complex mix of instruments, syncopated rhythm, and patterns. Swing-era jazz struck out from the older forms of jazz, both inspiring and being inspired by Lindy Hoppers. The unique style showcased "four-four rhythms, pizzicato string bass, guitar, prominent drumming, and riffs" (Spring, 1997, 183). It also utilized sections of grouped instruments, such as different types of brass and reeds, which operated in call-and-response patterns, harmonies, breaks, riffs, and solos. The music was a success, and live swing bands became a staple at the Savoy, Lindy Hop's famous dance hall and the first racially integrated ballroom (Spring, 1997).

Lindy Hop was more than just dancing to some music. Based in improvisation and freedom of expression, Lindy Hop provided African Americans, especially women, with an escape from the adversity and oppression that they faced from racism and sexism. Their bodies were frequently sexualized to the point of being seen as "dirty" and "promiscuous." Black women found Lindy Hop to be an outlet for rebellion. Most importantly, it was a way for them to reclaim their bodies and sexuality and throw it back in their oppressors' faces (Unruh, 2011). Their hardships during the industrial and post-industrial revolution led to inspiration for innovative cultural expression (Stovall, 2015). This dance was formed as a response to the oppression that all minorities were facing. Author Black Hawk Hancock, an associate professor of sociology at DePaul University, describes the dance as a way to celebrate their culture and rebel against white oppression (Hancock, 2013). Ironically, white society became involved in Lindy Hop in the 1930's and 1940's. Although some white people appropriated the dance and "re-named" it the Jitterbug, at the core it was still the same dance. After the 1940's, the dance

began to fade in popularity (Hancock, 2013) or develop into other dances, such as hand dancing (White, 2013).

Lindy Hop: The 1980s Revival

While the dance originated in the African American community, today it is predominantly danced by white people (Livingston, 2012). The dance moves may resemble their original styling, yet now exist outside the community and context of their origin (Funk-Hennigs, 2002). Lindy Hop's revival began in the late 1980s. Frankie Manning is credited as one of the leading figures in this comeback. As one of the original Lindy Hoppers, Manning helped the dance regain popularity in both the streets and in movies (Manning and Millman, 2007). Although the dance was brought back by one of the original dancers, it was now out of the context of its original culture. Lindy Hop may be experiencing a comeback, but it does not have the same demographics as the original practitioners. Today, the white community appears in much higher numbers than the black community in both dance scenes and dance events on local and global levels.

Lindy Hop exchanges are events, usually lasting for one weekend, that a dance scene hosts. They hire bands to play at the event, and out of town dancers sign up for the event and attend it. People might travel across states or even the globe to attend an exchange. Samantha Carroll is interested in exchanges as a source of "embodied discourse." Exchanges are a chance for people from different scenes and cultures to come together and share their experiences (2006). The issue is that events are not that diverse. Michael Livingston II attended the International Lindy Hop Championships, a popular Lindy Hop event. He interviewed Sonny Allen, one of the first inductees in the International Lindy Hop Hall of Fame. Allen described his disappointment at being one of the few African Americans in attendance. He hopes to encourage

more African Americans to learn the dance and help them continue what was historically theirs even as it grows into an international scene (Livingston, 2012).

Samantha Carroll expands on the international aspect of Lindy Hop and the importance of exchanges through her research on Melbourne, Australia's Lindy Hop scene. Home to a few thousand swing dancers, Melbourne's scene is considered "a leisure product marketed to and consumed by mainstream, urban, white youth in dance classes, workshops and regular balls and dances" (Carroll, 2006, p. 448). They are an insulated group who do not seek to create dance opportunities beyond those offered by the dance school. Through their isolation and weekly social dances, Melbourne dancers maintain a strong local culture and style. While this may seem like a positive practice, it conflicts with Lindy Hop's core idea of exchange. Carroll describes how "for dancers... the dance floor is the most important public discursive space" (2006, p. 453). It is where people express their opinions and exchange ideas through movements and speech. While a local exchange of ideas is still positive and important, having exchanges with people and scenes outside of one's local area can help create a more global and cultured dancer. As the international scenes flourish, it is important for these dancers to reflect back on the origins of Lindy Hop and question the new context of the dance.

Why Does Lindy Hop Exist Today?

Even if the dance once again becomes popular in African American culture, it will still be out of its original historical and social context of the 1930s. It will no longer be the same source of rebellion. So why do people dance it today? It could simply be because dancing is fun. Lisa Wade highlights and offers another possibility: its unique power dynamic between the lead and the follow. The follow is not simply passive, and the lead is not simply active; instead the two negotiate an exchange of power. It occurs naturally as the two dancers move through the song

and being to understand each other's movements. Wade believes that the dance has the ability to give people power outside of the dance context and help them create social change (2011). In other words, it created social change in the 1930s and 1940s, and it now has the power to create a different type of social change in the modern day.

Lindy Hop began and still exists on the premise of self-expression and freedom. No matter the era, people, especially minorities, will continue to fight for their rights and their future. Even though it is no longer the beginning of the minority-fueled Industrial Revolution (Stovall, 2015), where blacks provided labor and received little recognition or compensation in return, black women are still, at times, viewed as "naturally promiscuous" (Unruh, 2011, p. 215), and economic change and bigotry still exist. They may not appear in their old forms, but as long as capitalism still flourishes and prejudices continue, so will similar issues, such as today's fight for equal rights among genders (Wejnert & Rodriguez, 2015). Lindy Hoppers face frustration and hatred with determination and spirit.

Lindy Hop is about more than moving one's feet to music. It is a fully immersive, mind and body form of social expression. One must dance Lindy Hop to understand what it and the community are truly about. When I first joined the Lindy Hop community, it was just a fun dance to me. I loved the music and the freedom, yet I left the dance on the dance floor. After becoming more involved in the community and starting to teach Lindy Hop lessons at Appalachian State University, I started delving deeper into the history and origins of Lindy Hop. It felt wrong and incomplete to continue leaving Lindy Hop on the dance floor because it was never just a dance. It is about freedom and fighting for what you believe. It is about always claiming your body as your own and nobody else's. By becoming both a dancer and a scholar, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of why the dance began and why it is still here today. It

also gave my own dancing more meaning. I was no longer just dancing to move around and have a good time. I was now also dancing to keep alive a tradition that is much more powerful than a good beat and my two feet.

Research Plan

To examine how gender minorities are perceived and treated in Lindy Hop communities, I conducted ten interviews and participant observations at a dance event called The Snowball, held annually in Stockholm, Sweden. This location and event are well suited for addressing the research questions, as it is a well-established event that hosts about 1,400 people from all over the world. Additionally, Sweden's dancers, in collaboration with the United States' dancers, were a key part in creating the 1980's revival of Lindy Hop. For my interviews, the participants consisted of dancers, teachers, musicians, and an organizer. I asked participants about their experiences with Lindy Hop and its relation to gender in order to examine if the alleged reputation of Lindy Hop aligned with the actual perspectives of those involved in the Lindy Hop community. For my observations, I focused explicitly on the interactions between dancers of different genders both on and off the dance floor. As an active member of the Lindy Hop community, I also drew from my own experiences as data points in this autoethnographic tradition. I was able to reflect on how my own experiences have aligned with what interviewees shared and, using my pre-existing knowledge of gender issues in that community, make keen observations at The Snowball.

Research Site

I travelled to Stockholm, Sweden to collect data at The Snowball, which runs from December 26th through January 1st. Currently celebrating its 13th year of existence, this event is a combination of dance classes, recorded music, live music, and competitions. It features four

main types of Afro-American dances (Lindy Hop, Balboa, Vernacular Solo Jazz, and Blues), twenty-four internationally renowned and hailed teachers, and seven bands from four different countries (The Snowball, 2017). There are five main competitions at the event: “The Challenge [*sic*],” “Lindy hop [*sic*] Luck of the Draw,” “Balboa Luck of the Draw,” “Solo vernacular jazz/charleston [*sic*],” and the “Invitational Lindy” (Competition, 2017). The competitions test both the individual and team’s ability to adapt to the music and offer cash prizes to the winners.

The event is hosted at The Clarion Hotel, which features large ballrooms for dances and smaller rooms for classes. It is also where many of the dancers choose to stay for the duration of the event (Conferences, 2017). The pricing for the event varies depending on the package. It ranges from the Gold Pass, which includes 26 classes, all the dances, and additional classes for the cost of 4,100 sek (approximately \$504.95), to the Bronze Pass, which only includes the dances for the price of 2,300 sek (approximately \$293.27) (Event Pricing, 2017).

Participants

During my time at The Snowball, I engaged in interviews with ten different people. Of those ten, six people identified as men, and four identified as women. Seven of my participants engaged in the community beyond being a dancer as either a teacher, musician, or event coordinator. Their ages ranged from 26 years to 59 years, and they currently live in Norway, Sweden, the United States, England, Germany, and Australia. In regards to dance experience, the newest dancer had 5 years of experience, while the most veteran dancer had 38 years of experience. My interviews ranged from 9 minutes to 34 minutes long.

I recruited my participants by making a post on the Facebook event page for The Snowball. My request was the following:

I am searching for participants of any gender who are interested in doing an interview regarding their experience with Lindy Hop and the Lindy Hop community. My requirements are that the participant has been dancing and involved in Lindy Hop for at least three years. Please private message me if you are interested. (personal Facebook post, 2017)

I was able to arrange half of my interviews (5/10) through this method. I approached the rest of my participants at the event itself during classes and dances. I talked a lot about my research and goals during my time at The Snowball, and asked for an interview from anyone that seemed interested. I wanted to learn more about dancers' experiences and perspectives on participation and equality within Lindy Hop and the event itself. My only constraints for the dancers were that they have at least three years of involvement within the Lindy Hop community, so that they had time to become immersed in the subculture. I was curious to see whether the different interviewees had any overlap in perspectives or had traditionally gendered views about certain topics.

I also interviewed an organizer to ask how or if the event does anything to empower and protect gender minorities. I wanted to see if gender affected their choice of teachers or band members. With the band members and teachers, I had planned to ask them about their views of gender equality within the Lindy Hop community and their personal experiences related to this topic. I believed that interviewing these five types of people at The Snowball, along with observing the event as a whole, would afford me proficient insight into the event's connection to gender. After recruiting my participants, I focused on collecting my data through semi-structured interviews and participant observations.

Data Collection Process: Interviews and Observations

I used a combination of semi-structured interviews and observations for my data collection process. Semi-structured interviews offer a space to ask a combination of open and guided questions. They are also time-efficient, and I could plan in advance when they would happen (Doody and Noonan, 2013, p. 30). For my interviews, I originally wanted to ask each person a slightly different set of questions. With my dancers, I intended to ask them about inclusivity within the community and the event itself. I wanted to know whether or not they felt that their gender was relevant to their identity as a dancer. With the organizers, I thought that I would ask them questions centered around why they chose to be a staff member at the event, what policies they have to make participants feel safe, and if they had any policies that focused on including different genders for teachers and band members. Lastly, with both the teachers and band members, I wanted to ask about their experiences in the community as teachers and musicians.

After the first few interviews with varying “categories” of people in terms of both gender and their community roles, I realized that I really did not need to ask anyone different questions depending on their role. It felt necessary to recruit people from different roles in the community, yet asking everyone more or less the same questions was a better indicator of whether or not their role affected their response. To clarify, if I asked role-specific questions, it would guide participants to focus on how their role affected their identity and experiences. It also felt more natural to ask broader questions, such as, “Share with me how your gender influences your identity as a dancer,” instead of, “How do you feel your experience as a musician compares to musicians of other genders and experience?” By not mentioning one’s role in the question, people had the choice of whether or not they felt that their role was relevant.

During the interviews, I wanted to see if my participants would share their perspectives on “hot topics,” such as the renaming of a Lindy Hop competition. Traditionally called the Jack and Jill, this competition tests the connection and quick thinking between randomly paired dancers. It recently faced backlash for its gender-normative name, which implied that only men, “Jacks,” can lead and only women, “Jills,” can follow. Lisa Wade, in her article about feminism within Lindy Hop, describes how “lindy hoppers [*sic*] are degendering the lead/follow dynamic ... and in general, the conventional language for referring to roles is not ‘men’ and ‘women’ or ‘guys’ and ‘girls’ but (the grammatically incorrect) ‘leads’ and ‘follows’” (2011, p. 231). In an effort to be more inclusive towards men who follow, women who lead, and those who do not identify with either gender, Lindy Hop scenes have sought out different alternatives to the traditional names.

The Snowball is currently calling their version the “Lindy hop [*sic*] Luck of the Draw” (Competition, 2017). This is their first year not calling it the historical name, the Jack and Jill. During my time at the event, I wanted to see if my participants would bring up this well-discussed, yet rather new, topic. Doing this type of exploratory research was helpful because this community, an area of study, that has little material or guidance. By keeping my questions casual and open-ended, I had the opportunity to “explore new paths” within my research (Doody & Noonan, 2013, p. 30) and learn what opinions participants were willing to share. In addition to learning from my participants, I also gathered data through my own observations and experiences as a dancer and an attendee of The Snowball.

The participant observations method of my research focused on my experiences at The Snowball and as a dancer during the past four years. I chose this method of research because dancing is focused around involvement. I would not truly understand Lindy Hop and its

complexities unless I was a part of it. As others (Franko, 2016; Wade, 2011; Zebracki, 2016) have suggested about the idea of ethnography and autoethnography within dancing, the dancer is constantly changing between dancer and audience, both performing and critiquing oneself and others. My own role within the Lindy Hop community is advantageous in a similar way because my deeper understanding of the dance and my involvement with it would help me guide interviews and analyze the data collected from them. At The Snowball, I was able to both blend in with other dancers and analyze interactions around me on a level that a non-Lindy Hopper could not achieve.

I purchased a Silver Pass (with a focus on Lindy Hop) for The Snowball, which means that I had full access to 16 classes, all the dances, and the New Years dance. I had the opportunity to observe dancers in casual, class, and dance settings. I wanted to see how the teachers structured their lessons and whether or not gender was relevant or discussed. I was curious whether or not they used gender- or dance role-inclusive language and learning methods. With the musicians, I wanted to record the amount of female vs. male presenting musicians in each band and within the event in general. I was curious to see how many women were in positions of leadership within the band. I also wanted to observe how present the event organizers were within the event and how readily available they were to address issues that arose, especially those related to sexual harassment or making people feel safe. Lastly, I planned to record my general observations and feelings towards the event, such as the layout of the dance space and the pacing of the event. I thought that all of these factors together would give me a well-rounded overview of The Snowball and the dance community.

After completing my research, I can now see that the objectives listed in the paragraph above were too specific. My research is about the community as a whole, not just The Snowball,

so it did not feel very relevant to record specific numbers (such as ratios gender for musicians). For me, the event was more about having easy access to a diverse group of dancers from various countries and communities and less about the context of the event itself. This became apparent to me as I began to transcribe and code my data. The following section addresses this essential step in organizing my research.

Data Analysis Strategy

After I conducted my interviews, I organized them into categories based upon recurring themes and ideas in my participants' answers. These categories are: 1) what does Lindy Hop mean to you? 2) gender influence of men, 3) gender influence of women, 4) men/women power imbalance, 5) creating community discussion, 6) community welcomeness, 7) the future of Lindy Hop, 8) the non-binary elephant in the room. The combination of interviews and participant observations helped me to analyze different perspectives on gender minorities. I used an inductive analysis technique as my data analysis strategy. From my analysis, I was able to draw conclusions on gender inclusivity in the Lindy Hop community. My abilities to both code and analyze my research were dependent on my knowledge and experience as a dancer and a student. I would not be able to accurately process my research if I did not understand both the dance and proper research methods. The next section focuses on my experience as both a dancer and scholar.

Research Competence

I have been a dancer and member of the Lindy Hop community for over three years. I have danced Lindy Hop in North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Georgia, Costa Rica, and Sweden. On a local level, I am Appalachian State University Swing Club's event coordinator and Lindy Hop teacher. I research possible dance events (usually out-of-state and

one weekend long) that club members can attend, promote them, and create financial aid scholarships to encourage new dancers to come to these events. I teach Lindy Hop every week for two hours along with mentoring future teachers. Through teaching, I have gained a greater understanding and appreciation for the dance. Since I started dancing the beginning of my freshman year of college, I have participated in 34 dance events, 30 of which were outside of the state of North Carolina. For Lindy Hop, most dance events are one weekend long. I was able to squeeze in these weekends between long weeks of studying and researching my way through my undergraduate studies.

Throughout the past three and a half years at Appalachian State University, I have gained experience in creating and presenting research, interviewing, and writing. The summer after my freshman year, I had an internship in the Social Media Department at Blue Cross/Blue Shield North Carolina. I independently researched topics, such as how to properly use Instagram, and then presented them to my superiors. I have also learned about proper writing methods and have written numerous academic research papers. For example, in the fall of my junior year (for my honors seminar), I researched the question “Do men play more sports than women?” and wrote a 15-page research paper proposal on the topic. As a sociology student, I have taken coursework that focused on proper research methods and writing skills. I took Research Methods I and II, which included lessons and projects on interviews, how to choose a research method to fit one’s research topic, and how to use statistical data analysis software, such as SPSS. For Research Methods I, I chose to do my research and interview on why people dance Lindy Hop.

During my sophomore year of college, my Research Methods I sociology professor required us to complete a research proposal on a topic of our choice. It felt like the perfect opportunity to learn more about the history of Lindy Hop. I delved into the history and beginning

of Lindy Hop, yet did not explore the current revival. My senior year of college, my sociology professor for my senior capstone class gave us the option to write a research proposal for our final project. They warned us to pick a topic that we were passionate about. Lindy Hop was a no-brainer. Building on my research from sophomore year, I started to go beyond the history of Lindy Hop and into the current revival. I knew that I wanted my research proposal to be about today's community, yet I was stumped on what I wanted to focus on. Delving into peer-reviewed journals and books, I decided to look for what was missing instead of what already existed.

While there are many resources regarding the history of Lindy Hop and its focus on racism, I found much less information on the revival of Lindy Hop. One of the largest gaps in present-day literature on Lindy Hop is information regarding the community's focus on gender equality and gender-related issues. I see informal discussions about it happening every day in real life. The earlier works on the revival no longer reflect the current mission and opinion of the population. I want to provide updated information through my current research.

My thesis focuses on Lindy Hop's potential to create social change, specifically in relation to gender equality. Due to its history of gender equality and self-expression, paired with its current focus on being a welcoming community, Lindy Hop can be a dance that provides a safe community for gender minorities. I want to research where the Lindy Hop community is now in regards to gender-related issues. With its natural affinity for bringing people and communities together, I believe that the dance has the potential to address and alleviate differences through discussion. I want to find out whether the current discussion aligns with the everyday actions of the community. You might be wondering why this is important. In the next section, I explore the gap in research and why my thesis is important for those both inside and outside the Lindy Hop community.

Significance

Research Gap and Solution

I offer an up-to-date cultural accounting of the current global Lindy Hop community and analyzing how welcoming and accepting it is to gender minorities. Research on Lindy Hop already covers information on its history (e.g. Crease, 2012; Hancock, 2013; White, 2013) and style (Spring, 1997), yet lacks an existing body of knowledge regarding personal accounts and opinions of modern Lindy Hoppers. As described previously, Lindy Hop can create positive social change, especially in regards to gender minorities. Recent research on leading and following power dynamics (Wade, 2011) shows how Lindy Hop has set the stage for a welcoming environment, but there is not enough current research yet to show how well the actors will perform. As the community rapidly grows and changes, Wade's research does not reflect the current discourse of the community because dialogue about gender inclusivity was not as prevalent seven years ago. Her research was a helpful reflection of the Lindy Hop community in 2011 and my research focuses on the interests and issues of today's community.

The conversation on gender inclusivity in the Lindy Hop community is growing every day, yet very little research exists on the topic. The lack of more recent sources means that it is hard to gauge the community's progress in comparison to a few years ago. I will provide, through my research, a diverse set of interviews and opinions from a variety of dancers. As far as I have seen and read, I have yet to encounter one source that utilizes multiple sets of interviews and observations. Additionally, my research will involve dancers from all over the world. Through my interviews and observations, I will compare my results to past research and show how the Lindy Hop community has changed in regards to gender inclusivity and how it can create change beyond the community in the future.

Broader Impacts

Life is hard, and Lindy Hop can ease this burden. Every day, people, especially gender minorities, face oppression and difficult situations (Austin, 2016; Salter, 2017). Lindy Hop is viewed as a safe community and has already created positive social change beyond the dance. The more people that are part of the community, the more momentum we have to support gender minorities and allies. The Social Control Theory emphasizes this idea (Sanja, Maria, & Christopher, 2016). It describes the how more connected one is to society, the less deviant one's behavior is. If Lindy Hop is the community that connects people together by promoting gender equality and inclusivity, then a lack of such a community can lead to dissonance and the oppression of gender minorities. The deviant is someone who is not affiliated with a community. The beauty of Lindy Hop is that it focuses on what brings people together instead of what breaks them apart. Through something as deceptively simple as one song or a few minutes of dancing, people find something to connect with and start on a path of overcoming their differences.

Chapter 2

The Talk of the Town:
Analyzing Lindy Hoppers' Experiences with Gender

In general, I found that most of the participants were very open about their experiences and opinions regarding the Lindy Hop community. They demonstrated awareness of what was going on around them, and everyone provided at least a somewhat formed opinion about the community in relation to gender minorities. The most surprising aspect of my research was the lack of discussion surrounding gender minorities that were not women. During my interviews, I purposefully left my questions open-ended and always used “gender minorities” instead of “women.”

Of my ten participants, only two included non-binary people in their answers regarding gender minorities in the Lindy Hop community. When considering the guiding question of my thesis, which is whether or not the community is as open and accepting of gender as they claim to be, the fact that most participants solely correlated gender minorities with women is a strong point to consider in answering this question. In part II of my thesis, I will discuss the answers from my interviews and come to conclusions on the current state of the Lindy Hop community and what direction the community hopes to go in the future.

The Meaning of Lindy Hop

Lindy Hop is special because it is more than just a dance. In order to understand the reason why Lindy Hop is important to the Lindy Hop community, non-dancers, and me, one must first understand what the dance means to the lives of those involved with the Lindy Hop community. By learning first about the importance of Lindy Hop, one can better engage in the following information and understand the importance of this research.

When asked what Lindy Hop meant to them, all of my participants described it as something that is a key part of their social life, relationships, and identity. For some, the

community is what drew them to the dance. Stella,² a dancer from the United States, stuck with Lindy Hop because of this feeling. For her, “It’s not just you go to the class, you go to the dance, you go home. It does feel like a community of people, for better or worse... It’s a big reason why people get hooked on Lindy Hop” (Stella, personal interview, December 29, 2017). As suggested by Stella, when Lindy Hop becomes a major part of your community, it also becomes a major part of your life and experiences. Through this process, ideas, beliefs, and general thoughts become more heavily influenced by the Lindy Hoppers that one spends so much time around. When Stella refers to being part of the community “for better or worse,” she implies that not everything and everybody in the community is perfect or ideal, but for her and many others it still has an overwhelming number of redeeming qualities. Without Lindy Hop, most dancers would be missing an essential part of their identity and comfort.

Lucas, who frequently travels for his job, calls Lindy Hop his home. When recalling his experiences before starting Lindy Hop, he states: “I have a life before Lindy Hop and afterwards, but I hardly remember the life before.” The community is “much more important than the dance itself” (Lucas, personal interview, December 29, 2017). He humorously describes his actual house as the place where he does his laundry and Lindy Hop as his actual home. Due to his job, he spends much more time travelling internationally than living in his home in Germany. While travelling, Lindy Hop is one of the few things that remain more or less the same, no matter the country or the language. Even if he does not know a word that his dance partner is saying, he can still enjoy a fun dance with them. Lindy Hop is appealing to a variety of people, no matter their lifestyle or personality, because it starts with a dance and grows into a community. Even though

² All participants’ names are changed to protect their identity

not everyone travels as much as Lucas, they still heavily rely on the dance to make and maintain new friends.

Eric is another Lindy Hopper who strongly values the aspects of Lindy Hop that go beyond the dance. He says that Lindy Hop has been his “key social network for a number of years now.” When describing how he started dancing in the first place and its importance, he recalls, “I started classes when I started my PhD and I did have a bit with myself whether or not I would stop dancing or finish my PhD first. I have now given up my PhD, so dancing has won” (Eric, personal interview, December 28, 2017). For Eric, Lindy Hop is more than a dance and more than a community. It is his passion and a priority in his life. When talking about how he chose Lindy Hop over his PhD, something that many people might not understand or support, he did so with an air of acceptance and happiness. For Eric, his decision to pursue Lindy Hop over his PhD was not so much a choice as inevitability. After a certain amount of time spent dancing and being engaged in the community, Lindy Hop becomes a part of who you are.

Some dancers went beyond describing Lindy Hop as a community of friends; they viewed it as a family and essential part of their identity. Melody has been dancing for nine years and, throughout this time, has moved from one country to another. For her, Lindy Hop “felt like being part of a family.” While describing her relationship to the dance in more detail, she compared her love for the dance to a relationship: “I found something that somehow completes my life. People find a partner and are like ‘ooh this person completes my life’ - for me it was the dance, the passion involved in it. It gave a lot of sense to my dances having such passion” (Melody, personal interview, December 30, 2017). Melody draws a connection between the community and how being part of it makes her dancing better. By dancing with people who feel like family, and expressing her passion and love for the dance, her ability and joy of the dance

are enhanced. For Melody, the people in the dance are just as important, if not more, than the moves themselves. The people she interacts with are what bring the movements to life.

The relationships and connections made within the Lindy Hop scene are what make the dance what it is. Whether somebody identifies these aspects as a community, a family, a part of their identity, or something else, it still comes down to people wanting interactions beyond the dance. When I talk to many people, both inside and outside my interviews, nobody listed the reason that they stuck with the dance as just the dance itself. Yes, everyone loves Lindy Hop and it brings them fulfillment and joy, but the people who we dance with are most important.

Aiden, a dancer from the United States, described how he got into the dance community because of a woman. He really wanted to impress her, so he took Lindy Hop lessons and gained some skill and confidence in his dancing. Long story short, she dumped him soon after. Yet, when he talked about this somewhat unfortunate series of events, he didn't sound at all disappointed, and that wasn't just because he's married now. Instead, he was happy that, because of her, he was able to find a better relationship: one with Lindy Hop. Even though he got dumped, he pointed out, "I was left with the legacy of our relationship, which was the Lindy Hop scene, which was the greatest gift ever. And I don't think that she even dances anymore" (Aiden, personal interview, December 28, 2017). It is not one person, one experience, or one dance that makes or breaks the decision to be in the community. Instead, it is a culmination of wonderful friends and experiences that keeps people dancing long past midnight.

In the next two sections, I will discuss how men and women feel that their gender influences their identities as dancers. By contrasting these two sections against each other, I will demonstrate the differences in perspectives and self-awareness between men and women. While in broader social life, women are relatively equal in number to men yet are labeled as a minority

due to the history of female oppression. In the Lindy Hop community, women are a majority in number, yet still face sexism and oppression. They maintain a curious balance between being simultaneously a majority and a minority in the community. In exploring this contrast, I will help unravel what the Lindy Hop community needs to accomplish in order to create equality for all genders.

Gender Influence: Men

When asked about how their gender influences their identity as dancers, many of the men I interviewed discussed the advantages of leading, a dance role that most men choose. Generally, in the Lindy Hop community there are a greater number of followers than leaders. This, from what I have seen, is because most leads are men, and most women are follows. There are more women than men in the community, so there are more follows than leaders in the community. When talking to people at regular dance events and The Snowball about this, many people list gender expectations as a reason for this imbalance.

It is much more socially acceptable for women to take dance classes than men. Some men said that they have faced teasing and disbelief from their family and peers for being a dancer. If they still choose to dance, they risk further ostracism if they also choose to be a follow, which is traditionally a woman's role in the dance. Additionally, when beginning to dance, many people want to assimilate to those who are similar to them. In this case, if a man goes to a Lindy Hop lesson and sees that leads are mainly men, he is more likely to see leading as an obvious choice for him.

Leading is advantageous in the community because leads are a minority population. When talking about dancing at events, Alex, a man from Norway, says that he chose Lindy Hop, and in particular the lead's role, because he identifies with the classic "long stretches" of certain

movements within the dance (Alex, personal interview, December 30, 2017). Being a tall person, the more masculine movements of a lead's role fit his body type better. He also enjoys leading because you "can almost always find someone to dance with." For him, it was a logical choice because it fit both his physique and a need in the community for leads. Other men echoed his opinion. Eric (personal interview, December 28, 2017) agreed, "Being a male is more valuable within the community because of the apparent or general shortage of leads around." Though Lucas also discussed the value of being a lead in the community, he mentioned the pressure that comes with the role. While trying to learn blues dancing, he struggled to learn the stylization of the dance and "thought that if [he] danced with leaders [he] could copy them" (personal interview, December 29, 2017). He was able to use following as a tool to improve his leading and understand styling from those he admired. While this is a useful strategy for learning, not every Lindy Hopper has gotten this freedom of choice while learning to dance.

Before the past few years, dance roles were decided by gender. If you were a man, you were a leader, and if you were a woman, you were a follower. When Elias talked about when he first started Lindy Hopping decades ago, he said, "We didn't talk about leaders or followers; that's a modern construction... It was very unusual to see a man following even though the old timers did it" (personal interview, December 30, 2017). Aaron, another dancer who started 20 years ago, agreed that "it really didn't feel like a choice; at the time people didn't think about choosing" (personal interview, December 29, 2017). Additionally, both Elias and Aaron stated that even in the current openness of dance roles, they both prefer to lead and almost never follow. While they have chosen to stay with the roles that they started with, this does not necessarily mean that they have kept the same mindset. Aaron, in particular, is continuously conscious of his gender and role in a community that is becoming more open.

Aaron is careful about his word choice while teaching Lindy Hop because he does not want to “mansplain”³ to followers. Many times, he feels that followers in both classes and dances are told that being a good follower is to simply follow what their lead is asking. For him, “When I’m asking you to follow, when I’m asking you to do this thing, and like when the leader says something, respond with a yes and do this particular thing, then it’s not a diminishment of your status as a person or your status in this dance as an equal” (personal interview, December 29, 2017). Aaron wants followers to feel that they can follow in the dance, find space to express themselves, and be equal to their partner.

While trying to convey this concept, Aaron is always worried that it will come off wrong or, as a lead, that he cannot explain it from the right perspective. For Aaron, sometimes, “When [my partner] says things like that, it’s much easier to be heard as such . . . that’s one place where I feel [my role as a male leader] all the time” (personal interview, December 29, 2017). When the advice is coming from his partner, who is both a woman and a follower, the concept can, at times, be better heard and understood. My own experiences resonate with Aaron’s offered sentiment. When I teach Lindy Hop locally, I find it much easier to give advice to other people from my main dance role, following, rather than leading. Instead of telling leads how I think that it should be done from my somewhat limited experience on leading, I feel better giving advice to followers because I have much more experience and perspective on their role in the dance. We have a better sense of trust and understanding because I have gone through what they have, more or less.

Overall, being a lead is a pretty good deal. Leads are highly valued in the community because they are a minority in numbers. As a man, they get the benefit of being treated well

³ When a man assumes that a woman does not know something and attempts to explain it to her in a condescending manner

despite being a minority. For them, their gender history most strongly hinders them if they choose to forgo tradition and choose following over leading. It is difficult for men to be followers because they are both choosing an untraditional role and choosing to take on the role of a gender that has been historically a minority. When women break tradition and become leads, they are pursuing a role that has belonged to men, those who have historically held power. When men break tradition and become followers, they are pursuing a role that has belonged to women, those who have historically been oppressed. Even though the dance itself strives for equality, the history of gender still holds people back.

In the next section, this issue will become more apparent as one explores the relationship between women and gender in the Lindy Hop community. Coming from a historically minority perspective, women are more aware and affected by the influence of their gender in their dancing.

Gender Influence: Women

Women have a more complicated relationship between their gender and role in the dance in comparison to men. When I asked all of the women I interviewed about this relationship, they were quickly able to give me well-thought-out answers, while many of the men had not thought much or at all about this relationship. For women, this question led down different avenues. Some focused on their experiences trying to lead a woman. For Marilyn, she feels that “it’s harder for women who are trying to lead to find people who want to follow them sometimes, especially in Balboa, but in Lindy Hop as well” (personal interview, December 20, 2017). It can be hard to be a woman leading in the many communities that are predominately characterized by men leading. Though Marilyn acknowledges that she knew that it “was possible to do whatever I wanted,” possibility does not equal acceptance. If women cannot find people who want to follow

them in a dance, it is easy to get discouraged and feel alienated from a community that would better embrace them if they conformed to gender expectations.

One woman, Dita, primary leads in her community. She was bluntly asked by a man, “How do you handle boobs [while leading] considering you have boobs too?” (personal interview, December 28, 2017). Laughing at the memory, and slightly embarrassed that I taped her saying this, she said that she told the man, “It’s all good, we just don’t think about it.” It is frustrating to think how some people feel entitled to ask questions that make women feel even more unwelcome as leads. Nobody would dare ask a fat man how he can lead with a big belly in the way, so why is it acceptable to ask a similar question to a woman? It is frustrating how much adversity and intrusive questions women must face just to dance their desired role in the community.

In the Lindy Hop community, women need to be aware of the line between embracing our femininity and over-exaggerating it. One problem is that this line is not properly distinguished in dance classes. During Aaron’s last twenty years of teaching, he has found a problem in the community. When describing how some other people teach classes, he says that they often think, “‘I’m going to teach empowerment’ and they teach the followers sass, and sass is a really common conflation of weird gendered bullshit with empowerment. Sass isn’t empowerment inherently” (personal interview, December 29, 2017). When talking about sass, Aaron is referring to certain teachers who teach certain movements based upon common female stereotypes. He would prefer that followers are instead taught to express themselves in a way that fits their personality and style. Female empowerment and femininity is not about being sassy or any one way in particular; it is about being yourself, owning it, and not letting anybody else take that away from you. Instead, Aaron offers another way to promote this concept in class. Rather

than telling followers to act a certain way, he tries to “give followers responsibility in class.” It is not just about being a talented follower, it is about finding yourself in the dance.

Stella worries that female empowerment is getting lost in overly sexualized dancing. While sass is being taught in some classes, taking control of the dance through sexuality is being taught in other classes and social scenes. Stella gets frustrated when she sees pros call attention away from them dancing and performances through sexualized moves, flashy dresses, and behaviors. She has seen how dancers, especially young women, have started to believe that this is a necessary part of being a good dancer. She believes that “you can have [feminine qualities to your dancing] and not necessarily like hyper-sexualize and just trade in that currency of ‘do you think I’m sexy,’ then I’ve achieved my goal” (personal interview, December 29, 2017). Her goal is to be a talented dancer and be recognized and appreciated for her talent, not just her feminine qualities. Her dance partner, Aaron, reaffirms this idea:

It’s one of the things that I respect so much about [Stella]. Like, I think that [Stella] is beautiful, and I think that she like dances gracefully and dresses nice, but that’s not the selling point. She’s like, “I’m the shit. I might be pretty, but I can fucking really dance good. I might dress nice, but I can fucking really dance good. You might like my body, but I can really dance.” (personal interview, December 29, 2017)

It is not about boobs. It is not about how pretty that dress is. It is about one’s talent within the dance. It is about holding yourself with confidence and believing that how you express yourself on the dance floor is good enough. Stella hopes to see more of this attitude, “I would like to see people not aspire to that aspect of being feminine [of sexualization] within dancing, because I think that it’s BS... Like F that, be good at dancing, that’s totally enough” (personal interview,

December 29, 2017). What we can all learn from Aaron and Stella is to be ourselves and focus on dancing.

No matter the role, women face pressure relating to their gender. As a lead, it can be difficult to feel welcomed as a woman dancing a traditionally men's role. I have led in lessons where teachers have consistently referred to leads as "men" or where followers try to skip me in the rotation because they assumed that I was following. I have talked to women who have seen other women even be uncomfortable with the idea of being led by another woman. It is hard enough to break tradition and become a lead as a woman. Both men and women are making this move towards the freedom of choice difficult by not being open to change. If both genders want to see more equality in the dance, they need to acknowledge the disconnect between thought and action.

This section unpacks the balance between pursuing a dance role and still being able to have a healthy relationship with femininity and dancing. There is no reason to forgo one for the other. You can have boobs and still be a fantastic lead. You can identify as a feminine person without feeling pressured to dress provocatively or in a traditionally feminine manner. Pants and dresses do not make a good dancer; hard work and talent do. The next section explores this concept and its prevalence throughout the worldwide Lindy Hop community.

Men/Women Power Imbalance

The Lindy Hop community is still experiencing a problem of gender power imbalance between men and women in both the dance itself and especially in community leadership. Melody experienced this issue most strongly during her time living in Italy. It was her first dance scene, and, after gaining experience, she wanted to take on a leadership role. She felt and saw that because she was a woman, the men excluded and prevented her from starting to teach even

beginner lessons. She recalled how “there wasn’t much space for me to develop or teach. There were a lot of male leaders that would rather teach by themselves than pay a follower... rather than involve a female” (personal interview, December 30, 2017). It is baffling that a male leader would teach a partner dance alone rather than involve a follower, especially one who is a woman. It is like we are transported back to third grade when boys and girls still had those mystical cooties all over them.

Lucas, during his frequent travels around the world, saw this same issue in other places, “Often the person who is running the scene is a leader... and often the follows are only decoration, and I don’t like that very much” (personal interview, December 29, 2017). While it is encouraging that people are finally recognizing the issue and are talking about it, more needs to be done to change these imbalanced and male-dominated dance scenes. The trick is to create change that does not overcompensate into the other extreme. Two of my participants, Eric and Melody, are from Australia and talked extensively about their dance scene. While their experiences are not necessarily representative of the experience of the entire Lindy Hop population, it is important to understand the difficulty, yet importance, of creating balance in leadership positions. The following analysis of the Australian dance scene demonstrates the complexity of the situation.

The dance scene in Australia has changed over the past few years to create a more gender-inclusive environment in their dancing and leadership. Both Eric and Melody felt positive about the inclusiveness in the community, though they both noted some areas still in need of improvement. Eric talked about seeing an increase in women who teach, noting in particular one teaching pair that consists of a woman leading and another woman following: “[Two women teaching together in the scene] has been real lovely in the context of promoting the idea that role

is not necessarily about gender” (personal interview, December 28, 2017). It has helped dancers, especially newcomers, to feel more open and free to choose whichever dance role they prefer, or to switch between roles. It has also helped more seasoned members of the community, like Melody, feel that their gender is less relevant to their dance roles and decisions within the dance. Reflecting on her experiences at the local dances, she believes that “[she] very rarely felt that [her] gender has impacted [her] role in the Lindy Hop community” (personal interview, December 30, 2017). While the scene has developed and grown more inclusive of women, this achievement has some hidden consequences and concerns.

By making room for more women in teaching opportunities, the Australian dance scene has created a new gender imbalance. Instead of having a scene with mainly men in leadership, now it is tipping towards the opposite. While it is great that there is a teaching pair of two women, Eric also wishes “for the opposite to occur as well, to have two males. Women leading is much more prevalent than males following” (personal interview, December 28, 2017). Melody has noticed the same occurrence and noted that she has “definitely encountered more women open to leading than the opposite” (personal interview, December 30, 2017). There needs to be more instances of atypical lead/follow pairings of all types in order to create a more open mindset within all genders, not just women.

An open mindset is definitely possible. Melody is a part of the Balboa dance scene, which has a lot of crossover with the Lindy Hop scene and proudly shares that “for the past year now, we’ve had some huge changes where everyone is swapping roles, which is really cool because I’m pushing them to do it” (personal interview, December 30, 2017). She has been challenging people of all genders to swap roles, appealing to everyone’s competitive nature. Melody’s perseverance has paid off: “Now basically when you come to Sydney to a Balboa

beginners class you don't know who's leading or following" (personal interview, December 30, 2017). By pushing everyone equally to change roles, no matter their gender, everyone feels the freedom to dance with whom they want to. While this helps address the issue of dance roles, the scene still needs to consider the balance of leadership roles and emotional labor.

The Australian dance scene is facing a tough balancing act between including women in leadership roles, while also not overtaxing them with administrative work and emotional labor. While Eric happily said that more women are taking on leadership roles at weekly dances and larger events, he also worried that they are taking on too much. Eric's main concern is how "a large amount of emotional labor in the Lindy Hop community, certainly in Melbourne, is being done by women" (personal interview, December 28, 2017). This is because responsibility of leadership comes with the responsibility of organizing and educating others. They are also putting themselves in a position of scrutiny and judgment from their peers, especially those who are looking for mistakes instead of successes. The leadership in all dance scenes needs to have a gender balance in order to spread out emotional labor and administrative work. It will provide different perspectives during decision-making and help create a well-rounded community.

Through this insight into the Australian dance scene, one can begin to understand the different challenges in creating equality in leadership and teaching. As Eric alluded, some of the best tools to overcome this challenge are reflection and discussion. By analyzing the development of the community and talking about its direction with others, especially those different from oneself, scene leaders can help shape true equality and balance in the community. While it sounds simple and direct in theory, the execution of this plan is complicated. In the next section, I will discuss the complexity of creating this discussion.

Creating Dialogue

In the Lindy Hop community, there is a current movement to create open dialogue. In particular, people want to bring more attention to gender equality and creating safe spaces. Before I began my research, I was curious about the development and current state of these discussions in the community. While talking with Eric, he mentioned feeling lost on how to support women in the community. He, and other men that he talked to, wanted to help but were afraid of doing it in a wrong or potentially insulting way. Eric says that many men wish that women would tell more men how to be involved in a positive manner, yet also acknowledges that “we can’t rely on one side of this conversation to be making all the decisions. It needs to be a collaborative approach” (Eric, personal interview, December 28, 2017). Women should not be responsible for continuously educating men on what to do or how to behave. It needs to be a conversation instead of a lecture. Additionally, it should not be expected that one woman, or a handful, will represent the opinion of half the world’s population. Eric simply wants open and continuous conversation surrounding equality in the Lindy Hop community. The difficulty of this idea is that conversations surrounding gender equality are a relatively new concept, and many people feel that the conversation is not open to diverse perspectives.

One of my participants, Elias, who has been part of the community for decades, reflected on some aspects of Lindy Hop beyond the dance. Compared to when he started, “[Gender] was not discussed the way it is today, and if that is good or bad I have no opinion” (personal interview, December 30, 2017). He said that when he started Lindy Hop, nobody talked about gender or gender-related issues. If you were a man, you were a lead; if you were a woman, you were a follow. Safe spaces and rules regarding it did not exist. Now, for the most part, he has

remained separate and impartial from the current discussion. He instead wants to focus on the dance and improving his skills.

Elias chooses not to be part of the conversation because he feels that his views, which are more traditional, would not be welcome in the community. In his opinion, “You can’t say anything and... you have to watch your tongue all the time... if you want to have an opinion and you know that it’s not politically correct, then you can’t say it today” (personal interview, December 30, 2017). His response shows that he avoids discussion not just because he wants to focus on the dance, but also because he believes that the community is not accepting of different points of view. For Elias, it is not a conversation but a way for him to be criticized for potentially controversial opinions. Elias wants the community to be more welcoming of a variety of opinions and at least a base amount of respect for opposing views. Right now, he sees many people as “a lid on top of discussion.” I agree with Elias’s opinion and have personally seen, both in person and on social media, times when valid opposing ideas were shut down because they conflicted with majority and liberal views. We celebrate diversity and then shun it when it creates difficult discussion or challenges popular viewpoints. The Lindy Hop community needs to become more accepting of different opinions and make conversations that encourage everyone to have a voice.

We are dozens of pages into this thesis, and something obvious is missing from this research on gender minorities. If you cannot guess it, consider the term “gender minority” in comparison to “women as a minority.” There are more gender minorities than just women, yet almost all of my participants solely made the connection between gender minorities and women. This entire section has focused on conversations, yet consider how limited the discussions

currently are. In my next section, I will explore this gap in conversation and how we have excluded a muted voice in the community.

The Non-Binary Elephant in the Room

When I began my research, I wanted to gather information on all genders, including those who identify as non-binary. During my interviews, I was careful to use gender-neutral words and open-ended questions when talking about gender minorities. One of the most unexpected outcomes of the data collected from my interviews was that, of my ten participants, only two talked about non-binary gender minorities: Aiden and Dita. Everyone else, without guidance or language prompting, jumped straight to women when asked about their experiences with gender minorities in the Lindy Hop community. This has been an occurrence throughout the history of the Lindy Hop revival.

Aiden discussed the differences between now and the early 2000's in regards to how dancers thought of gender. When he first became involved in the Lindy Hop scene, nobody really knew about or discussed the idea of non-binary genders. He recalled a dance where, for an activity, he told people to split into two groups: women on one side and men on the other. At the time, it just seemed like an easy way to divide people. Looking back, he realized that this activity left no room for those who did not identify with either gender. Reflecting on this experience, he said, "It was like we hadn't encountered all these rules yet, like we weren't enlightened" (Aiden, personal interview, December 28, 2017). Now, he is much more careful to use inclusive language and tries to make everyone feel part of the fun. While Aiden is making changes to become more inclusive, more people need to understand the challenges that come with being non-binary.

Dita is another dancer who sympathized with the social distancing that many non-binary dancers regularly face. She thinks that this is due to the idea “that a lot of people have trouble understanding that they are not identifying with a specific gender” (personal interview, December 28, 2017). When people are faced with a concept that is different from their own selves and ideas, many people will reject or distance themselves from it. As part of the majority, binary individuals have the luxury of choice and can still interact with most of the community. Dita believes that binary people need to be more sympathetic and “that there’s a lot of things that people need to work on to understand that it’s not a phase, this is who they are” (personal interview, December 28, 2017). If people took the time to get to know non-binary individuals and seek out understanding instead of differences, we can create a more unified community.

That was it. After hours of interviews, my research on non-binary minorities trickles down to a few precious seconds of introspection and opinions. While they may not be the majority of the dance population, they still exist. It is strange that the Lindy Hop community claims to strive towards inclusion, yet people will not even discuss it when given the opportunity. Why is it so hard to get people to talk about non-binary individuals when they most likely interact with them at dances and are a part of the community? How can we create change if we will not even talk about it? In the following section, I will explore the future of the Lindy Hop community. Through the perspectives of different participants, I will unravel what the community feels that it needs to accomplish in order to continue creating positive change.

The Future of Lindy Hop

Looking at the future of Lindy Hop, many of the respondents desired more openness and inclusivity in the community. Specifically, Alex and Marilyn want it to be easier and more common to dance either role. Alex “would love to see more leads follow and more follows lead...

it will make you strong in the other role” (personal interview, December 30, 2017). If everyone is dancing both roles, it has the dual effect of making it a norm and creating a community of strong dancers. Marilyn agrees with this sentiment but is slightly apprehensive about its success in the current state of the community. She wants to see more inclusion in the community all around in regards to gender and to different levels of dancers. As she and other women, such as Dita, have experienced, “Sometimes it’s hard to break out of the mold” (personal interview, December 28, 2017). Not everyone is open to change. Marilyn believes that one of the first steps to creating a norm of acceptance is to “be respectful to people who don’t want to follow traditional gender roles” (personal interview, December 28, 2017). When people respect and appreciate each other, it is easier to overcome differences and create new friendships.

Aiden and Dita believe that an open mindset is essential to creating a better community. It is not only about taking specific actions, but instead listening to those who feel unwelcome. Aiden suggests that “as we go along, our eyes are open our ears are open... we can makes changes to how we interact” (personal interview, December 28, 2017). By being receptive to constant change, it will be a gradual and more natural process. Dita focused more on creating conversations with underrepresented groups. She feels that “we are all having trouble understanding the way they feel because we have never really asked them for their opinion. We need to really open up the conversation” (personal interview, December 28, 2017). By taking a more direct approach, we can know specifically what changes need to be made and create a plan to address them. When it becomes less of a general issue and more of a set of specific problems and situations, it is easier to humanize and empathize with others. Dita thinks that “having little videos of people sharing their experiences within the jazz community would be pretty fun and a great insight into what’s happening” (personal interview, December 28, 2017). When people

share their stories, others have a chance to listen and educate themselves on the problems that their peers are facing in the community.

Aaron wants teachers to create more equality between leaders and followers during classes. In regards to dance teachers, Aaron is frustrated by the message being taught: “What drives me insane is pandering disguised as empowerment... They tell the leaders like ‘just hold your arm out for a long time and let followers do their thing,’ which to me seems pandering” (Aaron, personal interview, December 29, 2017). Many followers are not being taught in class that they are equal to leads. I have seen it during the classes that I have taken. Many times, the classes focus on what the leaders have to do and then the followers are told to just follow it. There is little room for the follower to learn or find space in the dance. Aaron says that he, instead, instructs leaders to “lead the followers in a nice way and then followers do something cool” (personal interview, December 29, 2017). By changing the wording and focus during the lesson, it helps to emphasize the aspect of partnership and mutual appreciation in the dance.

While all of these perspectives on the future of Lindy Hop are valid and can create change in the community, I believe that we can take things a step further. In order to create strong and impactful change, we need to set broad goals for the next five to ten years and then create a plan, as a community, on how we will accomplish them. What we have done so far is not enough. What we currently expect for the future of the dance is not enough. We need to become a more welcoming community now, in both actions and words. If we do not, I think that we will lose the trust of gender minorities and their allies. The following section focuses strictly on my opinion. I will discuss my beliefs of what the future of the Lindy Hop community should do to achieve a welcoming and inclusive environment.

My Ideas on the Future of Lindy Hop

So far, we have journeyed through the general history and my personal history with Lindy Hop. I have discussed how the past has influenced the present and how it has inspired my research. Through my time at The Snowball, I was able to gather information and observe a consensus on the opinions of the community. I addressed both overlaps and gaps in discussion and then offered my participants' opinions on the future of Lindy Hop. While my research has helped me, and hopefully you as the reader, understand the current state of the community, this is not where it all ends. The journey is not complete. The following is, as my mentor, Joe Gonzalez, most accurately dubbed it, "Lily's Manifesto." In the following few paragraphs, I will outline my ideas and goals for the future of Lindy Hop.

We cannot just think our goals into fruition. We must instead make a plan and then take action. My proposal for the future of the Lindy Hop community is direct: 1) create open discussions in the community where everyone's opinions are truly welcome, 2) acknowledge the gap between our words/goals and our actions, 3) commit to setting the example for inclusivity. By having a set of clear goals, we can begin to work towards change and hold ourselves accountable.

The community is stunting its potential to change by refereeing people's opinions. In making only certain opinions acceptable to even mention, nevertheless discuss, we are creating a divide in the community. Many people will not even listen to an opinion or belief that is different from their own, especially if it is considered controversial. You do not have to agree with someone's opinion in order to listen to it. People need to take a calming breath and try to understand other people's perspectives instead of immediately attacking them. By showing respect and a willingness to listen, more people will feel comfortable having open conversations

with those different from them. Just because people have different perspectives, like Elias's traditional approach to dancing, it does not mean that their thoughts should be excluded from the conversation.

We will not achieve our goal of an open community until we listen to those whose voices have been silenced. People talk about creating safe spaces and welcoming others, yet do not dedicate enough time to listening to those who have experienced adversity and felt excluded. We need to listen before we act. The potential issue in this idea is that it forces gender minorities to provide the emotional labor backbone of the community. It feels inevitable because they are the only ones who truly know what they need and how to accomplish it. I think that, while this burden cannot be completely taken away, others can help make it a little less heavy. From my experience, emotional labor feels heaviest when I have to repeat myself or feel as if others are not putting in an equal amount of work. The community can respect and acknowledge the efforts of gender minorities by listening carefully and then participate in creating change based upon their suggestions.

The next step towards creating change is acknowledging where we have failed so far in our mission for gender equality. In my opinion, our greatest failure is the gap between our words and goals and our actions in response to them. Quite frankly, we have talked too much and done too little. Talking will get us nowhere if we encounter the situations we talk about and then do nothing or add to the problem. I have seen many discussions, both online and in person, about using gender-inclusive language in class. Yet, when I go to classes on both a local and global level, I still hear some teachers assign gender-specific words to dance roles. I have attended classes as a lead and then cringe as a teacher announces "Ok men, now do 'x,y,z' with your follow." This is not good enough. Even when I have talked to teachers who make these mistakes,

too many have responded with saying that it is not a big deal or that it is hard for them to adapt. Do you know what's hard? Going to a class where you are the only woman who leads in a sea of men or where follows skip you in the partner rotation because they assume that you are not a lead.

Teachers and other leaders in our community need to set the example for inclusivity because they are our main agents of socialization. They are the people that experienced dancers, and especially beginners, look at to create the standard for the community as a whole. If a teacher creates a classroom environment where they enforce gender roles, then students will think that this is the norm. If a teacher encourages everyone to dance every role and uses inclusive language, then they can create an open and welcoming community. They have the power to be the change they want to see and influence others to do the same. If we want to hold our community to a higher standard, we need to begin with our teachers. Today, it is not enough to just teach people how to dance and then call it a day. In order to create a gender-inclusive community, teachers need to go beyond the lesson and be careful of their word choices. The same goes for other leaders in our community, such as event planners. By making changes to how the dance is discussed, such as creating gender-inclusive competition names, they are showing what language and behavior is expected of their dancers. With just a little extra thought, community leaders can influence other dancers to uphold inclusive behaviors.

I get it. This is all easier said than done. I know that I am suggesting an overhaul of how we act and communicate as a community. While this may seem like something too big too handle, consider the original Lindy Hoppers. They faced racism, sexism, poverty, and oppression; the list could go on and on. They could have just given up and nobody would have blamed them. Yet, the Lindy Hoppers persevered. They looked bigotry in the face and said that

they would not be silenced, that they would keep dancing until their feet could not take it anymore. We are living the revival of the dance, yet not the spirit. The original Lindy Hoppers were true revolutionaries. They created a dance to celebrate their blackness and culture, the very things that whites were shaming them for. We need to rekindle this spirit and add to their distant voices. We must honor their memory by saying that we too can do it. Together, we can create a community that is welcoming and inclusive to everyone.

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Appendix
Original Plan for Interview Questions (Organized by Population)

For dancers:

1. Please share with me how you became involved in Lindy Hop.
2. What does being part of the Lindy Hop community mean to you?
3. What is your primary role in dancing (lead vs. follow or equal)?
4. How did you choose this role as your primary role?
5. Where do you identify as your home/dance community?
6. As an estimation, how many dance events have you attended outside of your own dance scene?
7. Please talk about your experiences related to the Lindy Hop communities that you have danced in.
8. Share with me how your gender influences your identity as a dancer.
9. Have you noticed any differences in treatment between genders within the Lindy Hop community? Please tell me about an experience you witnessed.
10. If so, how did you feel about these differences?
11. Share with me an experience where you or someone you know has promoted gender equality within the Lindy Hop community.
12. What do you feel that the Lindy Hop community could do to promote gender equality in the future?
13. What would you like to see the Lindy Hop community do or promote in the future to better the community?
14. Please state your first name.
15. How old are you?
16. What gender do you identify as?
17. What country are you from?
18. How many years have you been involved in the Lindy Hop community?
19. What else would you would like to talk about?

For musicians:

1. Please share with me how you became involved in Lindy Hop.
2. What does being part of the Lindy Hop community mean to you?
3. How many years have you played as a musician? Swing era jazz musician?
4. In what countries has your band played at Lindy Hop events?
5. Please talk about your experiences related to the Lindy Hop communities that you have played in.
6. How do you feel that your gender influences your identity as a musician?
7. How do you feel your experience as a musician compares to musicians of other genders and experience?
8. Have you noticed any differences in treatment between genders within the Lindy Hop community? What were they?
9. How have you promoted gender equality within the Lindy Hop community?
10. What do you feel that the Lindy Hop community could do to promote gender equality in the future?
11. What would you like to see the Lindy Hop community do or promote in the future to better the community?
12. Please state your first name.

13. How old are you?
14. What gender do you identify as?
15. What country are you from?
16. How many years have you been involved in the Lindy Hop community?
17. What else would you would like to talk about?

For teachers:

1. Please share with me how you became involved in Lindy Hop.
2. What does being part of the Lindy Hop community mean to you?
3. What is your primary role in dancing (lead vs. follow or equal)?
4. How did you choose this role as your primary role?
5. How many years have you danced?
6. How many years have you taught at a local/international level?
7. Did you identify any differences between other dance scenes and your own? What were they?
8. How do you feel your gender influences your identity as a dancer?
18. How do you feel your experience as a teacher compares to teachers of other genders and experience?
9. What have you noticed about the treatment between genders within the Lindy Hop community?
10. How have you or someone you know promoted gender equality within the Lindy Hop community?
11. What would you like to see the Lindy Hop community do or promote in the future to better the community?
12. Please state your first name.
13. How old are you?
14. What gender do you identify as?
15. What country are you from?
16. How many years have you been involved in the Lindy Hop community?
17. What else would you would like to talk about?

For organizers:

1. Please share with me how you became involved in Lindy Hop.
2. What does being part of the Lindy Hop community mean to you?
3. What are your experiences regarding your specific role as an organizer for The Snowball?
4. How do you feel that gender influences your role as an organizer?
5. How does The Snowball promote gender equality?
6. How does The Snowball promote safe spaces/safety?
7. What is the protocol for reporting unsafe or uncomfortable behavior?
8. How have you promoted gender equality within the Lindy Hop community?
9. Do you feel like your efforts are noticed? How so?
10. What do you feel that the Lindy Hop community could do to promote gender equality in the future?
11. What would you like to see the Lindy Hop community do or promote in the future to better the community?
12. Please state your first name.

13. How old are you?
14. What gender do you identify as?
15. What country are you from?
16. How many years have you been involved in the Lindy Hop community?
17. What else would you would like to talk about?