

## Negotiating the gay male stereotype in ballet and modern dance

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Dance, ballet and modern in particular, is culturally defined as a feminine activity in the United States. The purpose of the present study was to examine the experiences of professional male modern and ballet dancers in the United States. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 current professional ballet and modern dancers. We examined the ways in which the dancers initially became involved in dance, any support or opposition they may have confronted, and the ways in which they negotiated the stereotypical assumptions surrounding men's involvement in dance. Four emergent themes are discussed: (1) exposure to and entrance into dance; (2) the gay stereotype; (3) negotiating the gay stereotype; and (4) homophobia within the dance community. The social significance of this study is rooted in the ways in which our culture constructs gender, the body, and movement, restricting both males and females from using and exploring their bodies in ways not deemed gender-appropriate. Attention is also given to the ways in which we can create and nurture meaningful experiences for a greater number of individuals.

**Keywords:** male dancers; masculinity; gay men; homophobia

### Introduction

Hegemonic masculinity is commonly associated with strength, power, dominance, aggression, intimidation, and (hyper)heterosexuality (Anderson 2008). By demonstrating physical, social, and psychological attributes associated with hegemonic masculinity, boys gain status in most adolescent and pre-adolescent male groups. Boys who are more artistic or uninterested in socially defined 'masculine' activities, however, are forced to find alternative ways to claim their masculinity or face being labeled gay or effeminate (Anderson 2008; Messner 2002; Pascoe 2003). According to Knight and Giulano (2003), men who participate in activities that are considered 'non-masculine' by Western societal standards are often subject to harassment, ridicule, and the homosexual label. The fear of being labeled gay still keeps boys from getting involved or remaining involved in certain activities; it also forces those individuals who may be struggling with their sexual identity into a deeper state of denial.

In North America, dance is often labeled as a feminine activity and therefore not suitable for male participation (Crawford 1994; Gard 2008; Hanna 1988; Kraus, Hilsendager, and Dixon 1991; Risner 2002; 2007; 2009; Williams 2003). As Gard

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(2008, 184) has noted, ‘dance has long been seen as something which boys and men, particularly in Western countries, do reluctantly if at all’. While men have danced ‘prominently and enthusiastically throughout the human history’ (Gard 2008, 185), their involvement in dance has long been associated with homosexuality. During the 1930s, Ted Shawn, a United States modern dancer, formed *Men Dancers*, an all-male touring dance company. It was Shawn’s goal to combat the stereotypical assumptions surrounding male dancers. As Gard (2006, 235) explained:

Shawn’s self-professed mission in forming the company was to convince a homophobic US public that dance was a legitimate, ‘manly’ career for men. Shawn tried to do this by creating what he saw as hyper-masculine forms of movement and choosing stereotypically masculine themes for his dances such as work, sport, war and hunting. For Shawn, male dancers had to be athletes not aesthetes.

To ‘legitimize’ men’s involvement in dance, Shawn recruited athletes from varying sports and used metaphors from the world of sport. Athletes were employed as a way in which to challenge anxieties about the supposed effeminacy of male dancers. According to Burt (1995), Shawn’s work did generate a certain ‘respect’ for male dance. The irony, however, was that Shawn and many of his dancers were gay (Adams 2005). Even today, many attempt to enhance the status of men’s involvement in dance by promoting the athletic characteristics required of dancers and the opportunity to lift and dance with women (Risner 2009).

While many male dancers openly identify as gay or bisexual, little scholarly attention has been directed to their experiences (Risner 2002). As Desmond (2001, 4) has stated:

Homophobia, the dark background of dance history, is actually the constitutive ground of a great deal of what we know as the ‘canon’ of dance history.

Homophobia’s presence has long been known in the dance world but almost never subjected to analytical scrutiny.

Early research examining sexuality in dance failed to critically analyze the experiences of gay men in dance and actually worked to uphold stereotypes and assumptions commonly attached to gay men in dance (Risner 2002). In 1988, Hanna suggested that gay men were attracted to dance due to their ‘effeminate yearnings, feelings, and romantic idealizations of the ballet’ (136) and that in order to increase male participation, the gay population must be minimized and ‘respectable’ heterosexuals used to enhance the credibility of dance. In his critique of Hanna’s work, Risner (2002, 65) stated, ‘[Hanna’s (1988)] approach clearly illustrates the deleterious effects of heterosexual respectability, homosexual negation, and further homophobic attitudes in dance’.

It is important to distinguish between the ways in which the various dance forms are historically and socially constructed. While dance in general is linked to dominant ideas about gender, the perception that men/boys who dance are effeminate and subsequently gay is a commonplace perception within North America. As Gard (2004, 196) has stated, dance has regularly been viewed as ‘unmanly’ and this is ‘most clearly the case with ballet and its twentieth century offshoots, modern and contemporary dance’. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and the emergence of Romanti-

cism, negative attitudes toward male ballet dancers have been the norm. During the Romantic era the focus and attention shifted to the ballerina (Burt, 1995): female ballet dancers became sexual objects for male audience members to enjoy and objectify. Having men on stage with the women was considered a distraction and also raised concerns about what it meant for a male audience member to enjoy watching men dance (Burt, 1995). As Burt (1995) states:

... the ways that male dancers appeared on stage became a source of anxiety to bourgeois male spectators. To enjoy the spectacle of men dancing [was] to be interested in men. [The] pleasures of watching men dancing became marred by anxieties about masculine identity. (27–28)

Societal attitudes and perceptions regarding male physicality restrict the ways in which males are encouraged and allowed to move their bodies. Researchers have noted a resistance to forms of movement that are counter to the bodily practices of contact sports, movement that is deemed appropriately masculine (Gard and Meyenn 2000). In 2000, Gard and Meyenn qualitatively examined school-age boys' perceptions of physical activity and preferred styles of movement. The interviews revealed that the boys held especially negative attitudes and perceptions toward ballet and modern dance. As noted, the boys described the dancing body as “weird” or “pointless” or just “gay”, something they contrasted with sport’ (Gard 2008, 185). For several of the boys, dance did not allow for sufficient physical contact, a quality they deemed integral to physical activity/sport. Consistent with Ted Shawn’s project in the 1930s, the field of dance has continued to distance itself from the feminine label by drawing parallels to athletes and sport through emphasizing the strength, power, and dominance of the male dancers (i.e., lifts, powerful leaps). However, despite this emphasis, men who are involved in modern dance and ballet often face labeling and stereotyping, particularly in reference to their sexuality (Gard 2008; Risner 2009). It is important to note that modern dance generally ‘... refers to the work of the pioneer dance reformers (nearly all of whom were women) who developed styles other than ballet...’ (Burt 1995, 2).

In 1995, Ramsey Burt, in his book *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*, examined the representation of masculinity in twentieth-century dance. His book explored the significant developments in the representation of masculinity in Western theatre dance during the twentieth century, focusing specifically on homophobia within the dance culture, representations of the male dancer’s body, the influence of the male gaze, and new ways of approaching masculinity. According to Burt:

It is the prudishness of nineteenth-century gender ideologies that initially condemns male dancers to the problematic status they have spent much of the twentieth century trying to overcome. ‘Modern’ ideas towards masculine social behavior and the male body, which developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have exerted a residual influence on more recent social attitudes towards the creativity and expressiveness of male artists as a whole up to the present. (14)

More recently, Risner (2002, 64) examined the ‘homophobic myths and unspoken truths’ surrounding men’s involvement in dance. Using an autobiographical narrative approach, Risner shares his experience as a gay student and dancer. Risner describes dance as an escape from the bullying and abuse he experienced while

growing up. While dance was described as a comfortable and protective environment, it was often isolating due to the low numbers of boys/men and the negative stigma that forced secrecy regarding his involvement. In addition to hiding his involvement in dance, Risner described the ways in which he attempted to deny his own feelings and sexual identity. For example, Risner described having a girlfriend as a way in which to bolster his heterosexual image. Risner also detailed disturbing experiences of homophobic harassment and exploitation among faculty and fellow students and the silence that surrounded this harassment and abuse.

In today's society there still exists a stigma associated with men's involvement in dance (Risner 2004; 2009; Williams 2003). Researchers have found that it is this stigma that continues to push males away from dance (Gard 2008; Risner 2009; Williams 2003). According to Burt (1995):

Such is the strength of the prejudice against male dancers that a large proportion of the men who have pursued careers in modern dance and to a lesser extent ballet have often not discovered dancing until they were in their teens or early twenties. (1)

In order to increase males' participation in dance, some dance educators have been found to employ 'heterosexist approaches that idealize noteworthy heterosexual male dancers, focus on masculinist comparisons between male athletes (presumably heterosexual) and male dancers, and encourage greater male participation by minimizing or ignoring the significant population of gay men in dance' (Risner 2002, 84). While a significant amount of attention has been directed toward gender and dance (Krause et al. 1991; Posey 2002; Stinson 2005), minimal attention has been devoted to the experiences of male dancers.

Research examining men's experiences in dance reveals homophobic prejudice and harassment, social isolation among males, a lack of male role models, and problems with retention and progression of boys/men in dance (Risner, 2009; Williams, 2003). Williams (2003) examined the experiences of adolescent male dancers and found that they were keenly aware of the gay stereotype associated with men's involvement in dance, lacked social support from family and friends, often chose to hide their dance involvement, and were frustrated by others' need to 'legitimize' dance through associations with sport.

### ***Purpose of the Study***

Studying men's experiences in dance is especially important as it has the potential to illuminate insight into hegemonic assumptions surrounding masculinity, dance, and sexuality. As Gard (2008, 185) has noted, 'for many boys it [dance] seems to be something which needs to be negotiated, something which arouses strong emotions – either positive or negative – but is rarely just a normal part of life'.

Within this study, we applied the tenets of feminist theory to examine the experiences of current professional male modern and ballet dancers in the United States. Ballet and modern dance are culturally defined as feminine activities in the US. As such, we examined the ways in which professional male ballet and modern dancers initially became involved in dance, any support or opposition they may have confronted, and the ways in which they negotiated the stereotypical assumptions surrounding their involvement. Studying men's involvement in dance provides a unique opportunity to examine how masculinities are constructed, maintained, nego-

tiated, resisted, and justified. Additionally, it gives insight into the ways in which 'existing gender arrangements entail various costs for men' (Messner and Sabo, 1990, 13). Masculinity studies scholars, according to Messner and Sabo (1990, 13), 'see in feminism a critique, theory, or paradigm that holds the potential of liberating men as well as women from the limitations of sexism [and homophobia]'.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants consisted of 12 male ballet (six) and modern (six) dancers involved in professional dance in the United States. Participation in this study required that each participant had been dancing for a minimum of five years, with at least one year of *professional* experience. All of the participants were current professionals when interviewed. Six of the participants (all ballet) were recruited through a ballet company located in a major northeastern city in the United States. To obtain access to the dancers at this particular ballet company, the first author contacted the public relations manager, informing her of the purpose of the study and required criteria for participation. The public relations manager arranged a convenient time and place for an initial informational meeting with interested male ballet dancers at the company. Six of the ballet dancers who attended the informational meeting agreed to participate in the study. The six modern dance participants were recruited through the Internet. The public relations managers of several major modern dance companies were contacted via e-mail, and each public relations manager provided the e-mail addresses of potential participants. Six modern dancers agreed to participate in the study. These six participants represented three different dance companies in the northeastern United States.

The participants ranged in age from 22 to 42 years of age ( $M = 30.3$  years;  $SD = 6.4$ ). Their professional dance experience ranged from three to 27 years ( $M = 10.8$  years;  $SD = 6.9$ ). Of the 12 participants, eight self-identified as Caucasian, two as Asian/Pacific Islander, one as African American, and one as Tunisian American. Seven of the participants self-identified as gay while the remaining five participants self-identified as heterosexual. Table 1 outlines the demographic information pertaining to the 12 participants.

It is important to acknowledge the small sample size of 12 participants. While qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions, data from male dancers at a greater variety and number of modern and ballet dance companies, not only those in the northeastern United States, is necessary.

### *Interviews*

A semi-structured interview guide format was utilized in this study (Patton, 2002). The interview guide was reviewed by a panel of experts in qualitative research and/or dance education. Prior to the onset of the present study, the first author conducted four pilot interviews with male dancers in a collegiate dance program. The purpose of the pilot interviews was to allow the first author the opportunity to practice using the interview guide.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Name	Age	Race	Dance Form	Sexual Orientation	Professional Experience(yrs)	Interview Conducted
Brendan	26	Caucasian	Ballet	Heterosexual	6	Face-to-Face
Charles	27	Caucasian	Modern	Heterosexual	9	Telephone
Jacob	29	Caucasian	Ballet	Heterosexual	11	Face-to-Face
Jonah	23	Tunisian	Modern	Heterosexual	6	Telephone
Ken	37	Asian	Modern	Heterosexual	13	Face-to-Face
Leo	26	Caucasian	Ballet	Heterosexual	7	Face-to-Face
Marcus	38	A.A. <sup>2</sup>	Ballet	Heterosexual	20	Telephone
Oscar	35	Caucasian	Modern	Heterosexual	14	Telephone
Peter	26	Caucasian	Ballet	Heterosexual	6	Face-to-Face
Roger	42	Asian	Modern	Heterosexual	27	Telephone
Roy	32	Caucasian	Modern	Heterosexual	8	Telephone
Tony	22	Caucasian	Ballet	Heterosexual	3	Face-to-Face

Notes: <sup>1</sup>Each of the participants self-identified as heterosexual or homosexual on the demographic form

<sup>2</sup>A.A. is for African American

The six interviews with the ballet participants were conducted in a quiet room at the ballet company. The six interviews with the modern dancers were conducted over the telephone. All interviews (both face-to-face and telephone) were audio-taped. At the onset of each interview, the participant was given the opportunity to select a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes. Each participant dictated the pace of the interview. A series of probing questions were used in order to promote further clarity and understanding. Due to the hectic schedules of the dancers, several of the interviews were conducted over a two-day period. The interviews ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes.

Upon completion of the interview, each participant was provided with a final overview of the study and the upcoming timetable for transcription and data analysis. Each participant was informed that he would be e-mailed a copy of the interview transcript and asked to comment on its accuracy and make any additional corrections or additions.

### **Data Analysis**

'Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings' (Patton 2002, 432). The process of qualitative data analysis entails inductive reasoning, thinking, and theorizing (Berg, 2007). The first step of the data analysis process was transcribing the interviews verbatim. Each participant was e-mailed a copy of his personal transcript and asked to offer feedback on the interview so as to prevent any misinterpretations or miscommunications. Only three participants provided feedback, and all corrections/additions were minor. All of the participants were invited to contact the researcher at any time throughout the research process to clarify or discuss any information relevant to their experiences.

The transcripts were then studied in order to familiarize the first author with each individual interview. All data were inductively analyzed following the procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Upon reading and rereading the transcripts, an initial set of codes from the collected data was developed. These preliminary codes, or meaning units, were created in order to determine possible categories,



themes, or patterns. Open and axial coding was utilized (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The preliminary codes were then sorted into a hierarchical structure for further analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The first and second author, both of whom have experience in qualitative research, were involved in the data analysis process. Each individual developed her own coding schemes independently. The authors then met to compare and discuss similarities and differences. As Patton (2002, 464) suggests, 'Important insights can emerge from the different ways in which two people look at the same set of data, a form of analytical triangulation'. After several lengthy discussions, consensus was reached, and the data analysis was completed. The findings were then organized and presented in a logical manner. The data that are presented is a 'rich description' of the dancers' experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2000).

## Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of professional male modern and ballet dancers in the United States. More specifically, we examined the ways in which professional male ballet and modern dancers initially became involved in dance, any support or opposition they may have confronted, and the ways in which they negotiated the stereotypical assumptions surrounding men's involvement in dance. Each of the following four main themes will be discussed, with supporting quotes from the participants: (1) exposure to and entrance into dance; (2) the gay stereotype; (3) negotiating the gay stereotype; and (4) homophobia within the dance community.

### *Exposure to and Entrance into Dance*

All of the participants were asked to discuss their initial exposure to and entrance into the dance world. The majority of the participants were introduced to dance through their mothers and/or sisters. According to the participants, their mothers played a large role in fostering their interest in the arts. Tony referred to his mother as the 'driving force' behind his participation in dance. Five of the participants noted attending performances with their mothers and/or other female family members. Tony recalled seeing *The Nutcracker* when he was nine years old: 'When I was nine I saw a production of *The Nutcracker* and I thought it was really interesting, and I was like, well maybe I'll try taking a ballet class'. Brendan also attended performances with his mother as a child and described being captivated by the performances. As Brendan recalled:

When I was about probably nine or 10 years old I went to a community theater performance and they had a couple come out and do a dance in the middle of it, that was part of the show I thought was really cool, all the big lifts the guy was doing, I just thought it was gorgeous so I asked my mom if shortly after that I could start dancing.

For Jonah, seeing his mother's involvement in the arts triggered his initial interest in dance. As he described, 'I think it was my mom's theater productions. Being on stage and being theatrical, using your body, these are things that really appealed to me'.

Once the participants were involved in dance, they reported that their mothers were extremely supportive. As Leo stated, 'My mom was always really supportive

of it. I didn't really take into account what anyone else thought. I didn't really care'.

Four of the participants discussed becoming involved in dance as a result of their sisters' dance involvement. These participants described 'tagging along' with their mother to pick up their sister from dance class. Two of the four participants reported being physically approached by their sister's instructor while waiting after their sister's practice or recitals. The participants suggested that the instructors were very clearly interested in having them participate in dance.

Six of the participants discussed their fathers' attitudes toward their dance involvement. Three of the participants – Peter, Roger, and Charles – described their fathers as holding initially negative attitudes toward their involvement in dance. Their fathers perceived dance to be an effeminate activity, inappropriate for men/boys. Both Charles and Peter suggested that their fathers' disapproval was to be expected. As Charles commented, 'well, obviously my dad wasn't that excited'. Peter stated, 'usually with guys you have a father who doesn't want their kid there'. All three participants suggested that their fathers' disapproval was directly related to the stereotypical association of dance with femininity and homosexuality. As Roger explained, 'my father's perception of dancing was that it was, I don't know, as they call it in this country, a 'nelly' activity'. Both Peter's and Charles' fathers held the perception that dance would 'turn' their sons gay. As Peter explained:

My dance teacher told me years later that when I had wanted to really start dancing seriously, he [his father] asked her if dancing would turn me gay. My father is not by any means a very, very conservative man at all, but you know he was just like; he had no idea about what I was getting into. He had no personal experience with it whatsoever. He just hasn't had exposure to a lot of the people in this field and didn't know what to make of any of it because it can be a little quirky.

Both Peter and Roger indicated that their fathers' perceptions eventually changed and both now held positive and supportive attitudes toward their sons' involvement in dance. Peter and Roger suggested that their fathers' change in attitude was due to gradual exposure and increased education and appreciation for the work and dedication involved in the dance profession.

Two of the participants – Tony and Jonah – indicated that their fathers had always been supportive of their involvement in dance, and Oscar spoke of a close friend whose father physically accompanied him to dance practice to ward off boys that would taunt and harass his son. As Oscar explained:

His construction worker father, in order to keep him in dance, I mean the kid was really talented and the teachers were flipping out over him and when he said he wanted to quit they called his dad. His dad, in order to keep him in it, went to class for two years. . . his construction worker father went to class with him. And you know I think that's a touching version of masculinity. I think, to me, that's an incredibly masculine thing for a father to do.

Both Tony and Jonah were raised in families in which their fathers were heavily involved in the arts, which both perceived to significantly influence the level of support and acceptance of their involvement in dance.

Eleven of the twelve participants made reference to the 'preferential' or 'special' treatment they received as *male* dancers, especially when they initially joined dance.



Several participants indicated being ‘rushed through the system’ and purposefully ‘challenged’ by instructors in order to maintain their interest. As Peter explained:

Being a guy they threw me in the more advanced class right away because they wanted me to get all that knowledge in my head as quick as possible. . . . Guys are almost always rushed through. . . they want, I think, the guys to get to a point where they get really interested quickly so that they want to stay, you know so they don’t take too long in explaining things. I know my two teachers they would actually sit down and try and figure out ways to challenge me specifically in class, like that would just be their motivation for the class that they were teaching.

An additional benefit to the low number of males in dance was access and affordability of lessons. Several of the participants noted that they did not have to pay for their lessons and many discussed the abundance of scholarships available to men interested in dance. As Tony stated:

I remember when I first started; the teachers were all gaga over me because they were lacking boys to put in the school. They would tell my parents that they would do anything to make me come dance for them – ‘we’ll give him parts and this and that’. So they really are accommodating to men in dance because there are so few of us. It’s a little easier for us to obtain jobs because of that. It’s basically the supply and demand theory. There are fewer of us so we’re more in demand.

Despite receiving preferential treatment, all of the participants recognized many of the stereotypes and assumptions surrounding men’s involvement in dance.

### ***The Gay Stereotype***

All of the participants were asked to discuss the assumptions and stereotypes surrounding men’s involvement in dance. All 12 of the participants made immediate reference to the ‘gay stereotype’, the assumption that all male dancers are gay. All of the participants acknowledged the tendency for society to associate male dancers with homosexuality and effeminacy. As Brendan stated, ‘there is the obvious sexual orientation stereotype’. As Roger also suggested, ‘I think they assume that if you are dancing and you are male you must be gay’. All of the participants suggested that both ballet and modern dance were associated with homosexuality, although the majority of participants suggested there was a stronger association with ballet. It is important to note that all of the participants were speaking specifically about societal perceptions of ballet and modern dance in the United States.

Seven of the participants suggested that such stereotypes were due to the costumes (tights specifically), make-up, and movements required of male dancers – appearances and behaviors often deemed feminine. As Brendan stated, ‘The tights (laughing). . . blame it all on the tights’. Peter suggested that many hold the perception that ‘since most of the guys are wearing tights, ballet must make you gay’. Roy suggested that from a very early age kids learn to associate wearing tights and make-up with femininity. As he stated, ‘I’ve done tons and tons of kids’ shows and we did dances in no shirts and tights. . . if we came out in sweatpants and something else they wouldn’t automatically assume the kind of effeminate thing’.

Six of the participants indicated being hesitant about wearing tights when they initially became involved in dance. As Jacob stated, ‘the only hesitation was that it

was dance and you had to put on tights. . . but that kind of got overcome by the first year. . . it didn't take very long'. Brendan also stated:

I was raised in Utah with a very strict Mormon, moral background and for the first year and a half that I was taking ballet I wouldn't wear tights in class. I would wear like biker shorts with shorts over them. So, it took a lot of coaxing and talking to by the ballet teacher to convince me that it was an artistic thing."

Seeing other men wearing tights allowed the participants to feel 'normal' and therefore more 'comfortable'. As Jacob stated, 'there was a decent amount of guys and it started to seem like a very normal, natural thing [wearing tights and make-up]. We saw college guys, high school guys, and professional guys so that all seemed kind of normal'. Eventually, as Peter suggested, a male dancer has to 'get over the tights and the sparkles'.

In addition to the tights being associated with femininity and homosexuality, the participants also suggested that the ways in which dancers were required to move their bodies was oftentimes perceived as feminine and therefore gay. Peter described dancers as 'being theatrical' and it was this sort of 'expressive' form of movement that was associated with femininity and homosexuality.

While all of the participants noted the societal assumptions and stereotypes regarding the sexuality of male dancers, 11 of the participants noted the large presence of openly gay men working within the field of dance as dancers, choreographers, and administrators. Three of the participants, one heterosexual and two gay, admitted that they too (like society) were more likely to presume a male interested in dance was gay. As Charles stated:

It is not exactly a total misconception. It's a profession where there are a lot of; I don't know what the percent is, maybe 60% gay and 40% straight . . . I guess I'm more like society; I'm more prone to think that a dancer might be gay rather than straight.

Four of the participants, two heterosexual and two gay, argued that while there is a large presence of gay men in dance, there is also a strong contingency of heterosexual male dancers. As Jacob stated:

The reality is there is probably more gay men dancing than you would get at your average job, but there are plenty of straight guys and there are plenty of straight interests going on. . . I think it's so much more comfortable to be straight in dance than anybody would ever try to paint it if they didn't have a good picture of it.

Leo also noted being 'one of five guys who was gay out of maybe 30 guys in the program in high school'. Regardless of the number of heterosexual males in dance, the participants argued that the percentage of gay males in dance was typically exaggerated.

Several of the heterosexual participants suggested that being involved in the dance community provided them the opportunity to associate with openly gay men, which they perceived made them more 'sensitive' to homophobia and gay rights. As Peter stated, 'being around anyone who is different from you can sensitize you to the differences in people'.

Despite the increased ‘acceptance’ of gay males, several of the participants (both heterosexual and gay) made homonegative remarks by contrasting masculinity and homosexuality. When discussing his personal interpretation of masculinity, Peter stated, ‘the only thing that strikes me as not really being masculine is really, really flamboyantly gay men’. In reference to the large number of heterosexual men in dance, Leo associated heterosexual dancers with athleticism and toughness. As he stated:

I mean it really is such a sport and its very competitive and athletic that I think once you get in and sort of experience that world you see how tough it is. It’s not the frilly, pink stuff that you see on stage sometimes. It’s really grueling.

Tony spoke about the significant influence of a heterosexual male instructor and how the manner in which he danced challenged the gay stereotype:

I met a male ballet dancer named Tim who was one of my first teachers, and he was straight and every time he demonstrated stuff it was just he always had this power and this surge and really setting an example for me and a couple of other guys I danced with on how to be a male ballet dancer. And so I think he kind of took some of that being open about being a ballet dancer.

All of the participants were asked to discuss the impact of the gay stereotype on men’s involvement in dance, and in particular how it influenced their decision to pursue a career in dance. Several of the participants perceived that the stigma associated with being a male dancer served to limit/control the population of men in dance. More specifically, four of the participants addressed the peer pressure, teasing, and physical abuse they experienced and/or witnessed as a result of their involvement in dance. As Jonah explained:

I actually got beat up a couple of times. I was walking home from a class or from a studio or rehearsal and I don’t know. . . I would have a dance bag or sweatpants on. Certain kids in school knew that I did it so there was this antagonism. (Long pause) So that was intense. I kind of didn’t care. . . I mean they just kept doing it.

Charles acknowledged the difficulty heterosexual men may encounter as a result of the stereotypes and assumptions. As he stated:

I mean if they [heterosexual male dancers] are a little insecure I think it would be hard. But it’s a great opportunity for a straight dancer too. I mean if you are smart enough to see how things are going to be facilitated because you are straight I mean it’s a great way to meet other girls especially if you are a ballet dancer you are going to do all these super macho roles and you’re going to be the man. So you just have to get over the initial wearing of the tights and the sparkles.

As Tony also explained, ‘I think a lot of straight male dancers tend to drop out of it because of peer pressure or other kinds of pressure’.

### *Negotiating the Gay Stereotype*

All of the participants acknowledged the existence of a gay stereotype associated with men’s involvement in dance and discussed the ways in which such stereotypes

influenced their attitudes and behaviors. Almost all of the participants suggested that over time they became less concerned about what others perceived; however, almost all of the participants discussed ways in which they attempted to negotiate the assumptions and stereotypes surrounding the dance profession.

For several of the participants, becoming defensive was an initial reaction upon entering the dance community. As Peter stated, 'at first I guess I was [defensive] about it'. For Brendan, he was defensive because he was struggling with his identity. As he explained, 'I would say it made me defensive just cause I was already defensive about it [sexuality]. Like I was trying to hide it so much... so when people would assume it about me I would get really defensive'. However, with time and experience the participants recognized the difficulty in changing people's attitudes and as a result described becoming 'immune' to the stereotype. Several of the participants noted a need to 'know one's self' and to adopt a 'who cares' philosophy. As Jacob stated:

I guess it did bother me more the first couple of years that I was here, but I mean as long as you know who you are it can only affect you so much, especially as you get to be an adult. .. I guess it is annoying still, but I guess I mean who cares.

As Oscar also stated, 'It doesn't affect me or at least it hasn't in a long time. I really don't care because I know who I am'.

There were, however, situations in which some of the participants noted feeling especially 'vulnerable' or 'self-conscious'. Tony indicated that there were contexts in which he would not bring up that he was a dancer. As he explained:

You know, I go to a friend's house and they are not a dancer or something... I won't bring it up that I'm a dancer. I just kind of leave it behind and just talk about whatever is going on I guess. Like not to say I'm not proud of my profession, it's just that I mean, I would rather not bring it up, more so for him to feel comfortable than for me.

Roy suggested that wearing a t-shirt with a dance logo made him feel 'slightly self-conscious', especially in a 'real burly atmosphere'. Similar to Roy, four of the participants admitted working on presenting an overly 'masculine image' while in settings in which they felt their sexuality could be questioned. Tony noted a need to project a 'masculine' image when out with strangers. As he explained:

I guess on a social level when I'm out with other male dancers I don't want to act gay because if they are with their friends and they don't know that I am straight then they might try and pick me up or something. I try and establish that when I'm out.

As Jacob also noted:

If I were at a party after something and there were a lot of gay men there and they might assume that the dancers might all be gay, I would want to act very masculine so that it was very clear that I'm not. I would hang out with all the women there or something like that.

Roy also indicated that he attempted to integrate discussion of his girlfriend when in a conversation with a stranger or a person unaware of his heterosexuality.

Leo, a gay dancer, suggested that some of the heterosexual male dancers he had worked with were often homophobic in order to ‘cope’ with the gay stereotype. As he explained, ‘I think some of the men feel that they have to do that. Like really butch it up and make sure that everyone knows that they’re straight. Sleep with all the girls in the company; be a complete dog’. Charles also acknowledged a similar trend among heterosexual male dancers. ‘I think it endangers the straight guys, men who wanted to be straight. . . . because they were like if too many people became gay it forces yourself – ‘okay, am I like them?’”

### *Homophobia within the Dance Community*

Several of the participants discussed the existence of homophobia within the dance community. Eight of the participants described instances of homophobia within various dance schools and companies. As Charles noted, ‘in my school not many people were ‘out’ actually, which was interesting, because it was obvious that at least half of those guys were gay, but you couldn’t be ‘out’’. Charles suggested that the school was attempting to ‘protect’ the heterosexual male dancers; there was concern that the gay stereotype may prevent heterosexual males from remaining in dance.

Roger identified several companies and people within the dance community that wanted to ‘destroy’ the gay image associated with men in dance. Roger suggested that many companies would purposefully not hire men whom they believed were ‘obviously gay’. Roger noted an artistic director who specifically wanted a ‘straight guy image’ to be associated with his company. As he explained, he was told:

Look, I hired you because you are the best dancer that was in the audition and even though you are so obviously gay you should be very proud of the fact that this company is going to have a really straight guy image. You got the job because you are the best dancer.

Charles also described a similar experience: ‘I can’t remember who the choreographer was, a female choreographer that didn’t want any gay dancers in the company. So if you were gay you didn’t have to bother to audition’. Several participants also noted cases in which companies attempted to ‘find out’ a dancer’s sexual orientation prior to his being hired.

Several of the dancers discussed the need for companies to maintain a ‘marketable’ image of dance. To do so, it was important that a piece between a man and a woman was ‘believable’. As Leo suggested, ‘They want the dancers to be attracted to the women [dancers]’. The participants also suggested that choreographers often preferred male dancers who ‘portrayed masculinity’, which the participants contrasted with ‘acting gay’. As Leo also explained, ‘you don’t want the audience to feel jipped. And you wouldn’t be out there limp wristing nellying around the stage. I mean you are wearing tights, but you still have to be very masculine and in character’.

While the majority of the participants cited specific instances of homophobia within the dance world, four of the participants suggested that homophobia had little chance of ‘surviving’ in the dance community. As Jacob stated:

I mean if you’re that bad I don’t think you would make it through years of dance school because you would inevitably end up having gay teachers or gay people that

are your boss at some point or another. So yeah, I think that if you've got a real deep seeded homophobia you would probably drop out.

It was also suggested that there was a level of expectation of having to work with individuals who identify as gay. As Peter stated, 'It's one of those things that you walk into kind of expecting that you're going to be working with gay people'.

One of the participants, Charles, raised an important point pertaining to the female dancers' sexuality. As he stated:

I think it would be very interesting to do [a study examining] gay women in dance because that's even more taboo I think than gay men. I think dance is such a girly thing. . . I'm going to wear pink tutus with lots of make-up and I'm going to pretend that Prince Charming is going to come and like it's very girly. I mean especially in ballet, the ballet dancers have to be extremely straight.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of professional male modern and ballet dancers in the United States. Within this section of the paper we will examine our findings within the context of existing literature, furthering our current understanding of male dancers' experiences.

The majority of the participants indicated that they were exposed to dance through their mothers and/or sisters. Consistent with the participants in the present study, Risner (2009, 110) reported that 66% of the male dancers in his study reported their mother as being 'helpful and supportive' of their dance participation. Such findings are not surprising considering research has suggested that women tend to hold more open views regarding 'acceptable' behavior for males and females (Greendorfer, 2001). In contrast, researchers have suggested that fathers tend to hold more rigid attitudes toward gender-appropriate behavior for males (Coakley, 2009). This rigidity is particularly apparent in boys' physical activity selection and involvement. Risner (2009, 110) indicated that only 32% of the male dancers in his study reported their father as 'helpful or supportive'. Interestingly, while three of the participants' fathers (Peter, Roger, and Charles) in the present study initially held negative attitudes toward their sons' involvement in dance, the attitudes of two of the three fathers shifted with time and exposure to the dance culture. Furthermore, two participants (Tony and Jonah) described their fathers as supportive and encouraging of their dance involvement. This finding is especially important to acknowledge as many stereotypically assume that all fathers hold negative, disapproving attitudes toward male participation in dance. In fact, several of the participants themselves 'expected' fathers to be negative and unsupportive. While the findings from the present study suggest social support for male dancers may be improving, future researchers need to examine the nature of father-son relationships among males involved in activities deemed feminine and the decision-making process of how physical activities are encouraged and discouraged among parents.

The participants also suggested that they received 'special treatment' from dance instructors and choreographers when they initially became involved in dance. Aware of the social pressures male dancers may confront, the instructors worked to counter the negative assumptions and stereotypes by challenging the dancers, providing them with extra attention and, in some cases, allowing them to take lessons without charge. It is possible that such measures were necessary to maintain and ensure



male dancers' interest and commitment to dance. Consistent with the participants, Garber, Sandell, Stankiewicz, and Risner (2007) and Van Dyke (1996) acknowledged the 'special status' and greater opportunities afforded to boys/men due to the lower numbers of males involved in dance. As Burt (1995, 1) suggested, while 'far fewer men go into professional dance training than women... it is consequently much easier for men to find employment in dance than for women'.

All 12 of the participants acknowledged the gay stereotype associated with men's involvement in dance and detailed their personal experiences of the stigma. All of the participants suggested that the gay stereotype was often associated with the tights and make-up worn by male dancers. Several of the participants discussed being initially reluctant to wear tights. Gender expression is everything one does that communicates his/her gender to others, including clothing, mannerisms, and the roles one takes. Researchers have examined the ways in which clothing and physical appearance are used to construct a cultural ideal of masculinity (Filiault and Drummond 2009). As Filiault and Drummond (2009, 179) suggest, clothing provides 'individuals with a chance to modify their appearance so as to appear in accord with social archetypes of the ideal body'. Men are expected to 'not worry about their clothes and certainly should not wear tight, stylish clothes' (Filiault and Drummond, 2009, 191). The males in the present study, regardless of their interest in dance, were socialized within the dominant culture, which associates wearing tights with femininity. Therefore, it should not be surprising that some of the participants were initially reluctant to wear tights, especially at a young age. Fisher (2007, 45) argued that male dancers must be 'either exceptionally brave or foolhardy, or both... because of the art form's strong associations with a super-feminized world'.

While the dancers were initially reluctant to wear tights, seeing other males wearing tights and make-up assisted in breaking down the participants' resistance and preexisting perceptions regarding masculine forms of expression and appearance. Theories of sex role development assign a major role to modeling as a basic mechanism of sex role learning (Bandura, 1969). Researchers have found that same-sex role models provide a strong conveyor of socially acceptable gender behavior (Bussey and Perry 1982; McCreary 1994). As Burt (1995, 4) suggested, 'often what leads men to start dance training is the discovery of their own unrealized potential; this is frequently brought about by seeing an inspirational performance by another male dancer'. Risner (2009) also found that male role models serve an important role in the retention of male dancers. While the participants in the present study also acknowledged the importance of male role models, it is important to closely examine the ways in which the participants described their role models and why certain male dancers were privileged over others in terms of status and prestige. The male dancers the participants tended to idolize were often described as 'strong' and 'powerful', adjectives that served to reaffirm stereotypical assumptions about what it means to be masculine. Furthermore, some of the male dancers in the present study suggested that seeing other strong and powerful male dancers assisted in making them feel 'normal', as if wearing tights and make-up or moving gracefully and rhythmically was in need of justification. These participants had clearly adopted gendered and heterosexist attitudes toward masculinity in general and male dancers in particular.

Several of the heterosexual and gay participants suggested a large presence of gay men involved in dance, and that one should 'expect' to interact with openly

gay males within the dance community. Researchers have found that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) individuals seek out and join such spaces as a way in which to meet and surround themselves with other GLBT individuals (Krane and Romont 1997; van Ingen 2003). As dance is historically stereotyped as an environment with a high population of gay males, it is possible that openly gay males with an interest in dance may feel greater ease in joining such a space. In his study of 75 pre-professional male dancers, Risner (2009) found that 50% of those who self-identified as gay or bisexual suggested that being involved in dance helped them 'come out'. In contrast to these findings, several of the gay participants described facing unique challenges as a result of the gay stereotype. Two of the gay participants discussed their personal struggles with 'coming out' and the ways in which the stereotypes surrounding dance further impeded their identity development. Consistent with these findings, researchers have found that the fear of being labeled gay not only keeps boys from getting involved in certain activities, but also forces those individuals who may be struggling with their identity into a deeper state of denial (Pronger 1990). Due to the association of dance with male homosexuality, these two participants may have attempted to distance themselves from dance as a method of self-protection.

In addition to discussing the large presence of gay men in dance, several of the participants acknowledged that people would be surprised by the large number of heterosexual males involved in dance. Several of the heterosexual participants suggested that as a result of their involvement in dance and, in particular, relationships formed with gay dancers, choreographers, and administrators, they became more 'sensitive' to issues facing gay men. Intergroup contact with gay men and lesbians has been found to result in more positive attitudes toward gay men (Herek and Capitano, 1996). Furthermore, positive attitudes toward GLBT individuals have been found to be associated with heterosexuals who have deep, meaningful relationships with GLBT individuals (Herek and Capitano 1996; Roper and Halloran 2007). It is possible that as a result of working with openly gay males within the dance culture, many of the heterosexual participants developed genuine and close relationships with non-heterosexual males, which assisted in establishing a genuine respect and concern for GLBT individuals.

Consistent with Risner (2009), all of the participants discussed ways in which the participants, both heterosexual and gay, actively attempted to negotiate the gay stereotype. Several of the gay and heterosexual participants actively worked to present a 'masculine' or 'butch' image when in a non-dance setting. Based on the interview data, being masculine meant denouncing any association with femininity and, for those who identified as heterosexual, asserting their heterosexuality. For example, several of the participants worked to display what Risner (2009, 106) described as 'heterosexual markers' such as purposefully making reference to their girlfriends (heterosexual participants only), being embarrassed when wearing a dance t-shirt or carrying dance equipment, and not sharing with certain people their occupation as a professional dancer. Interestingly, while research has documented heterosexual males attempting to justify their involvement in 'feminine activities' (Anderson 2005; 2008), the gay-identified participants also worked to associate male dancers with athleticism and other traditionally masculine qualities and characteristics.

Despite the suggestion by some that the dance community was a safe space for gay males, several of the participants indicated that they had confronted forms of

homophobia within the dance community. It is important to note that while all of the participants in the present study were employed at one of three dance companies, the participants shared experiences throughout their dance careers and therefore referred to a variety of companies. Several participants described instances of overt homophobia in the manner in which dancers were selected and hired. For example, several participants noted witnessing male dancers not being selected based on a perception that they were gay. There was an expectation among some choreographers that the story between a male and female dancer must be 'believable' and as such male dancers needed to portray a 'masculine' persona. Such findings are consistent with Gard's (2006) work, which found numerous examples of heterosexism within choreographers' work.

What is especially disturbing about the findings from the present study is the blatant homophobia present in the dance community. While heterosexism among choreographers (Gard 2006) has been previously addressed, little attention has been directed toward the unique ways in which homophobia exists within the professional dance world, a setting which many – even some of the participants themselves – assume is tolerant and inclusive. It is also important to recognize the manner in which homophobia and heterosexism were repeatedly minimized by many of the participants in the present study. Consistent with these findings, Risner (2009) found that young adult males in dance minimize their experiences of verbal abuse and harassment, as well as the lack of support they experienced in their teen years. For male dancers who self-identify as gay or bisexual or are questioning their sexual identity, their hiding verbal abuse or ignoring instances of homophobia and heterosexism may be in part due to the negative social attitudes toward the self commonly referred to as internalized homophobia (Herek, Gillis, and Cogan, 2009). Individuals within the GLBT community have been found to internalize significant aspects of the prejudice experienced within our heterosexist society. As Allport (1954) suggested, stigmatized individuals often engage in defensive reactions as a result of the prejudice and marginalization they experience. Personal acceptance, minimizing discrimination, or even endorsing the sexual stigma are commonplace reactions to growing up in a culture that marginalizes and excludes GLBT individuals (Herek et al. 2009). Furthermore, as many of the participants perceived that homophobia had no chance of surviving in the dance community, it is possible that when homophobia is experienced or witnessed, one may be discouraged from speaking out as it seems impossible or unlikely that such behavior or attitudes could exist.

### **Implications for Dance Education**

While researchers have consistently discussed how dance has the potential to challenge dominant ideas surrounding gender, sexuality, privilege, and the male body (Gard 2006; Risner 2004; 2005; 2009), this study's implications suggest that dance educators, directors, and choreographers still have work to do with respect to improving upon current practices. Participants within this study showcased (through semi-structured interviews) how dominant notions of masculinity and homophobia, both internalized and overt, still exist within the professional ranks of Western ballet and modern dance companies.

It is important, as Risner (2004, 5) suggested, to explore the 'educational and pedagogical impact of sexuality on the educational experience and perspective of

dance students and teachers'. It is imperative that dance educators include discussion and reflection on issues surrounding gender and sexuality within the classroom. Exploring one's personal perspectives and attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and movement is critical to learning how to reconfigure deeply entrenched gender expectations. Dance educators must be cognizant of the 'crises' males may encounter and become equipped with an understanding and appreciation of men's experiences in dance. An understanding of the growing literature focused on males' experiences in dance is necessary for all dance educators. It is important to also acknowledge that while attention to these important issues is necessary, positive and constructive work within the dance community has been emerging in this area in the last decade (Gard 2006, 2008; Risner 2009). In particular, many dance educators, especially those teaching in K-12 settings, are already conducting anti-gay/diversity curricula (Gard 2006, 2008). Furthermore, many researchers in dance education have been posing very important critical questions specific to sexuality and homophobia with the dance community (Garber, et al. 2007; Gard 2006, 2008; Risner 2004; 2007; 2009).

One of the most disconcerting findings from the present study was the overt homophobia witnessed and experienced by some of the participants. Based on the homophobia this study documents, and because several participants conveyed the belief that homophobia is in decline and will likely not survive in the professional dance community, it is imperative that dance educators do not make these same assumptions. Educators are in a powerful position to help people with the coming-out process and help others understand the importance of equality, fairness, inclusion, and mutual respect. As Risner (2009, 150) states:

In this unique position, teachers have special opportunities for providing meaningful advice, mentoring, and guidance. Male students may depend on their favorite teachers' support at greater levels than teachers are aware or comprehend, creating not only educational opportunities but also additional responsibilities.

It is also important that we explore the potential of integrating alternative forms of movement into our existing curriculum (i.e., contact improvisation strategies) in order to adopt a non-gendered teaching perspective and approach (Risner 2009). Teachers must be encouraged to consider the ways in which they teach boys to move and experience their bodies. Rather than focusing on narrow definitions of physicality, males should be encouraged to move with greater expression and self-discovery. Exposure to varied forms of movement has the potential to attract males to the many dance forms, allow them to develop artistic expression, and challenge existing norms and assumptions surrounding 'appropriate' behavior for males and females. Furthermore, the strategies historically employed to 'legitimize' dance – emphasizing comparisons between sport and dance, highlighting the work of heterosexual males and minimizing that of non-heterosexual males – must be stopped as they reproduce negative stereotypes of non-heterosexual male dancers (Crawford 1994) and are often not the reasons why males participate in dance in the first place (Risner 2009).

As noted in the methods section, it is important to acknowledge the small sample size of 12 participants. While using a qualitative approach allowed us to acquire an in-depth understanding of the male dancers' experiences and perceptions, future research examining male dancers would benefit from accessing male dancers in

companies outside the northeastern United States, as well as those who may have left professional dance.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study provides a number of insights about the experiences of professional male ballet and modern dancers and the ways in which they negotiate the gay stereotype associated with male participation in dance. The findings reveal that all of the participants interviewed acknowledged and confronted the gay stereotype associated with male participation in dance. The participants discussed the ways in which they actively worked to reaffirm their masculinity, as defined by the dominant culture. Future research should examine how the ‘normalizing’ of masculine behavior in dance serves to ‘... disregard, negate, and often erase others’ experiences of the world’ (Risner 2009, 35). According to Risner (*ibid*), Western concert dance, and in particular male dance students, are ‘ideally situated to challenge mainstream ideas of what is normal’.

While all 12 of the participants interviewed were able to navigate the societal pressure, teasing, and taunting associated with their involvement in dance, there are certainly many males that may be unable and unwilling to challenge or resist the stereotypes which may result in leaving dance altogether. In the first sentence of Walter Terry’s (1978) book, *Great Male Dancers of the Ballet*, he poses the question: ‘How many potential [great male dancers of the ballet] in the United States of America were aborted by prejudice?’

The social significance of this study is rooted in the ways in which our culture constructs gender, the body, and physical movement, restricting males and females from using and exploring their bodies in ways not deemed gender-appropriate. Greater attention is needed on the overemphasis of certain types of movement and the ways in which we can create and nurture meaningful experiences for more individuals. Gard (2008, 186) argued that the negative feelings people harbor toward men’s involvement in dance are not ‘intrinsic or unchangeable’, but rather an example of ‘how constructed [one’s] feelings and desires can be’.

Perhaps the most alarming of the study’s findings was the dancers’ acknowledgement, whether consciously or not, of the homophobia and heterosexism that continue to exist within the professional dance world. Consistent with William’s (2003) doctoral research findings, several participants in this study noted the blatant use of homophobic language by directors when describing the importance of making performances ‘believable’ for the audience. Future research needs to examine how such narrow views of masculinity can contribute to an internalized homophobia among male dancers. As Risner notes, ‘... dance education may serve as an important means for disrupting dominant cultural assumptions about acceptable ways of being and moving for males’ (55).

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