

## The Two-Sex Scottish Dancer\*

The sight of women dancing as men is so familiar to Scottish country dancers that we now take it for granted. If some of us ladies once considered dancing with a partner of the same sex as the ultimate bad luck, we have wisely changed our mind about the issue, with special help provided by some hard facts about Scottish country dancing. For example, women account for 73% of this year's membership of the Vancouver Branch, and beginners' classes clearly attract a majority of women.

How frequently and why do local women dance as men? Do some women have special abilities that enable them to dance on both sides of the dance with equal aplomb? These are the main mysteries I recently attempted to solve using a list of eight questions answered anonymously in writing by 50 women who proved too kind to refuse their help. This rather large sample represents 20% of the total female local membership.

From the table below we can see that the majority of women practice and dance as men at least half the time. Moreover, fewer women dance as men at dances; this indicates that more men attend dances than they do classes, or that the ratio of men is higher in some classes than in others, or both.

<b>Percentage of time danced as a man...</b>	# of answers ( <i>n</i> = 50)	
	<u>...in classes</u>	<u>...at dances</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> 75 to 100%	13	10
<input type="checkbox"/> 50 to 74%	25	22
<input type="checkbox"/> 25 to 49%	11	14
<input type="checkbox"/> less than 25%	1	4

In order to investigate the reasons why women would ever decide to dance as men, participants were given a list of six choices and invited to pick as many as they saw fit. They could also provide their own

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\* Borrowed from the late Patricia Batt's poem entitled, *The Ladies Man*. For complete poem and biography of author, go to [www.rscdslondon.org.uk/060915Reel257.pdf](http://www.rscdslondon.org.uk/060915Reel257.pdf), p. 10.

reasons by checking "Other reason(s)". Choices and the frequency at which they were selected are presented below.

<b>Reasons to dance as a man:</b>	# of times chosen
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I am taller than most.</i>	15
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I am an experienced dancer.</i>	30
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>There is a shortage of men.</i>	48
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I enjoy the challenge.</i>	15
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>My partner is unable to dance as a man.</i>	31
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>My partner is unwilling to dance as a man.</i>	32
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Other reason(s):</i>	

The inescapable shortage of men was so obviously the reason why women have to dance as men that two participants ignored it and focused on other statements. Experience and partner's disposition were chosen as reasons to dance as a man by well over half of participants. More specifically, the two statements pertaining to partner's disposition were selected concurrently 26 times and associated with dance experience 17 times. This brings to light the high sensitivity of women who dance as men, experienced or not, to their partner's ability and desire. Lastly, height and the challenge of dancing as a man mattered to nearly one third of participants.

"Other" reasons provided by at least two participants each were as follows: I do not want to sit out; I enjoy being in charge (!!!) [emphasis mine]; I like to help new dancers; I can dance on either side; It is a courtesy to the person I asked to dance.

If the "how many" and "why" questions were relatively easy to formulate and delimitate, issues pertaining to the ability to dance from either side of the set were much harder to grasp. A few of the concepts seemingly related to dancing bear names such as, diagrammatic or spatial ability, spatial aptitude, spatial intelligence, spatial relation perception, mental imaging, mental imagery, motor imagery, visual imagery, etc. Each one of these concepts comprises, or is comprised in, part of another, and so on. Instead of attempting to formulate a workable definition of an obviously *über* complex talent, I decided to focus on spatial ability/aptitude/intelligence/relation perception (and to reserve further explorations for future submissions to *The White Cockade!*), mainly because spatial ability intuitively seemed most relevant to dancing. Moreover, some of us, perhaps

many of us, have been tested on spatial ability at school as teenagers about to embark on various courses of studies.

In a nutshell, one of eight cognitive skills allegedly making up intelligence, spatial aptitude refers to the ability to visualize shapes, reorient objects and find relations between spatial objects. Spatial ability is said to start growing from childhood, with males engaging early on in activities that stimulate the strong development of spatial skills. With the passage of time, spatial ability differences between men and women tend to disappear, likely because women catch up as men also develop in other ways, and not because members of both sexes entirely lose the said ability... In real life, spatial ability helps in recognizing objects, faces, and details, in making measurements, navigating, and moving around safely. Thus, in the survey participants were asked to rate their own skills in performing various tasks pertaining to spatial ability on a scale ranging from "excellent" to "poor".

For calculation purposes "excellent" was assigned a value of 5; "very good", 4; "good", 3; "mediocre", 2; and "poor", 1. The averages on each task for women who practice as men are presented in the table below, with the highest averages highlighted in bold. Since only one woman danced as a man less than 25% of the time, her ratings were not included in the table.

Tasks	Women who practice as men at classes		
	25 to 49%	50 to 74%	75 to 100%
	11 women	25 women	13 women
	<b>Average</b>		
Estimating the weight of objects	2.73	2.72	<b>2.77</b>
Parallel parking your car	3.18	3.24	<b>3.58</b>
Remembering faces	3.45	<b>3.72</b>	3.46
Estimating distances	2.82	2.80	<b>2.92</b>
Finding your way on a city map	3.18	<b>3.96</b>	3.85

Even though these results are based on self-evaluations and not objective observations that would require a lifetime of inquiry, one finding emerges: women who dance as men at least 50% of the time tend to rate themselves on average higher on various tasks related to spatial ability than women who dance as men less than half the time. In addition, one positive comment of a general nature can be made:

on average women perceive themselves as good or better at parking their car, remembering faces and finding their destination with the help of a city map.

In sum, this enquiry has provided us with some numbers to describe the extent of the phenomenon of two-sex dancing at the Vancouver Branch, while it has afforded us a glimpse into what makes two-sex dancers dance. Moreover, it has revealed that inveterate two-sex dancers may well draw on their spatial ability to inspire awe in those of us who struggle to acquit ourselves competently from the vantage of our one comfort zone. Exciting dancing to all!

*Doctor D*

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