

Dancing with Inclusivity: The Importance of Integrating Genderless Terminology into Swing Dance Spaces

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Genderless language is a style of language that removes unnecessarily gendered terms to promote inclusivity and help work towards undoing the notions set by society's gender-based stereotyping. Research shows this kind of language helps reduce the disparities and differences between men and women in people's vernacular on college campuses (Remigio & Talosa, 2021) and prevents the maintenance of society's prejudice of transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals (Patev et al., 2018). Reducing the inequity between people regardless of gender is essential for creating a safe environment. Using language that is not gender-coded has been shown to aid that goal. If this language choice is effective for college students, it could likely hold the same benefits for partnered dance communities, which have roles strongly associated with gender. However, while there has been some conversation on the benefits of genderless

language, little previous research has been done on genderless language in the swing dance community.

The bulk of the research that has been conducted on using inclusive language in swing has been about Lindy Hop, an energetic style of swing dancing that is leading the conversation on gender roles in swing dance communities. Whereas many partnered dance styles prescribe women as follows and men as leads, Lindy Hop communities have become more welcoming of dancers dancing outside of the traditional roles set into place (Shaw, 2018). Shaw also goes into detail in discussing the imbalance between men and women in swing dance communities. Men are often discouraged from joining dance scenes due to the societal views on dance being a feminine activity. Still, once they have started Lindy Hop, men are in the advantageous role if they choose to take the leadership path, as there are typically more follows. However, women in swing dance can be at a disadvantage in either position. Female follows often do not always get to have someone to dance with due to the lower rate of leads, but women who lead can face stigma for dancing in the 'man's' role and can have dances rejected due to the discomfort of other women. There has been some conversation on West Coast swing beginning to follow the lead of Lindy Hop in their gender discussion by adopting more neutral terms (e.g., lead and follow as opposed to men and women as labels for dance role) (Lavin, 2019), which shows that the conversation of moving away from traditional gender roles is relatively new to swing dance as a whole and is a conversation that needs to be held in other swing dance communities the way it has been in Lindy Hop communities.

An area even more neglected by research is how gendered language in dance communities, such as referring to leads as gentlemen and follows as ladies, impacts nonbinary and gender-nonconforming dancers. In dance spaces, trans and nonbinary dancers lack representation and can often experience transphobia through gendered expectations placed on dancers. As a result, they can be made to act the role of a gender they may not identify with (Best, 2021).

The way gendered language and the benefits of genderless language in swing dance impacts how roles are viewed is a new conversation with many unexplored and undeveloped paths to explore. When there is talk about gender in these dance communities, the discussion most often focuses on the dynamics of men and women. When traditional gender roles are being played out, the expectations are of dominant male leads, and the obedient female follow. Adhering to these roles can leave very little room for experimenting with learning both dance positions and perpetuate inequality in dance spaces that hurts and hinders both men and women. While this is a meaningful conversation, it excludes the dancers that do not identify in this way. Therefore, it is important to discuss all genders when considering what genderless terminology can do to create a welcoming, accepting, and safe environment for dancers.

My research aims to answer how genderless terminology impacts how dance roles in swing dance are perceived. To research this topic, I will be focusing on the Western Oregon Swing Dance Club (WOSDC). WOSDC is a dance club at Western Oregon University that provides students to learn and practice multiple styles of swing dancing, most of which are partnered dancing. In swing dance, dancers are split into two

roles, leads and follows. Traditionally men will dance in the lead position, and women will dance in the follow position. However, within this organization, anyone is permitted to dance in whatever role suits them most, regardless of gender identity. Many members learn both parts and routinely switch between them, strengthening their dancers' skills. My research will focus on how the use of genderless terminology during teaching within this club influences the way dancers feel about the roles they take when dancing.

This paper will provide a discussion on how using inclusive language in a swing dance club at Western Oregon University achieves two goals. The first goal is to provide a safe and welcoming space for dancers. The second goal is to learn how genderless language shapes dancers' views of the roles they dance within the community. Studying the way language and gender function within this community can provide a way to start a conversation on how acknowledging diversity and using inclusive language can break down arbitrary barriers constructed around the idea of gender roles to create a more open learning environment.

Method

I interviewed several Western Oregon Swing Dance Club members to collect my data. I started with Chelsea Hendrickson, a member of the swing dance club, Jess Farrenkopf, the club's membership coordinator, and Marie Mazzota, the club president. I conducted each interview one-on-one in a secluded part of the campus university center where participants would experience minimal interruption and outside influence. I started each interview by informing participants that their responses would be used within this paper and that I would be transcribing our interviews. I proceeded by asking a series of

pre-planned open-ended questions about each participant's experience with the language and terminology, such as the use of the terms lead and follow as opposed to guys and girls or ladies and gentlemen, used in the swing dance club and their feelings and experiences with gendered expectations in the context of the club. In addition to the prepared questions, I also asked each participant additional clarifications based on their responses to learn as much as possible about their experiences. At the end of each interview, I allowed each participant to share further thoughts on genderless language and its use in WOSDC. Finally, I will report the findings of these interviews. I will use open coding to find common themes associated with the topic across interviews. Once I have those codes, I will break down the information given to me within these categories and mention the relevant personal experiences of the participants.

Results

After conducting interviews with all participants, I have concluded that the Western Oregon Swing Dance Club is a space that actively participates in using genderless language, such as leads and follows, to address different dance roles. During the interviews, I asked a series of questions revolving around genderless language, gender roles, and their ability to express themselves within the organization. Two significant themes reoccurred throughout my interviews regarding the benefit of genderless terminology: creative freedom and inclusivity. In addition to the benefits of genderless language, another common topic was how progress still needs to be made. This need for improvement was shown through the mention of micro-aggressive behavior towards gender-nonconformity.

Creative Freedom

In this paper, creative freedom is defined by the ability to dance in either, or both, roles regardless of identity to find what best suits the dancer and allows them to have the most enjoyable experience. This definition means that this swing dance club will enable students to freely change between or learn a variety of roles and styles of swing at any time, and their accumulated knowledge shapes their style as dancers.

In my interview with Chelsea, she shared, “The language is very open and ungendered, and we are encouraged to take a shot at whatever role we are comfortable with or suits us better. I think that that open language allows people to feel safe and comfortable switching from follow to lead or lead to follow”. By using ungendered language, the club executive members have created a safe space for students to explore dancing with minimal pressure from gender roles and gendered stereotypes prevalent in partnered dancing. Chelsea shared that swing dance can be taught in a gendered manner as early as in elementary school, when staff had boys and girls paired off. However, making that distinction creates a dichotomous and gendered view on the dance form, and that gendered element is not as prevalent in Western Oregon University’s swing dance club.

Jess shared a similar stance in their interview, sharing that in their experience as a nonbinary dancer, they have learned both roles and get to pick and choose what role they would like to dance in. They have expressed that they are comfortable using dance as a form of self-expression in settings where their dance partners make them feel safe and welcomed. By creating a space with a lack of gendered expectations promoted by

genderless language, WOSDC has allowed Jess to select a dance role based on how much creative control they would like when dancing.

When I asked Marie, the current president of WOSDC, about her ability to express herself within the club, she was excited to communicate that the club was somewhere she got to let go of expectations, learn new things, and challenge herself. A lot of this had to do with the fact that when she was first introduced to the club, she was taught by female leads, who used the same genderless language, which broke down the idea of traditional gendered dance roles. She had also disclosed that “I feel able to express myself in that I can show, as a woman, that I can be strong and lead, and that it is not just men that can be the leader.” The interview with Marie gave me insight into how, even as a cisgender woman, there were benefits to the genderless language that she encourages in the dance space she manages. If she had gone without seeing representation of other strong women in the lead position, or if she was delegated to follow due to her womanhood, Marie would not have had the opportunity to explore and come to love that challenge of leading and knowing both roles. Dancing both roles allows her to be a valuable asset to club members like her teachers were to her.

Additionally, it was frequently mentioned that a large majority of the club members are women, which means that for everyone to dance many women get the opportunity to play with the idea of leading. Despite this not being the traditional role women would take in swing dance, this practice allows for much freedom regarding switching roles.

Inclusivity

The second central theme within the interviews was inclusivity. Inclusivity, defined for this data set, is the welcoming and inclusion of people with a range of different identities. When it comes to the topic of ungendered language, inclusivity primarily refers to the acceptance and inclusion of transgender and nonbinary people and gender-nonconforming individuals or those who display gender-nonconforming traits.

An example of the importance of inclusivity can be seen in Chelsea's response when I asked her how the language used in the club influenced how comfortable she was expressing herself. She responded by telling me, "I think that if they said men on this side and women on this side, I might have felt like I had to violently not conform to the gender roles assigned or feel really uncomfortable in the room as someone who does not conform to gender roles or someone who does not like gender roles, and I probably would not have come back." In other words, if the executive board of WOSDC had decided to teach swing dance with traditional gender roles and with the use of gendered language, Chelsea would have either felt the need to defend her individuality in a setting of conformity or would have felt othered by the nature of that teaching structure and would not have felt comfortable being part of that space. Instead, Chelsea can feel safe exploring her role as a gender non-conforming woman within swing club and does not have to fight for others to acknowledge her in whatever part she is filling.

In the case of gender-nonconformity, genderless language becomes an essential tool for making those individuals feel accepted and valued. Jess, who is nonbinary, is another member who does not conform to the gender stereotypes placed on men or women, as they are neither. They shared, "gendered language especially can have a big

impact there because you can literally see and hear how people are using it,” while discussing how language choice affected their learning and identity within WOSDC. When gendered language is used, there can be discomfort and a lack of respect for the identities of nonbinary people within a space. In addition, using gendered terminology in a space where people may identify as something other than male or female can have an alienating effect that can be discouraging. By choosing to use language that is not gender-coded, the WOSDC executive members have made an effort to create a space that does not other or cast aside members of the club that do not fall within the structure of a gender binary.

On inclusivity, Marie was willing to share that many of the WOSDC executive board choose to use genderless language and do not enforce traditional gender roles because many members are part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Those that do not identify with LGBTQIA+ are allies to that community. This means there is representation for the voices of the people in that community and that they are valued. The goal is to maintain an openness to gender expression through dance and allow people to dance in whatever role makes them happy and comfortable. She has a dedication to including people of all identities with the club. However, she acknowledges that there are other swing dance spaces and wants swing dance as a whole to continue to grow into a social dance form that allows anyone to dance with anybody.

Microaggressions

The interviews I have held have clarified that, while most fixed members of WOSDC do well in avoiding gender-coded language, some people’s behaviors do not

align with these ideas. This space is not perfectly free from gender or identity-based discrimination and bias despite the effort being put forth by many. For example, some individuals will behave in a microaggressive manner. Microaggressions are discriminatory actions to a minority or marginalized community in a subtle way or roundabout. Within swing dance, this can look like someone coming off disrespectfully or negatively with or without intent to members who do not fit into the male lead and female follow tradition. One way this occurs is through misgendering other dancers.

When discussing if WOSDC has felt unwelcoming, Jess divulged that while slip-ups can happen as genuine mistakes, most club members are accommodating and take the time to learn people's names and pronouns. However, some people will use a member's legal name or make minimal effort to use the correct pronouns and may even avoid dancing with the person they are misgendering. This kind of hostile behavior is not typical among members of WOSDC, but it can create an uncomfortable tension that can impact a student's level of comfort within the organization. This indicated that, in general, this swing dance club has many members that work to make a welcoming environment. There is, however, the potential for new members to join that may challenge the structure of the club and its openness in regards to keeping roles and language ungendered. In addition, the potential for members that may interact with students who are transgender/nonbinary, gender-nonconforming, or dancing outside of nontraditional roles opens up the risk of microaggressions that, while reduced by genderless language, cannot be altogether avoided by utilizing this more inclusive terminology.

Chelsea has also been confronted with microaggressive behavior; when describing her experience, she revealed, “It can also be discouraging trying to be a lead and having someone trying to take a dance from you.” She further explained that it could be hurtful to be cut off by other leads while getting used to dancing with a follow and undermine her ability to practice expressing herself through leading dance. This is another example of how members or people participating in club meetings will sometimes undermine the experiences of other dancers. This is often the result of discomfort around the idea of WOSDC breaking away from traditional gender roles and can look like some dancers trying to fit other members into gendered boxes they are not comfortable in or do not apply to them. This can be distressing for transgender/nonbinary and gender-nonconforming dancers and often leads them to feel weary the more they are the target of these attitudes.

Discussion

When it comes to Western Oregon Swing Dance Club, it can be seen how inclusive and non-gendered language can go a long way in creating a safe environment for students, regardless of gender. This style of speech can drastically change the way the role lead and follow are viewed by dancers and how they view themselves within those roles. It seems that genderless language aids male-female equity and narrows the social prejudice that transgender/nonbinary/gender-nonconforming dancers face, similar to the previous research conducted on those effects on college campuses (Remigio & Talosa, 2021), (Patev et al., 2018). By changing the language used in partnered dance styles, like swing dance, learning and participation in these activities can become a fun

way to express individuality while working with a dance partner in a safe and welcoming environment. There must be acceptance between dance partners to feel comfortable enough to communicate. While genderless language is not the only component to creating a safe environment, with variables such as personal relationships and feelings of personal comfortability and safety with a dance partner playing an important role, it does contribute to fostering a welcoming space that can foster these feelings of comfort and safety with other people within the community.

Even though ungendered language can help foster acceptance, addressing prejudice and advancing towards progress cannot occur without a conversation. In an interview, WOSDC Membership Coordinator Jess Farrenkopf shared, “Sometimes when you do not talk about things, people will have beliefs and biases that are just there in the background that kind of just simmer there, but we never actually talk about it, so it is harder to address that hidden bias,” while talking about a lack of dialogue that occurs within the club. Genderless language is an effective tool for creating space for all people within a group. However, it is only that: a tool. When discussing the impact of genderless language in swing dance communities, it is vital to understand that this language style can foster inclusivity. However, bias and discrepancies need to be addressed. Shifts in language should be accompanied by a more open dialog in both research and dance communities to implement an inclusive language model. Throughout this paper, the effectiveness of using this communication style was discussed and defended. Still, to truly make change through genderless language, there need to be more discussions about unlearning biases and harmful traditions. In addition, there needs to be an ongoing

conversation about how genderless language, diversity, and inclusivity can benefit people of all gender identities and swing dance communities. For much of the history of swing dance, the idea that dancer partners ought to be a man and a woman, but now there is a shift in this notion in the current swing revival. There is a lack of research on the adjustments that need to be made in language and behavior within these communities to fit this new generation of dancers better.

Conclusion

This paper explores the importance of genderless language to help create inclusive spaces in swing dance communities and examines how this language style impacted the identities and the exploration of dancers within those communities by studying the Western Oregon Swing Dance Club. One of the most significant findings was that using language that is not gender coded fostered inclusivity within the community, helping close the discrepancy between different genders that can be seen in other partnered dance communities. Another prominent finding was that by using this type of speech, there was a shared sense of being more comfortable being creative and expressive when dancing, experimenting with how they dance and the roles they would like to practice. Despite the benefits of genderless language and what it can do to create a welcoming environment, it was found that it is not enough to keep microaggressive and traditionalist mindsets from finding their way into the club entirely in a potentially harmful way.

Overall, this study strengthens the idea that genderless language is beneficial in creating equity between cisgender men and women and nonbinary/transgender

individuals within swing dance communities. The research conducted for this study had shown a pattern of feeling included and expressing oneself when genderless language was at play. These findings add to the limited but growing body of research on language and inclusivity in various swing dance communities. It would be valuable to have more research on genderless language in swing dance and start a conversation about the impact of discussing biases on these communities. The findings that there was still unaddressed bias in some community members represented in this study lay the groundwork for discussing how conversations and addressing biases. These conversations, paired with tools like genderless language, will help swing dance communities grow into communities accepting various gender identities and gender-nonconforming dance roles.

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Appendix A
Interview Questions

1. Describe your experiences dancing or witnessing people dancing in and out of traditional dance roles
2. Can you describe the type of language used by club leadership when they are teaching?
3. How comfortable are you with the idea of dancing in different roles?
4. Tell me about the attitudes of the club when it comes to gender roles.
5. In what ways have you felt either accepted/welcome or unaccepted/unwelcome?
6. In what ways do you feel able to participate in exploration and self-expression?
7. In what ways do you feel unable to participate in exploration and self-expression?
8. In what ways do you find swing dance clubs to be inclusive or noninclusive in terms of gender?
9. What effects have gender roles and gendered language had on your learning and identity within the swing dance club?

Author Bio

Guinevere Olander is a Sophomore attending Western Oregon University. She is currently working towards a Bachelor's of Science in Psychology but spends a lot of her time taking creative lower-division classes in the Art, Dance, and Music departments. She plans to further her education by later obtaining a Master's degree in counseling and pursue a career in mental health counseling. Guinevere spends her free time volunteering at the Stitch Closet, a campus resource for access to free clothing, dancing at the Western Oregon Swing Dance Club, practicing photography, and reading.