

FEATURE ARTICLE



## Fostering a Culture of Consent in Social Dance Communities

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines how an affirmative consent model can be applied in social dance contexts and addresses how social dance teachers can foster a culture of consent in their classes and communities. This model is based on legal and cultural activists' efforts to reduce incidents of sexual assault by shifting rape culture to consent culture. The author shares consent exercises developed in the context of a university salsa dance course and includes student perspectives and responses to illustrate their impact in empowering students to honor personal boundaries while engaging in touch-based social dancing. Practical suggestions are offered for dancers, teachers, and community groups that can help shift the culture in social dance communities toward normalizing open and proactive discussions around personal boundaries.

### KEYWORDS

Gender/feminism; Latin dance; community; higher education

Given the new-found urgency for educational institutions to help students develop skills in negotiating consent since the #MeToo movement (founded by Tarana Burke in 2006) became a viral global movement in 2017 (Muehlenhard et al. 2016; Grigoriadis 2017; Freitas 2018; Kulbaga 2019), education about consent should be an essential part of any instruction in touch-based partnered social dance. Until recently, however, consent has rarely been addressed in more than a cursory fashion in social dance classes. When I took my first ballroom dance class at the age of 12, the male teacher explained to his middle-school foxtrot pupils that the only acceptable answer to a boy's invitation to dance (we were taught that only boys could invite a girl to dance) was, "I would be delighted." Thankfully, social dancing and American society have evolved such that now many social dance communities encourage same-sex dancing, "no, thank you" has become an acceptable response to a dance offer, and many women are empowered to invite a potential partner to the dance floor. Negotiating consent is, however, much more complex than the binary yes/no model implies. Most social dances have their roots in courtship and flirtation that are, at times, sexually charged. Of course, most dance interactions do not evoke a sexual spark, nor would we want them to. A good deal of the fun is never quite knowing when a playful exchange will become electrified with sexual energy. While this ambiguity is a crucial feature of many social dance communities, it is also why social dancers need to stay vigilant about ensuring that every participant is consenting to the game as it is unfolding. The #MeToo movement has

exposed gut-wrenching tales of egregious sexual assault, persistent sexual harassment, and cultures world-wide that silence, minimize, and ignore the ubiquity of sexual violence. Social dance floors are spaces of celebration, cultural bonding, personal expression, and healing, and they are also embedded within these broader cultures of sexual violence. Almost every social dancer I know can recall a tale of an unwanted sexual advance or interaction on the dance floor that left them feeling violated, disrespected, or uncomfortable.

Several people within specific social dance communities have laid fundamental groundwork in developing language and processes for how we can teach and discuss consent in social dance contexts. Social dance genres that have fewer codified steps, such as contact improvisation and fusion dancing, have been at the forefront of many of these efforts in part because the open-ended improvisational nature of these genres exposed personal variation in physical boundaries more readily than dance forms based on more tightly codified vocabulary (T'ai 2017; Kennedy 2020). Some social dance communities were propelled into discussions about consent in reaction to incidents of rape and sexual assault within their communities, such as the lindy hop scandal of 2015 when one of the most widely celebrated teachers of the international touring circuit was charged on multiple accounts of sexual assault (Gordon 2016). As dancer Caitlin Ferguson notes, social dance teachers have no regulatory body dictating professional consent practices in the field, and for far too long dance communities have relied on informal and deeply flawed systems for ensuring safety of