

Cross-sex bias in duets in Contact Improvisation jams: an empirical study

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(latest version: August 2021)

Abstract

Where most social dance forms are done with members of the opposite sex, contact improvisation is known for dances between both same and opposite sex pairs. This is central to the identity of CI and within CI there is a rhetoric of gender neutrality in dancing. As Steve Paxton, CI founder, is oft quoted, "It's physics, not chemistry." Many CI Jam practitioners claim that contact duets at jams have little to no bias toward cross-sex dancing, or that when there is, it is a sign of deviance, rather than the rule. This claim stands counter to what feels to many others as obvious: that there is a strong bias toward cross-sex dancing shaped in part by heteronormative intimacy exploration in contact jams. To address this confusion, I have since 2009 been collaborating with other dancers to document sex combinations of duets in contact improvisation jams at longer, large CI events to assess the actual choices that dancers make in open jams. The results, documenting to date over 3000 dances at 27 different long CI events in the US and Europe, show that ALL 25 events demonstrated a clear bias toward cross sex dancing. Using mathematical formalism developed for chemical balance equations meant to analyse the relative strengths of attraction between atoms in forming molecules, this data demonstrates that CI dancers at these events display in their dance choices an average attraction to cross-sex dancing that is almost 5 times that of same-sex dancing, running counter to the rhetoric of sex-neutrality. Contrary to the rhetoric and aspirations held by some, the norm of contact improvisation jams is to strongly emphasize cross-sex dancing. Rather than the more extreme claim of sex-neutrality, a better framing would be that within a norm of dances being strongly influenced by heteronormative intimacy-seeking, contact jam practitioners demonstrate a degree of openness to and exploration of same sex dancing that is unusual in western social dances.

Introduction

The early days of Contact Improvisation were characterized by challenging of gender norms in dance and an emphasis on the use of alignment and structure for power, such that small people could lift big people, women lifted men, etc.. It also emerged in the time of postmodern dance out of a fascination with the mechanics of the body and the deconstruction and provocation of "natural movement". It was very much an intellectually engaged movement study. A guiding rhetoric framed it as a gender neutral exploration that was "not about intimacy", or as a physically intimate dance that was not sexual. "It's physics, not chemistry", a phrase often repeated by founder Steve Paxton, was a guiding myth. However, as Nita Little, another one of the very early contact improvisers once told me, "That was never actually true." Contact Improvisers in festivals and large jams consistently display a strong preference for dancing with members of the opposite sex. This is obvious if you look and count.

However, about 10 years ago, long term contactor Keith Hennessey and I were comparing notes about something we were both were experiencing. We would point out the obvious: contact improvisation is saturated with heteronormative intimacy seeking as demonstrated in part by the displayed bias toward cross-sex dancing, as well as by the nature of the dances based on sex combination. For example, slow soft floor dances tend to be between opposite sex pairs. After pointing out the obvious, some people would respond with some version of "no shit, Sherlock." Many others, however, would surprisingly get upset at us for pointing out what is plain to see and would deny it or accuse us of trying to "sexualize" CI. My feeling is that the rhetorical commitment to "contact improvisation is not about intimacy" and "contact dancing is gender neutral" was so strong that people not only were unwilling to admit what was consistently in front of their eyes or what they were themselves doing, but would also get actively angry at anyone suggesting that this was not the case.

It is of course, obvious if you just watch jams for any extended period of time that while some dances are male-male or female-female, the great majority of dances are cross-sex.

To be clear, there are different ways of being intimate. Contact improvisation is necessarily an intimate dance. To do it well, one must feel one's partner and allow oneself to be felt. It is necessarily a breaking down of our daily rules around physical touch and meaning, as we give another permission to feel and affect our body and we take up the space to physically move with another in a sensitive and sensing way, to feel and move another. Beyond this,

however, is the realm of feeling and interpersonal meaning, how our bodies respond with oxytocin to relaxed and weighted touch, the excitement and pleasure based in physical play and relaxed touch, and in particular, this touch and play along lines of and shaped by sexual orientation. This has arguably been a central source of the collective enthusiasm for holding and creating contact jams, a central reason for why people come, and also a perennial source of confusion and dissonance as the rhetoric and aspirations of some conflict with the reality of what most are exploring in these spaces. This sometime dissonance is only made worse by framing conversations judgmentally in terms of what CI “should be”, shaming that which is a central aspect of the majority of dances (often including those of the accuser). This puts the phenomena around sex and intimacy further into shadow.

To be clear, this is not about overt sexual behavior in jams (making out), although there is certainly some degree of subjectivity and varying norms about what constitutes such. Such overt sexuality in CI is rather uncommon and there is mostly a shared norm around avoiding this. This is also not a discussion of whether the intimacy explored in the space turns into sexuality or romantic relations outside of the dance space, something that also unsurprisingly happens regularly in longer dance gatherings and in local ci communities. The issues can be intertwined and/or conflated, but this is a different discussion.

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Rather disconcerted by the consistent denial of the obvious, I started a project of counting dances at CI Festivals and CI Long Jams to document this cross-sex bias. I performed counts myself, but also enlisting the help of others for counting dances at events I was not attending. The protocol is simple, and you may do the counts yourself to explore your own events or challenge the findings here, if you like. I would be interested and surprised if your results do not fall in line with those presented here.

The first version of the count was at the European Contact Improvisation Teacher’s Exchange (ECITE) in 2009, where I enlisted the aid of Irene Sposetti to double check my counts (in anticipation of “you made the data up” claims). I was anticipating that I would have to do a large count, as I expected the bias to be on the order of 1.5 to 1, since it was a teacher’s gathering and therefore theoretically more in line with the rhetorical ideals of CI. I was laughing a lot as I was counting at the event because of how blatant the cross-sex bias was, actually turning out to be 6 to 1 after data analysis. After the event, I also did a survey asking dancers what they remembered from the event (30% response rate). 9 out of 10 said that there was either no cross-sex bias or very little. Only 1 in 10 acknowledged experiencing a strong cross-sex bias in the dancing at the event. The participants of ECITE demonstrated collectively a strong blindness to what was actually happening in the space, with only 1 in 10 seeing clearly what was happening. This blindness appears normative in many ci communities.

Since then I have either counted or received counts from 26 other large CI events in Europe and the US, with consistent results, but also interesting variation. The paper follows more or less the format of a scientific paper and proceeds from here as follows. The next section describes the methods used for data collection and analysis. The following section summarizes the results for each of the events and as a whole. Finally, the results are discussed and synthesized with qualitative observations and further questions are explored. Usually a science paper ends with a section called “Conclusions”, but I just end with a “Discussion” section to keep it open-ended.

Methods

Observation protocol

Observations are performed at open jams in large CI gatherings – long retreat jams, festivals, etc -- where it is easier to get large counts with the same group of dancers than might be the case at weekly contact jams. The counts are done discreetly so that the dancers are not reacting to being observed, thus more likely doing as they usually would. At each count, duets are counted by sex combination (male-female, male-male, female-female). Trios and other combinations are side-noted. To be clear, what is noted is the sex as apparent to the observer, which is how for the purposes of this paper “male” and “female” are used. As the counts are observational and “on the fly” at events, there is not any sort of systematic effort to gather information on dancers’ relationships to gender constructs, nor on their sexual orientation. Where there is confusion about sex or where it seems clear that the dancer is trans or intersex, their dance is also side-noted, but this only happened for a few individuals out of all of the CI events, (too small of a sample to either affect the overall results or make meaningful statistical claims about such dancers).

Counts were done at random intervals, at least an half hour apart from each other to avoid over-counting specific dances. The observer never counted their own dance and also never started a count based on seeing something in the space, to prevent the counts from being biased toward attention grabbing moments which might involve less usual dances.

Based on early rounds of the counts, trios and larger dances were found to be infrequent or brief enough to ignore in the summary statistics, as their inclusion would not significantly affect the results. While they stand out in memory, in the actual counts, they represented less than 5% of the observed dances. Similarly, cases where the observer could not make an easy and rapid claim of the apparent sex of a dancer as biologically male or female were infrequent enough that their inclusion or not would not affect the overall statistics in an appreciable way. I acknowledge here that it is possible that there could be some remaining confusion about the assigned-at-birth vs apparent sex of a specific dancer, but for the most part, partnering in CI is initiated non-verbally and thus would be based on appearance.

Again, counting is not advertised beforehand to avoid dancers changing their dancing based on being watched, something which the data appears to reveal is a real issue. Counts would not be done if there were some announcement of a kind of “closed container” where one is asked not to communicate about what one sees in the space, but this was never the case. All observations are anonymized for publication.

Analysis Protocol

A number of summary statistics of the raw counts were recorded, including ratio of cross-sex to same sex dances (C:S), ratio of cross sex dances to male-male dances divided by 2 (C:M/2), and ratio of cross sex dances to female-female dances divided by 2 (C:F/2). The latter two reflect the male and female experience of cross vs same sex dancing. The division by 2 is to reflect that there are two men in a male-male duet and only one in a male-female duet and to make them comparable to the C:S numbers. It is important to note that these jam-averaged ratios do not by themselves reflect the strength of the performed preference for cross vs same sex dancing, as there is usually an imbalance toward more male or more female dancers. Because of imbalance, a certain amount of same-sex dances are “forced” to happen if people want to dance. That is, when there is an imbalance, the most skewed that the dancing can get will involve all member of the minority sex dancing cross gender and the remaining dancers of the majority sex dancing with each other in “forced” same sex dances. For example, if there were 6 male dancers and 18 female dancers, and all male dancers only danced with women, you would have C:S of 1, even though the dancers would be demonstrating a very strong preference for cross-sex dancing. By calling these dances “forced”, I don’t mean that they are not wanting to dance same sex and are not enjoying these dances. I simply mean that even in the extreme case that there was a very strong preference for cross sex dancing, an imbalance in the sexes would require some dancers to choose the less desirable, but still enjoyable same sex dances. (As a statistical aside, if dancers were truly choosing blind to the sex of their partner, you would expect a slightly higher number of same-sex dances than cross-sex dances ($C:S < 1$), owing to these regularly occurring imbalances.

What we really want to know, of course, is how much more strongly are dancers trying to make cross-sex dances happen. Luckily, there is a well developed mathematics for the very analogous system of chemical reactions, where different atoms have different levels of attraction to each other to join and form molecules. From observing the overall amounts of atoms of different elements in a container and the ratio of different molecules, we can back-calculate the relative strength of attraction or “bonding strength” of different combinations of atoms. For details, google “chemical balance equations”. I directly use this simple mathematics to derive an average displayed relative strength of attraction for cross-sex vs same-sex dancing, denoted “X” in Table 1. . $X = 1$ would be sex-blind. $X > 1$ would be cross-sex biased, with stronger attraction to dance cross-sex than same-sex. $X < 1$ is same-sex biased.

There are limitations of this method. This is an average; there is variation amongst individuals in how much they prefer to dance cross vs same sex, and this method does not capture this. Some actually prefer same-sex dancing, while others have far stronger than usual attraction to cross-sex dancing or attract cross-sex partners more strongly. This method does not capture variance, only the average. Also, this should be seen as a lower bound on sex-based intimacy seeking in dance. Some amount of dancers in CI are strongly attracted to sensuality and intimacy with members of the same sex. When such same sex intimate dances happen they would balance out the intimate dances that are cross-sex, even though they are both based on sex-preferential intimacy seeking. In other words,

because of same sex sexual attraction for some, this should be considered an underestimate of the amount of contact dancing biased towards the sex to whom dancers are attracted. A further limitation is that this method can not distinguish amongst the cases where the imbalance is because of male choice, because of female choice, or both in balance. It also will not distinguish amongst cross-sex bias manifesting as longer dances cross-sex, more frequent dances cross-sex, or both. It also does not explicitly gather data on the qualities of the dances, which would be of interest. A more sophisticated (and labor intensive) study would use something like video-recording and coding of the dances in more detail based on the recordings, as well as comprehensive interviews with all participants. If you have the resources or obsessive energy for that, I would be most curious to hear the results.

Results

The results are summarized in Table 1. X is, again, the main number of interest, the average displayed comparative strength of attraction to cross sex dancing to same sex dancing. A few basic take-aways looking at the data

- The overall cross-sex bias (X) is 4.6, meaning that the attraction to dance cross sex is almost 5 times as strong as that to dance same sex, on average.
- The overall raw count ratios are
C:S = 2.4
C:M/2 = 4.5
C:F/2 = 1.7
This means that men experience much more strongly skewed dancing than women do, due purely to their being greater numbers of women dancing on average.
- The range for event-averaged X goes from 1.5 to 9.8. The lowest it gets down to is a moderately strong bias toward cross-sex dancing and it goes up to an order of magnitude stronger attraction between cross-sex pairs. As discussed below, I would not put too much weight on the specific high and low end counts, though, because of the phenomena of “regression to the mean”.

A Meandering Discussion

What was relatively obvious to some has now been documented and quantified. Contrary to the gender-neutral rhetoric held by many in contact improvisation, heteronormative intimacy directed dance is the norm in contact improvisation. This is not necessarily a bad thing per se. What feels problematic is the common denial of this fact and, relatedly, how denial and shaming of it keep it in shadow and allow the infrequent but regular proliferation of misstep and projection.

The norm, however, is hidden from many whose sexuality fit well with the norm. From personal experience in conversations, it seems pretty consistent that those who are not 100% straight are more likely to see the intimacy seeking within contact improvisation practice because the intimacy that is being pursued is not aligned to their sexual attractions. At ECITE 2009, there happened to be a break-out session on the topic of CI and gender. Of the 90 ECITE participants, only 5 of us showed up for the session, all of atypical sexual persuasions. I brought the subject up of cross-sex bias, and all said it was obvious. Strikingly, the two men leaning more toward the same-sex attracted side of the spectrum named how they felt almost compelled to dance in a way framed by heteronormative intimacy... primarily cross-sex and with slow dances only being with women. An important take-away from this is that not all individuals who are dancing more cross-sex or in ways strongly shaped by heteronormative intimacy are doing so based on their own preferences ... It is also shaped by the general culture of CI, what is more or less normal, and what is invited by others.

As a personal note, I would like to talk about slowness and sensitivity and how they are shaped by the culture of heteronormative intimacy-seeking in CI. While I of course love the explosive roller-coaster ride of a dance that careens through the space, I like to take a long time in slow, soft and sensitive dances for warm-up, body maintenance, self-study. I find, however, that moving slowly acts for men in most CI spaces as a kind of “male repellent”, so the overwhelming majority of these dances are with women. To be transparent, I am mostly straight these days, and I certainly do not find the cross-sex intimacy exploration of CI anathema, but much of my cross-sex bias in slow dancing has to do with who is available to dance with me in these dances. Finding male partners for such slow and sensitive dances at open CI jams is challenging as a male. To illustrate this, I was at long jam at Earthdance, where there is an annual tradition of having an hour of sex-segregated dancing one of the evenings. In the opening

talk, I named how I find it very difficult in the open contact Jam community to find soft and sensitive dances with other men. There was in the circle much resonance with this statement and an affirmation of the need for more male-male sensitivity. I then quietly gave myself a rule for the hour of dancing that I would not move any part of my body faster than 1 foot per second. In a sea of (predominantly straight) men, I found myself to be like Moses splitting the waters as I slowly moved through the space, with men avoiding the slowness like magnets repelling each other. Only two dancers were able to slow down and dance with me: one was a professional dancer and the other was gay. One other man touched me in the hour, but he departed after 3 seconds. As the doors between the spaces opened and we were once again a mixed sex group, within minutes I had a dance partner and continued to easily find partners for the next hours within my slow dancing, but only women. I have repeated this experiment with similar results a number of times.

As mentioned, the ECITE 2009 count was followed up with a survey of what people remembered of the dancing. With a 30% response rate to the call for the survey, 9 out of 10 claimed that the dancing there had been sex-neutral or maybe slightly biased toward cross-sex dancing. This was in the face of a cross-sex bias of 6 to 1. Also remarkable was the very bimodal nature of the responses. There were no “in-between responses”, claiming moderate cross-sex bias: either they saw little to no bias or they, the 1 in 10, saw it very strongly.

With regards the question of whether the cross-sex bias is driven by male choice, female choice, or both, this method is incapable of distinguishing them. There have been many who suggest that it is driven by male choice making with female dancers simply accepting offered dances. Certainly, something in male choice is a driver. However, I think it is a mistake to jump to the conclusion that this is the whole story. In private conversations, I have heard many women talk of it being easier to get a dance with a man than with a woman. Irene at ECITE 2009 mentioned how she found it quite difficult to get a “dropped-in” dance with another woman in her 20s or 30s, with such dances tending to end quickly when they did start (Irene was in her 30s at the time). To note, in a recent conversation, Irene, now in her 40s, said that she feels like she has seen a cultural shift in CI, where she finds this less of an issue. My intuition of the current state of affairs is that the cross-sex bias is largely male choice driven but that female cross-sex bias is also significant, if lesser. This would also align with greater female identification with bisexuality in the CI community. To answer this question, though, would take more detailed observation and interviews.

What amplifies the cross-sex bias and what decreases it?

I think that this is a very interesting question. I'll offer a mix of qualitative and quantitative observations here. There certainly is variation amongst different events and also variation within events that seem to be correlated with specific factors. I will throw out here a few proposals.

- Contactors from cultures more comfortable generally with sensuality, seem significantly LESS biased toward cross-sex dancing (based on observations in Spain)
- Slow, physically intertwined floor dancing seems to be more biased toward cross-sex dancing
- Non-talking spaces and spaces with music seem to have MORE bias toward cross-sex dancing. The Underscore is a clear example of this, with all observations of the Underscore at these larger events having significantly higher emphasis on cross-sex dancing than at other jams at the events (3 Underscores counted with N of 221) .
- Beginnings of Jams seem to have LESS cross-sex bias, while mid or late jam seems to have MORE cross-sex bias
- Where there is more explicit mutual observation throughout the space, there is LESS cross-sex bias
- The last three points seem to have in common that those jams that invoke less a sense of the social self and less potential observation and judgment have more cross-sex bias.
- Talking about cross-sex bias and homophobia reduces (at least temporarily) cross-sex bias
- Those with a contemporary dance background seem to have less cross-sex bias as do spaces framed around CI as a contemporary dance technique.

Notes on the Underscore: At three of the events, ECITE 2009, Nordtanz 2018, and Italy Contact Camp 2021 there were sessions of Stark-Smith's Underscore where there were significant counts taken. Without going into all the details, this a jam frame for exploring contact improvisation with an attention to the many possibilities of choices

one can make in a jam setting, where, importantly, there is a request to stay in a non-verbal state and where there is usually music as part of the experience, as was the case in these counts. The call to introspective attention, the non-verbal rule, and the music all take one out of usual social awareness, creating for many an altered state. Quite remarkably, in these cases, the Underscore amplified the cross-sex bias by a factor of 2! Dancers were twice as strongly preferring to dance cross-sex during the Underscore as during the rest of the event. Quite possibly this is because of how the score was presented in the middle of a long retreat CI event, as opposed to how it might manifest in another kind of container, like a workshop specifically focusing on Underscore. There was a fourth event in which the Underscore was presented and a count was done, the Bremen Sylvester Jam 2019, but there were no “unforced” same-sex dances observed, resulting in a “divide by zero” error in the math. If you don’t want to get into the math, qualitatively, the same thing happened only amusingly causing the mathematical method to break down, it was such a strong effect.

It’s worth looking at a few anomalies of reduced cross-sex bias at the events ... I preface this by saying that I would not put too much weight on the more extreme results of exceptionally strong or less strong cross-sex bias at events. For those who don’t live and breathe statistics, there is a phenomena called “regression to the mean” which, loosely speaking means that exceptional results are probably exceptional in part because of random factors and that repeat observation would probably bring the number closer to the average. I would also note that these lower cross-sex bias events still had a significant bias toward cross-sex dancing, merely lower than the usual.

First, the 2019 Leipzig Contact Festival had an exceptionally low cross-sex bias ($X = 1.5$), and in fact the overall counts had slightly more same-sex as cross-sex dances (see note on Freiburg below for how this difference arises). I was not at the event, but I did debrief observers and heard three observations worth mentioning. 1) There was a very strong emphasis on “inclusiveness” in many forms at the jam. 2) the dancing on the first of the two open jams was very group oriented with duets being very short with a lot of inclusion of third partners, fission and fusion of duets. 3) the second of the two jams was dominated by “puppy piles” of many bodies moving slowly or in rest, rather than sustained duet activity. I can only speculate, but I suspect that the inclusiveness generated a greater openness to same-sex intimacy, and the rapid fission/fusion of dances with a group orientation meant more of a publicness and mutual watching to the dances, which seems associated with less cross-sex bias. It is also quite possibly the case that the festival had a higher than usual number of LGBTQ dancers, given the social circles of some of the organizers.

Second, the Valencia Contact Festival also had a lower than usual cross-sex bias ($X = 1.7$). I suspect that what is going on here matches informal observation that Irene Sposetti and I were making at ECITE in 2009. This is just speculation, but we both experienced in other contexts and saw at that ECITE that many Spanish dancers seem to have a greater comfort with sensuality in the dance and as a result seem to have less charge around it and as a result are more open to exploring it with members of the same sex. I would be interested to hear from others about this.

Third, at the New Year’s Jam at Earthdance in 2009, Rajendra Serber’s counts showed a lower than usual cross-sex bias ... less also than counts at other Earthdance events. In follow up interviews, I found that the preceding long jam had had an explosive meltdown over sexual boundary transgression which generated a lot of processing in the community around intimacy, sexuality, and gender in CI. It appears that this significantly reduced the cross-sex bias in the dancing for the following event, with cross sex dancing preferred only 2 to 1 relative to same-sex dancing, compared to the usual 5 to 1. It bounced back again within the year, as demonstrated the following July ($X = 5.7$).

I would also point out the difference between raw totals of dances vs calculated cross-sex bias, particularly for the Freiburg Teacher’s Meeting 2010 ($X = 3.6$, $C:S = 1.6$) and the Breitenbush Spring Contact Jam 2012 ($X = 6.1$, $C:S = 1.2$). The discrepancy comes down to overall sex ratios and “forced same sex dancing”. In the Freiburg count, there was an unusual amount of dancing time in the counts where members of one sex were dancing more than the other, so the cross-sex preference is as not revealed in the overall ratio of cross to same sex dances, but in the infrequency of minority sex pairs. In the Breitenbush count, the overall ratio of men to women was exceptionally skewed, more than any of the other observed event at 2 male dancers to 5 female dancers. In the actual counts, the few men were almost exclusively dancing with women ($C:M/2 = 10$) and women were dancing with each other quite a lot ($C:F/2 = 0.6$). Again, this method can not tell the difference between men avoiding dancing with each other and women grabbing guys to dance with first and then dancing with other women once there were no men left.

Does this information call us to do anything?

Answering this question is not the primary purpose of this paper. This paper is primarily about establishing the facts. What we do with those facts is up to us as individuals and together in groups based on affinities of interest. I will take a little time here to give my two cents. The first thought that I have is that this works for a lot of people the way it has been. While I personally would like to decrease the bias, I don't want to make a strong argument that it is somehow wrong to have this cross-sex bias or intimacy seeking in CI. It is very clearly a big part of why most people come to practice CI. People are pursuing the dances that they want and this is the result. This by itself is not a problem for most people in the community, even as difficult conversations are sometimes sparked and there are perennial issues with projection, miscommunication, and exactly "how" intimacy is being pursued, negotiated, communicated. I think open, well-intentioned and kind conversation goes a long way to smoothing out many of these issues, particularly important around sometimes experienced boundary crossing or misinterpretation. However, if it is strongly NOT working for some people, then by all means I would encourage people who want something different to host new spaces with different frames, just as others initiated existing jams. I think it is a trap to get into arguments about "what contact improvisation as a whole should be" or "what is the right way to do contact improvisation." It was started with an open invitation and an avoidance of definition and for better or worse, open-ness to interpretation is its most defining characteristic. This unfortunately seems to be the reflex, however, to try to address personal desires for change by saying that others are wrong. I think we are better served by a diversity of contact spaces where people can find norms that fit their desired explorations better: more physics, more open to chemistry, tightly focused and framed exploration, open space, heteronormative, non-heteronormative, theater research oriented, etc.. Creating diverse clear frames can be interesting, and I think they all have things to offer. I also think that actual physical experimentation with alternatives would likely be more informative and more fun than arguing about right and wrong ways to do contact.

Chris Aiken once said at the Seattle Festival of Alternative Dance and Improvisation that he had the feeling that CI had developed as it had with the exploration of intimacy that it had, precisely because there was a myth that allowed a kind of denial of what was being explored. Openly naming it would have caused too much confusion in the beginning. However after decades of exploration and a clear establishment of a stable global community of exploration, it is potentially safe for us now to acknowledge what we are doing... so we can do what we do better. Things that we don't talk about, that we deny, just manifest in shadow, creating what has been a shadow side to the intimacy exploration of contact improvisation. This shadow has manifested through a sometimes confused relationship to intimacy in contact improvisation, dysfunction in pursuing it, sometimes distorted projections, experiences of boundary crossing, and an awkwardness in talking about it all.

We are not very good at talking about this stuff. I remember back in the late 90s, there were two issues of CQ magazine devoted to sexuality and contact improvisation. I was frankly stunned by the collective avoidance of talking about the positives of intimacy and CI in those two issues... it was all "how to avoid intimacy", "how to say no", or tangents like "gender roles in performance". While I understood the drive for each individual article, the collective avoidance of the positive was striking, especially since I personally knew that most of the authors had romantically hooked up with people in the CI scene at some point. This felt like it was just pushing things deeper into shadow. As I recall, only Keith Hennessey had anything positive to say in a one-liner about recognizing that all of his future lovers needed to be at least familiar with CI, even if he had to teach them himself.

I offer two exercises I have led at different events: *Intimacy Lab* and *Gender Questioning*.

- In *Gender Questioning*, we talk and then jam, asking the question of how does my partner's sex and various flavors of attraction I may or may not have affect how and whether I dance with them. I try imagining that I am the opposite sex or play with opposite gender construction... how do I dance with this image? I try imagining that my partner is the opposite of the sex that they are... how do I dance with them? Why would I do that? How does intimate/sexual attraction (or anxiety) shape these choices and what sort of other choices can be made? Through these questions, we expose our unconscious habits and perhaps open ourselves to other possibilities. In various venues where we have explored this score, there was a general sense of dropping unnecessary self restriction in dancing, and the cross-sex bias in pairing decreased significantly.

- In *Intimacy Lab*, we come together and talk in an open ended way about intimacy and CI... fears, habits, desires, aversions, imaginations. We then jam, giving ourselves and each other just a little bit more permission to experiment, explore questions of intimacy, and as part of this give others just a little bit more forgiveness and

leeway in experimentation. The point is NOT to just to “try to be intimate” or to “meet perceived intimate gesture with intimacy”. The invitation is to explore the question around intimacy and CI with curiosity and a little more permission than usual. As much as exploring “being intimate” this may just as well mean being explicitly “not intimate” or taking space when we choose. One person may choose to somehow “initiate intimacy”, and may then be met with others choosing to walk away or create space... this is not “failure” but a successful gathering of information. It also may simply mean dancing as one ordinarily would, but reflecting on how your choices are made and why. How do we construct or deconstruct intimacy in CI? What are the spoken or unspoken rules about how we dance that relate to permissible vs questionable intimizing of contact? Is the CI jam space a place with special unspoken rules around how we touch or how we choose to react to touch? How much of my experience of the intimacy or sexuality of touch is essential and independent of interpretation on my part and how much is based on my own conscious or unconscious reaction/interpretation? What choice can I make there... what choice should I make? How are my own choices subtly or not-so-subtly shaped by intimacy... avoidance, seeking, or ambivalent wavering between? What is “intimacy”, really? Maybe I experiment with non-verbally negotiating these questions. Maybe I experiment with explicitly verbalizing while dancing. How does each means of processing affect the pathway of experience ... Is one more “real” or not? ‘open exploration with a little more permission to experiment and with forgiveness for small oversteps of experimentation and owning/exploring of one’s own agency. Afterward, we reflect what we have experienced, share further questions.

My thinking is that if we can name and accept what we are doing, it will be less in shadow, we’ll be able to work out the kinks of communication better, and if our interests diverge too much in moments toward mutually exclusive explorations, we can choose to create more spaces for dancing frames with a greater diversity of exploration. I also think by bringing it out of shadow, we are controlled by it less. My experience in facilitating Gender Questioning at the Sierra Festival and Intimacy Lab at the West Coast Contact Festival is that this was followed in jams later by dancing that was actually less biased toward cross-gender dancing.

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to Irene Sposetti, Isabelle Kirouac, Jess Curtis, Rajendra Serber, Adina Rocoviteanuea, Manu Schmeid, Nadja El Aid, and several other CI dancers who would like to remain anonymous for helping me with data collection.

Thanks to Keith Hennessey for many conversations on the subject years ago. Thanks to the participants of the Sierra Contact Festival for engaging discussion and participatory laboratories on the subject of sex-based preferences, dancing, and the nature of intimacy in CI, and embracing vs challenging our tendencies. And of course thanks to the thousands I’ve danced and talked with over the decades in classes, jams, and labs for the lively engagement on the subject of intimacy and contact improvisation.

Notes

I think the results from this are mostly of interest to people within or in proximity to the contact jam community, as opposed to social scientists outside of it. The two main results – that people in a touch-based dance form will prefer to dance with those of the sex they are attracted to and that people will make claims about themselves that run counter to their actual behavior around sex – are somewhat no-brainers to people outside of CI. I think they mostly will be of interest to people within CI jam practice making assertions about the behavior and norms of people in CI jams around intimacy and sex and trying to navigate the development of practice and community. However, if you think that there would be an academic journal that would be interested in publishing a version of this with a specific emphasis, let me know. Similarly, if you are a social scientist and think the raw data could be useful in exploring some hypothesis, feel free to contact me about data use.

Also, if you are interested in discussing this, have some challenges to method or phrasing, or have other informative observations or speculations, feel free to contact. This paper is not a final product but will likely be updated over time.

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Table 1: Data summary			Total				Weighted Average				
Event	Date	Location	MF	MM	FF	N	X	C:S	C:M/2	C:F/2	Data collected by
ECITE	July 2009	Omskirk, UK	182	23	25	230	6.0	3.8	4.0	3.6	Karl Frost, Irene Sposetti
Earthdance NY Jam	Dec 2009	Mass, USA	34	15	11	60	2.3	1.3	1.1	1.5	Rajendra Serber
Moab Jam	May 2010	Utah, USA	22	3	5	30	5.9	2.8	3.7	2.2	Adina Rocoviteanuea
Harbin Hot Springs Jam	May 2010	California, USA	91	9	26	126	3.1	2.6	5.1	1.8	Karl Frost
Earthdance	July 2010	Mass, USA	75	16	15	106	5.7	2.4	2.3	2.5	Karl Frost
Freiburg Festival Teacher's Meeting	Aug 2010	Freiburg, Germany	29	11	7	47	3.6	1.6	1.3	2.1	Jess Curtis
Freiburg Festival Open Jam	Aug 2010	Freiburg, Germany	26	2	9	37	6.1	2.4	6.5	1.4	Isabelle Kirouac
Breitenbush Jam	March 2012	Oregon, USA	60	3	48	111	6.1	1.2	10.0	0.6	Anonymous
Ponderosa CI Jam	June 2012	Stoltzenhagen, Germany	54	3	18	75	3.1	2.6	9.0	1.5	Karl Frost
Moab Jam	May 2012	Moab, UT	30	7	12	49	2.4	1.6	2.1	1.3	Anonymous
Sierra Contact Festival	July 2012	Sierraville, CA	65	9	26	100	3.1	1.9	3.6	1.3	Karl Frost
Berlin weekly jams	June 2012	Berlin, Germany	19	3	2	24	5.2	3.8	3.2	4.8	Karl Frost
Earthdance July 4 Jam	July 2012	Plainfield, MA	79	15	19	113	3.7	2.3	2.6	2.1	Karl Frost
West Coast Contact Jam	July 2012	Berkeley, California	67	14	19	100	3.5	2.0	2.4	1.8	anonymous
ECITE	Aug 2012	Berne, Switzerland	54	25	21	100	2.1	1.2	1.1	1.3	Isabelle Kirouac
Earthdance NY Jam	Dec 2012	Plainfield, MA	171	11	50	232	7.1	2.8	7.8	1.7	Karl Frost
Valencia Festival	March 2016	Valencia, Spain	69	43	15	127	1.9	1.2	0.8	2.3	Karl Frost
Leipzig Mini-Festival	June 2018	Leipzig, Germany	42	6	10	58	4.7	2.6	3.5	2.1	Karl Frost
Out-of-Berlin Jam	July 2018	Hamburg, Germany	85	10	32	127	3.7	2.0	4.3	1.3	Karl Frost
ECITE	July 2018	Belgium	87	4	38	129	6.4	2.1	10.9	1.1	Karl Frost
Nordtanz Festival	Oct 2018	Hamburg, Germany	148	8	52	208	6.8	2.5	9.3	1.4	Karl Frost
Bremen Sylvester	Jan 2019	Bremen	50	6	8	64	9.8	3.6	4.2	3.1	Karl Frost
Leipzig Fest	May 2019	Leipzig	64	32	39	135	1.5	0.9	1.0	0.8	Manu Schmeid, Nadja El Aid
Potsdam Pfingsten Jam	June 2019	Potsdam	116	15	43	174	4.2	2.0	3.9	1.3	Karl Frost
Prague Long Jam	October 2019	Prague	80	6	24	110	5.4	2.7	6.7	1.7	Karl Frost
Bremen Jam	December 2019	Bremen, Germany	141	18	47	206	3.6	2.2	3.9	1.5	Karl Frost
Italy Contact Camp	August 2021	Tuscany, Italy	152	32	34	218	3.8	2.3	2.4	2.2	Karl Frost
		Weighted Average/Totals	2092	349	655	3096	4.6	2.4	4.5	1.7	

X is the relative strength of attraction to cross-sex dancing to same-sex dancing

C:S is the ratio of raw counts of cross-sex to same-sex dances

C:M/2 is the ratio of cross sex dances to male-male dances, divided by 2

C:F/2 is the ratio of cross sex dances to female-female dances, divided by 2

MF is the number of male-female duets

MM is the number of male-male duets

FF is the number of female-female duets

N is the total number of duets