

# The joy of intimability: Forms of intimacy and relationships among older couple-dancing adults

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## Abstract

Recent academic debates on intimacy emphasise that intimacy needs to be reconceptualised beyond long-term relationships. This study contributes to such reconceptualisation by coining the term *intimability* and exploring its implications based on interviews with 29 older people about couple dancing in Sweden. We show that older dancers find great pleasure in dancing with others but carefully avoid overt sexual signals or forming obligations outside the dance, such as long-term relationships. We model *intimability* on Simmel's concept *sociability* in order to capture how human beings enjoy being intimate and therefore arrange intimacy for its own sake. The concept draws attention to the temporary character of intimacy in dancing and the avoidance of sexual signals or forming obligations beyond the dance context. Similarly to how Simmel wrote about sociability, intimability becomes a world unto itself, and the links to other spheres of life are modulated to sustain the sense of temporary and non-obligational intimacy. We demonstrate how contextual factors are at play to sustain intimability, including the way communities are formed around dance activities and how existing long-term relationships are handled. Although this article examines couple dancing, we propose that the concept intimability can be applied beyond this specific context.

## Keywords

Intimacy, intimability, sociability, dancing, ageing

## Introduction

The intimacy concept has a long tradition in sociology (see e.g. Simmel, 1950) and was conventionally understood as a central ingredient of friendships, family relationships, and romantic love (Jamieson, 1998), or in other words associated with long-term relationships. With late modernity, however, these relationships have been viewed as shifting (see e.g. Morgan, 1996 on new family practices), with traditional forms converging into new constellations (Smart, 2007). In related fields like queer studies,

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scholars have called for a clearer distinction between intimacy and conventional relationships (Bersani and Phillips, 2008; Povinelli, 2006). As a consequence of these kinds of discussions within sociology and cognate disciplines, there has been a growing scholarly interest in studying close and personal interaction that goes beyond but at the same time intersects with conventional forms of close relationships (Dawson and Dennis, 2020; Jamieson et al., 2006). Some studies have drawn attention to how people may seek intimacy for its own sake rather than as part of long-term relationships. Although these observations on intimacy beyond long-term relationships have been made in varying contexts (e.g. singles' activities and communal living), couple dancing is a recurring example in the literature (Ericksen, 2011; Milton, 2024; Törnqvist, 2018).

The practice of couple dancing entails bodily proximity and can elicit intense emotions, making it a favourable case for the study of intimacy outside of conventional intimate spheres. By showing how intimacy is achieved, studies on couple dancing illustrate how dancers maintain boundaries around sexuality and navigate the temporary character of emotional attachments in dancing (Ericksen, 2011; Milton, 2024; Törnqvist, 2018). Moreover, it has been suggested that middle-aged and older people, to an increasing degree, pursue 'union forms that allow them to combine intimacy with independence' (Bildtgård and Öberg, 2017: 78), which may be a reason why they seek intimacy not just beyond marriage, but also beyond long-term sexual relationships more generally (Milton, 2024).

Couple dancing among older people is, in other words, a paradigmatic example to draw on for studying and rethinking intimacy beyond long-term relationships. In order to contribute to these ongoing discussions on intimacy, the aim of this article is to focus on how older people experience intimacy in couple dancing. Using Simmel's sociability concept (Simmel, 1949) as a model, we introduce the concept of *intimability*. The concept was developed during the analysis in this study to delineate and describe a pleasurable state in couple dancing characterised by a simultaneous pursuit of intimacy and avoidance of deeper involvement beyond the dance context. It has allowed us to explain and integrate previous findings on boundary work (Ericksen, 2011; Milton, 2024) and strong but temporary emotional attachments (Törnqvist, 2018), while also contextualising the dance interactions beyond the act of dancing itself. Intimability and its characteristics are analysed under three relational conditions: interaction during the couple dance itself, relationships in communities around the dance activities, and long-term relationships outside dancing. The research questions are as follows: What are the characteristics of intimability in couple dancing among older people? How does it relate to interaction in couple dancing, relationships in the dance communities, and long-term relationships outside the dance context?

## Intimacy and dance

A recurring theme in studies on social dance is that dancers avoid overt erotic signals, mainly in order not to develop longer relationships. For example, Gagné (2014) uses the notion 'parasexuality' to elucidate how salsa dancing in Japan creates space for romantic fantasies while typically not leading to sexual contacts, and Törnqvist (2012: 23) portrays the tango tourism in Argentina as a sensual geography that 'rarely lead[s] to sexual intercourse or temporary romances' but still is 'part of skin-to-skin intimacy'. The bodily sensual intimacy in dancing is described as having a temporary character, captured by concepts such as 'instant intimacy' referring to how ballroom dance in both social and sport settings involves a transient physical proximity not normally achieved outside a sexual relationship (Ericksen, 2011). Similarly, middle-aged female salsa dancers in England retain respectability by insisting on boundaries around sexuality (Milton, 2024). They achieve 'safe sensuality' by emphasising boundaries between intimacy (as in bodies touching) and sexuality. Milton describes quite well why individuals feel drawn to activities like couple dancing, but does not theorise how such activities are structured, at least not beyond the exclusion of sexuality.

The temporary intimacy of dance includes an affective dimension. Törnqvist (2018) coins the expression 'semi-anonymous and transitory attachments' to refer to the momentary, yet strong, emotional attachments that may develop between strangers dancing Argentinian tango. These fleeting attachments

are distinct from the long-term bonds in romance, friendships, and family relationships, as well as casual encounters between strangers in everyday life. Without the explicit usage of concepts of intimacy, studies exploring couple dancing from an emotional sociological perspective have similarly underscored the intense emotions that can be elicited through dancing (Alfredsson Olsson and Heikkinen, 2019). The synchronisation of movements between dance partners can generate peak experiences of emotional energy, an energy that to some degree also endures beyond dance interactions (cf Collins, 2005). Moreover, participants in couple dance frequently report experiences of flow (Heikkinen and Wilinska, 2022).

The literature on social dancing also emphasises the community around the dance activity (see e.g. Cooper and Thomas, 2002; Törnqvist, 2018). Studies deploying a serious leisure perspective point out the emergence of social worlds involving shared norms and representations anchored in the dance activities (Brown et al., 2008; Heikkinen, 2021; cf Stebbins, 2007). A few studies describe dance in terms of sociability. For example, Cooper and Thomas (2002) discuss the sociability of dance among dancers in the third age as a kind of friendliness making dance enjoyable and even, among some dancers, as *communitas*, which refers to rituals based on egalitarian behaviour where status and social positions become irrelevant (see also O'Connor, 1997).

## Introducing intimability

The concept intimability partly derives from the concept of intimacy. In this study, we understand intimacy as the experience of closeness produced in interaction involving at least two persons, in which people feel addressed as distinct persons, rather than in their roles or social positions (Henriksson, 2014; Schutz, 1964; Törnqvist, 2018). To be able to distinguish between aspects of intimacy analytically, we deploy David Morgan's (2009) depiction of three intimate dimensions: bodily or embodied intimacy, such as holding hands and sitting close to each other; emotional intimacy, for example, sharing feelings and recognition; and, finally, intimate knowledge, meaning the experience of having knowledge of each other conventionally denied to others. This knowledge may be tacit and sensual, in how the physical world and other bodies are experienced, as well as verbal, concerning life histories and shared personal stories.

Classical sociologist Georg Simmel defined sociability as being social for its own sake (Simmel, 1949). He argued that humans have an innate need to be social. In certain contexts, these needs are put centre stage. For example, rather than sit in silence, strangers in a bar who find themselves at the same table might choose to maintain light banter just for pleasure. Such sociability, however, abhors consequential content and ulterior motives, according to Simmel. For example, if one of the strangers at a table wants loyalty from the others or starts a sales pitch, sociability is broken and something else ensues. Being sociable is to maintain sociality while avoiding what Simmel calls 'substantive content' (Simmel, 1949: 260). Importantly, sociability does not only pertain to individuals or their interactions, but also to contextual arrangements. Some contexts are more conducive to sociability than others. For example, Simmel writes about old-style royal courts as one such example.

Couple dancing is commonly a non-verbal activity. While there might be activities around it that entail verbal interaction and that may be sociable (see also Cooper and Thomas, 2002), we argue that the concept sociability seems less useful in the context of dancing itself. Sociability does not capture the core of why people dance and what they seek when dancing. Using the same conceptual schema that Simmel uses for sociability, *intimability* would presume a need for intimacy. Intimable situations then are those where people engage in intimacy for its own sake, leaving substantial content and ulterior motives aside. Intimability can entail bodily closeness, affectual emotions, sharing of knowledge, as well as other forms of interaction where people address each other as unique persons. Like sociability, intimability meets a human need and is experienced as pleasurable. If ulterior motives intrude, for example, obligations related to relationships outside the dance or sexual interaction that implies ulterior motives, intimability is disturbed and may be shattered. We coined the concept of intimability based on previous research and the observation that the couple dancers we interviewed sought intimacy while actively engaging in boundary work to exclude other experiences often related to intimacy, such as sexuality and long-term

relationships. Intimability, therefore, is characterised by boundary work related to ulterior conditions not immediately involved in the desired intimate qualities produced in couple dance. It also needs to be understood in relation to the wider context of this interaction, and how the creation and maintenance of the boundaries of intimacy are done there.

## Method

The data presented are part of an explorative and ethnographic research project on the social aspects of dancing among older people in Sweden. All data were collected in 2016 by four researchers (including the article authors) and included qualitative interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. The study complies with the ethical requirements of the Swedish Research Council. During the analysis of data for other aspects of dance, including the organisation of dance (Krekula et al., 2017), emotions in dance (Alfredsson Olsson and Heikkinen, 2019; Heikkinen and Wilinska, 2022), and dancing through life (Heikkinen, 2021), the authors of this article observed how intimacy seemed to be handled unexpectedly. The interviewees could mention that they were madly in love with their dance partner during the dance, but had no interest in getting to know the person when the dance stopped. This motivated us to revisit the data and analyse it through the lens of intimacy, which was facilitated by the fact that intimacy had been one theme in the overall interview guide.

For this study on intimacy, we have only included interviews involving couple dancing. The type of couple dancing discussed in the interviews is part of what has been termed Swedish ‘folk park dancing’ (Heikkinen, 2021), which refers to a widespread tradition of dancing in public recreation venues such as folk parks and communal houses from the beginning of the twentieth century. Today, the dance styles commonly associated with this Swedish tradition are foxtrot and Swedish *bugg*, an early variation of lindy hop. Like the overall project, we define ‘older’ as 50 years of age and above, a definition coinciding with the lower age limit set in some of the observed dance events involving older people.

Interviewees were recruited during participant observations at various dance events, and in a few cases through snowballing (for more details on recruitment, see Heikkinen, 2021). In total, 29 interviewees were included for this study based on their experiences of couple dancing. Of these, 26 were still dancing while 3 had recently stopped. Age-wise, interviewees were between 53 and 82 years, with a median of 72 years. 21 women and 8 men were interviewed, which reflects the visual gender distribution at the various events.

Interviews were semi-structured, and the interview guide included the themes of emotions, dancing across the life course, present-day dancing, intimacy, norms in dancing, and breaking of norms. Regarding intimacy, questions from the interview guide concerned, for example, how dancers signalled that they wanted to make contact with someone and how it became noticeable that two individuals were partners outside the dance setting. However, since the interviews were qualitative in nature, the interviewees had the opportunity to speak freely and elaborate on their views regarding intimacy. As a result, most interviewees explained that dancing was not primarily about finding a partner or about sexuality, and they elaborated what this meant for them. Each interview took between 1 and 2 h and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All names and names of places were anonymised in transcripts.

The interviews were coded thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2022), at first using a primarily inductive procedure. Codes derived from the data, for example, pertained to various emotions, physical closeness, neutrality towards one’s dance partner, the dance community, and long-term relationships. Working with these codes and relating them to previous research, the theoretical framework presented above was developed, which resulted in a re-reading and coding focused on intimacy. The concept helped us to bring together salient patterns in the data as well as to connect some of the main findings to previous research. Three themes related to intimacy were developed: intimacy in the dancing act, the dance community upholding intimacy, and long-term relationships as a threat to or facilitator of intimacy. All quotations, originally in Swedish, have been translated by the authors.

## Intimability in the dancing act: Bodily closeness and temporary pleasure

In this section, we focus on the core activity (Stebbins, 2007) of couple dancing, namely the actual dancing on the dance floor carried out by two partners. Below, we describe this dancing and discuss what intimability can mean in this context.

Couple dancing is typically portrayed as an activity that evokes powerful emotions (Chipperfield and Bissell, 2023; Törnqvist, 2018). In our interviews, numerous individuals articulate that their motivation for dancing is to experience pleasure and joy, which is also reflected in the frequent use of the expression ‘the joy of dancing’. Maria explicates the feelings she experiences from dancing as follows:

It’s a kind of euphoria that happens. You feel incredibly elated and happy and joyful because it works so well. This feeling of the music, the rhythm, and everything, the fact that you are hearing it in the same way. You just sort of float, dancing around the floor. It’s a wonderful feeling, really wonderful. You don’t experience it very often, but I have experienced it a few times, that’s for sure.

Similar feelings have been highlighted by Törnqvist (2018) in a study of Argentine tango as an expression of intimacy, which she describes as an affective relational quality. This intimate quality is created through interaction with someone else. In our study, several people describe how the feelings are related to the dance partner. Josefin explains that what she enjoys about dancing is ‘the closeness. The music, I love music. And the sense of closeness to the person I’m dancing with. The feeling that you belong together in some way. Someone you are fonder of than the one over there’. Emma, aged 63, similarly says: ‘Yes, you feel this connection with the person you’re dancing with, sort of, that he has the rhythm, and you have the same rhythm’.

The feelings that arise are so passionate that the interviewees even compare them to love relationships: ‘It’s like a little dance romance. But then, when you’re done dancing, it’s like “poof!”’ (Gustav), or ‘there is a kind of love feeling when you hold someone and dance and you get a connection with someone’ (Anna).

In the intense temporary feelings of couple dance, the other is experienced as unique, yet an exclusive ‘we-ness’ emerges (Neuhmart cited in Törnqvist, 2018). The experience is also characterised by a transcendence of the self whereby ‘you almost melt into one’ (Kristina) and you forget time and space for a while (Heikkinen and Wilinska, 2022; Mjöberg, 2011). We therefore contend, similarly to Törnqvist, that couple dancing involves a distinct emotional intimate quality, temporary but emotionally vivid, created in interaction together with a partner who is perceived as unique.

Couple dancing also involves bodily proximity, which Morgan (2009) emphasises as another dimension of intimacy. The importance of bodily closeness can be illustrated by quotes from two of the interviewees:

It’s that I’m holding my hand [on the men’s backs], I dare to hold [it there], and they sort of see this. That it’s safe and secure, and it’s not connected to any attempts at anything, but it’s the joy of dancing. (Anna)

But most people still want to cuddle, you can feel that. So I wonder if that’s part of why people go out dancing. To get a hug without having to sacrifice anything more. (Arne)

Body contact and holding someone are described as central in the interviews. Touch is very loaded and conveys emotions (Field, 2010; Kinnunen and Kolehmainen, 2019). Dancing also involves interaction and coordination between bodies that can create emotional energy and amplify the joy of dancing between synchronised bodies (Alfredsson Olsson and Heikkinen, 2019). In other words, emotional and bodily intimate qualities are intertwined in couple dance. Several interviewees emphasise in the interviews that dance is a unique arena in society where it is allowed to be physically close to a stranger to experience temporary vivid feelings of joy together.

While dance involves intimacy that is exhibited both emotionally and bodily, it is evident that the interviewees draw clear boundaries to prevent the development of long-term intimate relationships outside the dance context. This is where intimability comes in, a concept coined by us and inspired by Simmel's (1949) concept of sociability. Just as sociability is about being social for the sake of being social, intimability is about the desire to be intimate for the sake of intimacy, not to create relationships beyond the dance context. Bringing in external aspects beyond the dance context is avoided in order to maintain dance as a temporary arena for intimacy. One interviewee uses the term 'neutrality' to describe the importance of dance partners not becoming involved with each other outside the dance, despite all the vibrant feelings. She explains: 'I think I feel quite neutral as long as the interaction, the dancing, is the most important thing and the dancing is the joy', but it is a problem 'when you clearly feel that this is a person looking for contact. Then I naturally disconnect from the dancing and then that person becomes a discomfort for me' (Anna). The fact that the dance is the priority and not the dance partner is a recurring theme in the interviews. Another interviewee explicitly said that 'you [can] fall madly in love', but then it is important not to mix up the feelings: 'it's not the person you are dancing with [that you fall in love with], it's the dance' (Kristina)

One distinct boundary that needs to be managed to maintain intimability in couple dancing, given the physical proximity, is that of eroticism and sex. Dance has often been associated with eroticism and sexual desire, but most interviewees claim that this is not at all the purpose of their dance. Instead, couple dancing is characterised by what Mayr (2023) in her study of cuddle parties has called de-sexualisation (see also Gagné, 2014; Milton, 2024). The physical closeness and touching take place within a framework of consent and a shared definition of dancing as interaction, which does not entail moving on to sexual acts. It therefore becomes problematic when people cross the line and become sexually interested, or as Agnes says:

I like to dance closely, but when they start scratching my back, I don't accept that either. Many people don't accept it. We're here to dance. This and, well... I haven't seen that... people making out on the dance floor [that would be problematic as well].

From the intimability perspective, sexual interest goes beyond the immediate situation and thus undermines the idea of intimacy for its own sake in dancing.

Sexual invitations can also be perceived as invitations to initiate a romantic relationship that would potentially create obligations and alignment in life outside of the dance context. As has been demonstrated, dancers talk about neutrality, directing the experience of feelings of love towards the dance itself and not the dance partner. They reject sexual invitations and perceive the joy of dancing as contingent upon the shared assumption that no one makes 'any attempts at anything' or that they should have to 'sacrifice something more'. These strategies can be interpreted as the dancers trying to maintain pure intimacy by avoiding implications of relationships that extend beyond the temporary constellations of people at the dance. 'Something more' and similar notions that recur in the interviews can be understood to refer to the potential for the kind of long-term relationships that intimacy often leads to in other contexts. These possibilities are closed off by the intimability of the dance.

## **The dance community reinforces intimability: Belonging, recognition, and repeated encounters**

The intimacy expressed in the dancing act itself, characterised by intimability, takes place within a dance community. The community comprises the network of dance events, places, and participants that make up what can be described as a social world (Unruh, 1980). Participants travel around and dance in many different places, but still experience a belonging and identification with other participants in the social world. Kristina explains that she enjoys going out dancing since it is 'a very lovely community'. The

sense of closeness with some participants is so profound that some interviewees call the dance community a family, and others talk about their dance friends within the community. For example, Martin talked about how his divorce was made less burdensome ‘because I had the dance, I had a family to go back to’, while Klara emphasised how she ‘has a big network of friends among the dance people’. Likewise, Anna explains her feelings for a dance friend as follows:

We love dancing with each other... I’m in love with that man because we dance so wonderfully together... and it’s so much fun when we go to the same place. And he’s a kind of dance friend, even though I only know his name is Jonas and that he has his wife at home, you know. So it’s really the joy of dancing, and he gives me so much joy, and it’s the same with many others. And there are so many different [people].

In this quote, the dance community is largely described as grounded in the intimate qualities that arise in the act of dancing itself, which was described in the section above. While the intense emotions during the dancing were temporary, the dance community is characterised by emotions that *endure* beyond the dance interaction. This emotional endurance can be related to interaction rituals which can create so-called emotional energy that also lasts after the ritual and contributes to belonging, confidence, and solidarity (Collins, 2005; see Alfredsson Olsson and Heikkinen, 2019 on emotional energies in dance). While the dance activity itself creates bodily intimate qualities, the dance community exists beyond physical proximity and interaction. Moreover, while dancing is highly non-verbal, the chit-chat between dances and during breaks is also central in the dance community.

An important aspect of the dance community is embodied intimate knowledge (Morgan, 2009). This is the knowledge of how others dance and how one’s own way of moving can (or cannot) be synchronised with others. In the interviews, this knowledge appears as unique knowledge of another person, in the sense that dancers get to know their dance friends through dancing, but it is also emphasised as ‘public’ knowledge. As it is common to dance with ‘strangers’, participants often observe others to decide who might be a suitable partner for the next dance. In fact, the dancers are quite selective, as only with certain partners will they be able to create the kind of interaction that contributes to the temporary yet powerful emotional-bodily intimate experiences they seek. Erik explains:

Sometimes it happens that they want to see how people dance. Like, “that’s not good enough for me” or “I don’t know how you dance, I’d like to see how you dance first” or hearing someone else say, “yes, that one dances well, it works” or something like that.

One consequence is that it is important to dance regularly so that others recognise that you can dance and that you might be the right person to dance with. Knowledge of others and others’ knowledge about one’s own dancing is essential for inclusion in the dance community. This is even captured in specific notions within the community such as ‘dancing back’ (cf coming back, ‘dansa in sig’ in Swedish), meaning that if people have not participated in dancing for some time, they have to prove themselves as suitable dance partners on the dance floor before being accepted more generally as dance partners. Klara shares her experiences of when she was away for a while from the dance floor:

When you’ve been dancing for as many years as I have, you get to know a lot of people out there... but what can make a difference is if you’ve been away from the scene for a while, like when my husband passed away, and when he was ill, I didn’t go out dancing much, you know... and then you get away from the dance floor for a while and you are a bit forgotten, and then it takes a while “dancing back” again.

The dance community is anchored in the dance activity itself (cf Stebbins, 2007 on serious leisure). This means that intimability, intimacy for its own sake, also has an impact on the dance community. While the dancers feel a clear sense of community as expressed in the notions of dance family and dance friends, they try to keep a clear boundary between the couple dancing and other arenas of life. Several

interviewees speak appreciatively of the dance community as a separate sphere and show reluctance to develop community relationships outside of the dance context. For example, Josefin says:

So you meet people you don't need to get deeply involved with, become best friends with, or take responsibility for, care about, and engage with. You dance around and maybe learn their name. You're friends. Eventually, you gather a large group. He's there, she's there, they're there. They pair up and they split up.

The dance community that is so vital for security and closeness is thus conditioned in a similar way as intimacy in the dance interaction as such. An essential part, as shown in the quote above, is to refrain from getting to know people's personal narratives and lives outside dancing. Like Josefin above, Anna describes this lack of knowledge about dance partners:

I don't know their names, for example. Almost nobody that I dance with a lot. Because you can't talk much when you dance. But here's something intrinsic [to dancing], that you have this shared feeling when you've really looked each other in the eyes and you've danced.

In other words, the intimate knowledge that dancers seek, and which is a prerequisite for achieving the powerful emotional and bodily intimacy in dancing, is about the bodies and movement patterns of other dancers. Intimate knowledge of each other's lives is usually avoided in order to prevent the commitments and responsibilities of long-term relationships beyond the dance context.

The interactions within the dance community can in some respects resemble sociability (Simmel, 1949). Dancers interact with each other verbally in a light-hearted way, without allowing obligations outside the dance context to disturb them. It is quite possible that intimacy also supports sociability and vice versa; both rely on boundary work that excludes ulterior content. Sociability, however, is not what the dancers are primarily seeking; they may even lack time to talk to their dance partner before changing partners for a new dance. Sociability therefore, we argue, does not capture the core of couple dancing, which is about the search for intimacy. Intimacy is a more relevant concept to describe what happens in the dance when closeness in the form of intimate qualities is sought for its own sake.

Our interview material also shows how norms in the social world around dance help maintain the boundaries to the outside world and in this way promote intimacy. One prominent norm is that, at most dance events, partners change after every second or fourth dance, making it harder to develop long-term relationships with 'strangers'. This norm also helps to address the surplus of women often present at older people's dances, allowing more women to dance with the men (Heikkinen, 2021). Another norm is sobriety, which contributes both to the ability to maintain intimacy when dancing and to managing interactions in the dance community in an acceptable way.

Above, we have demonstrated how the dance community is anchored in the dance activity itself and shaped in ways that support intimacy. While feelings of belonging, community, and solidarity emerge, they are largely directed towards the dance context and thus constitute only a restricted version of similar feelings in long-term close relationships.

## **The risks and possibilities of long-term relationships for intimacy: Latent sexuality and social support**

The intimacy of dance interactions, reinforced by the dance community, is still embedded in long-term relationships. Dancers are faced with the possibility or risk of developing new long-term relationships beyond the dance community, and existing long-term relationships can both facilitate and hamper intimacy.

One kind of long-term relationship associated with couple dancing is romantic relationships. Despite the pronounced intimability of the couple dance we studied, the risk or possibility of romantic relationships is still present. Martin elaborates on this:

If you are single and free, it's also important that there might be a potential for a relationship with a woman. But now [when you have a partner], when you dance with someone, it's no longer about that; it's about how fun it is to dance together. But when you're single and searching, it's very important that there's someone on the ladies' side who is also searching. So it varies, depending on your situation.

The quote points to how some dancers, being single, still seek romantic relationships and happily go beyond intimability under the right circumstances. However, the interviews reveal that it is not easy to transcend intimability to develop a romantic relationship within the dance community. Josefin describes how she danced a whole evening with a man in a large dance hall with several dance floors. The transgression of intimability was facilitated by the fact that it is difficult to keep track of everyone present in such a place. They were able to break the norm of changing partners every two or four dances. 'We were left alone there [and danced several dances together]. And then he asked me out for coffee'. At a smaller event where it was possible to see everyone, Moa recounts how people slipped others hidden scraps of paper with phone numbers to keep in touch.

Although it is mainly romantic relationships that develop out of couple dancing, we also have examples in the interview material of other types of long-term relationships developed through dance. Two of the interviewees could be described as 'dance buddies'. They are not dance friends based on face-to-face interaction in couple dance, but two women talking to each other *between* dance interactions and in this way developing a relationship beyond the dance. One of the women told us:

My friend, she has been a widow for 11 years... that's probably two years more than me, I think. And we had never met before, so it's through dancing that we've formed this friendship... and we have a great time, share the same ideas, and nothing is fixed, we'll just head off if we want to! (Moa)

The women now socialise with each other between dance events, by, for example, serving on the board of a senior association and looking after a summer cottage for one of the women's children together. However, the dancing and its intimability is at the centre of the friendship. They support each other emotionally in dealing with rejections and keeping their mood up in the competition with other women at dance events. Their friendship seems to be conditioned to some extent by the dance, as shown in the quote above by the expression 'we'll just head out if we want'. The same woman also talked about how she went dancing by herself when her friend was ill for a long period, explaining that 'you're not dependent [on each other] in that way, you're dependent on the dance'. In other words, while the relationship between the women exists beyond the dance community, its main purpose seems to be to facilitate dancing.

Romantic relationships with new partners, nevertheless, is the most likely type of long-term relationship to emerge from dancing. Having one's partner present at the dance event prevents sexual and relational transgressions and thus helps to maintain intimability. Martin, who talked about potential romantic relationships above, describes how he has had to be clear about a new romantic relationship to avoid misunderstandings:

But I said, "Now it's this lady for me," and I was open about it, and it felt good. Because when we were on this boat trip, there were two or three ladies there who I know would like to have a relationship with me. They said hello and there were no hard feelings or anything, so I felt it was good that I was open about it.

Some interviewees also prefer to go to dance events with their partner because it provides security and a base from which to seek other interactions (Eriksson, 2007). This seems to be particularly true for

women, as the typical surplus of women at dance events creates a risk of not getting the chance to dance. One woman said:

Interviewer: Hmm. Yes, exactly, how is it to go [dancing], is there a big difference between going to a dance alone or with a partner?

Interviewee: Yes, it depends. I think it's more fun to go with a partner. Of course it is! Because then you always have someone to go back to. But I don't think we should dance together all evening; we should dance with others too. Yes. Because often when you're out dancing, you see that a couple is there, and they dance with each other all evening. And I mean, you might as well stay at home on the kitchen floor, I think. (Emma)

As illustrated by the quote, the motive for going out dancing is primarily to dance with others, and the partner becomes what we interpret as support in the pursuit of intimacy for its own sake, that is, intimability. Our material also shows that already existing long-term relationships, such as acquaintances and friends who dance, can provide the courage to start dancing again after a break or function as an aid to maintain dancing.

In other words, intimability is not entirely about the absence of or complete demarcation from long-term relationships. In many cases, such relationships are experienced as valuable in relation to the goal of intimability. What interviewees try to avoid is when long-term relationships prevent them from experiencing the strong emotional and bodily intimate qualities with different partners in dancing. This holds true for all kinds of long-term relationships creating obligations that can interfere with the dance. Josefin comments on this:

But in recent years, I've started going with a neighbour, a girl from next door. Then what happens is more like, "Can we leave now?" "No, I want to stay," "I want to go." So you have to be more considerate. And I've met a man. Six months ago at Hallunda. So we go out dancing. And I bring this neighbour and another girl who also likes to go out dancing. We usually go out as a group of four. And then it gets a bit tricky. When do you want to go home? Like that.

To sum up, long-term relationships can both facilitate and impede intimability. Established romantic relationships may facilitate intimability by signalling that the person is already involved with someone, barring any possibility of a new romantic relationship. A partner can also create comfort at a dance event by being someone to return to after a dance. Other long-term relationships can facilitate coordination of transport and provide security at dance events. At the same time, it is clear that interviewees view long-term relationships, both romantic and otherwise, as creating obligations that make sharing of intimacy for its own sake, that is, intimability, more difficult.

## Discussion

Through the case of older people's couple dancing, this study contributes to contemporary sociological discussions on how intimacy can be reconceptualised beyond the traditional notions as a central ingredient of romantic relationships, friendships, and family relationships (Henriksson, 2014; Törnqvist, 2024). We introduce the concept of *intimability*, drawing on Simmel's concept of *sociability* (Simmel, 1949), to understand what drives older people to dance and their experiences of intimacy in dance. Just as sociability is being social for the sake of being social, intimability is intimacy for its own sake. Both centre on forms of interaction that humans seek because they are pleasurable. In both cases, it is crucial to draw boundaries against external motives that would interfere with the pleasurable interactions. In the case of intimability, it is about enabling intimacy with strangers without creating obligations outside dancing.

More specifically, using the distinctions that Morgan (2009) introduces for intimacy, our study shows how intimacy in the dancing act is embodied, emotional, and cognitive. The older couple dancers seek

bodily and emotional intimacy while keeping boundaries towards sexual signals and redirecting lasting emotions towards the dance rather than specific persons. As for the cognitive dimension, there is intimate knowledge of other dancers' bodies and dancing styles, facilitating intimacy as embodied and emotional experiences. However, since personal content can disrupt intimacy (as it may in sociability), boundary work to exclude personal narratives becomes important. It is this selective boundary work that helps dancers avoid forming relationships while enabling intimate experience.

This study also demonstrates how intimacy in the dance interactions is supported contextually. Around the dance activity, communities bolster intimacy in dance interactions through norms such as changing dance partners every second or fourth dance. These communities also maintain sociability in the form of small talk between dances (Cooper and Thomas, 2002), but the focus is on supporting the intimate experiences created in couple dancing, that is, intimacy. Moreover, our study highlights how intimacy is not, of course, 'insulated' from long-term relationships. Such relationships are woven into intimacy and the dance communities that are created around dancing itself. Boundaries are in place to prevent the formation of new long-term relationships and secure intimacy. At the same time, established romantic relationships seem to prevent the establishment of new ones, which helps to maintain intimacy.

While some of the above findings, such as the boundary work around sexuality and romantic relationships, emotional intimacy, and the temporary character of intimacy, have been observed in several previous studies on couple dancing (Ericksen, 2011; Gagné, 2014; Milton, 2024; Törnqvist, 2018), the concept of intimacy offers a more integrative approach in the form of a theoretical lens to relate diverse findings to each other. For example, previous research observes the existence of communities related to couple dance (see e.g. Törnqvist, 2018), yet links between face-to-face interaction and the dance communities remain largely unexplored. The same holds true for connecting the management of long-term relationships to the temporary experiences of intimacy in the dancing act. Furthermore, by combining intimacy with Morgan's three-dimensional framework of intimacy, we were able to make sense of how avoidance practices in some respects could enable closeness in other respects. In other words, we were able to delineate a phenomenon which contributed to pleasure just because the 'seriousness' of intimate relationships was kept away. This phenomenon has not been clearly articulated and theorised in previous research on dance and intimacy, even if diverse observations of its manifestations exist.

Neither has the phenomenon of intimacy, to our best knowledge, been clearly delineated in existing sociological theories of intimacy. For example, while our analysis of intimacy draws on Morgan's multi-dimensional framework, intimacy extends beyond his model. At first glance, intimacy may appear similar to what Morgan defines as *acquaintanceship*, an everyday practice situated between intimacy and anonymity. However, although acquaintanceship may involve avoidance practices to prevent becoming too close, it is not characterised by a search for intimate experience. Rather, acquaintances, such as neighbours, are typically not intimate in any of Morgan's dimensions. Another example can be drawn from Carol Smart's personal life framework, in which a person's relational agency emerges within already-existing networks of close relationships (2007). This focus on relational configurations resonates with our findings on the importance of local arrangements in couple dancing to support intimacy. However, while Smart expands the discussion of intimacy to include a range of relationships beyond the family, her framework still centres on stable relational ties (or their absence). Neither the transitory character of intimacy nor the strategic avoidance of new relationships to enable fleeting experiences of intimacy fit neatly into her account of relational configurations. Lynn Jamieson, another leading sociological theorist on intimacy, criticises the common definition of intimacy as the disclosure of personal information and seeks to broaden it substantially. Her concept of *intimate practices* (Jamieson, 1998) could potentially be used to understand intimacy. However, Jamieson herself focuses almost exclusively on long-term relationships, as is evident from the fact that she defines intimate practices as creating and sustaining 'a sense of a close and special quality of a relationship between people' (Jamieson, 2012: 2.1). Whereas intimacy highlights how new lasting relationships outside the intimate setting (such as dancing) are discouraged, Jamieson is more concerned with how intimacy is constructed within culturally

and socially determined forms of intimate relationships. A final comparison can be made with Jennifer Mason's notion of *affinities*: felt connections that do not necessarily result in relationships (2018). These affinities are affective, sensory, and atmospheric, and they enrich personal life. The momentary character of these feelings resembles, in many ways, the kind of emotional intimacy we have identified when analysing intimacy in couple dance. However, Mason's affinities are primarily ephemeral, and she largely avoids discussing aspects we have studied in intimacy such as the strategies in interaction as well as the norms and rules that people may set up to promote and reproduce feelings of closeness or connections.

This study outlining intimacy is based on couple dancing among older people. However, we hold that the phenomenon may not be exclusive to this arena. Cuddle parties, as described by Mayr (2023), also have bodily and emotional intimate qualities coupled with boundary work towards sexuality. The types of emotions involved in these two settings may, of course, differ; for example, there are peak feelings of joy in dancing, while feelings of security may be central in cuddle parties. However, both cases refer to a state of intimacy for its own sake without external motives, a state that is very pleasurable. Another example is the experience, which many of us share, of talking to a stranger about the most private aspects of our lives, simply because we know we will most likely never meet that person again (Simmel's essay about the Stranger describes this well, Simmel, 1971). Here, the context of the situation itself helps draw boundaries against long-term relationships, as our everyday lives are lived in different places. Could this be described in terms of intimacy? A significant theme in contemporary research on intimacy is the status of intimacy mediated online (see eg Lambert, 2013). Is it possible that intimacy can be arranged online? One potential case of this would be the ASMR community, where so-called 'artists' use video equipment to try to recreate a sense of embodied closeness and personal connection, for example by whispering close to the mic and caressing the camera (Anderson, 2015). Here, as elsewhere, the boundaries between 'touch' on the one hand, and sexuality and relationships on the other, are often strictly policed. More research on intimacy and what intimate qualities are at play is warranted to determine the relevance and usefulness of the concept in understanding social reality in the contemporary world.

Since we have modelled the concept of intimacy on Simmel's notion of sociability, we also want to clarify the relationships between the concepts further. Intimacy draws on key features of sociability (Simmel, 1949): pleasurable interaction pursued for its own sake and bracketed from ulterior motives. The intimacy concept enabled us to interpret empirical patterns in couple dancing and to show that the boundaries used to exclude sexuality and romantic relationships are not arbitrary. Rather, they are part of a whole that shapes the local experience of intimacy, a whole that also helped us understand how contexts are set up and managed. This last aspect of the context may be viewed as less clear in Simmel's text on sociability than in our data and analysis. Nevertheless, the context is discussed in Simmel's writings. He notes that certain situations or circumstances are more prone to sociable interaction than others, indicating that contextual arrangements matter. Further, while Simmel emphasises sociability as a world of its own, he also points out that sociability 'maintain[s] the liveliness' (1949: 259) through connections to the external world; without these, it risks becoming an empty form. Similarly, we hold that, intimacy thrives on long-term relationships even if boundaries are drawn and the significance of relations is modulated. The use of words like 'love' and 'dance friends' in descriptions of couple dance is, we maintain, not incidental, even if they evoke only partial versions of what they mean in long-term relationships. As we have also pointed out in our study, sociability is present in the chit-chat between dances, but this is not usually the main reason why individuals go couple dancing. Most attend to experience the special kind of intimacy afforded in couple dance, thus they seek primarily intimacy – not sociability.


Lastly, it is important to ask whether intimacy is more prevalent among older people than other groups in late modern society. Bildtgård and Öberg (2017) have characterised later life as a period of post-reproductive freedom, offering the opportunity to invest deeply in new intimate relationships. However, as the authors point out, it is also marked by a sense of urgency. For some older individuals, particularly women, this manifests as a strong desire to safeguard autonomy and leads them to avoid new


romantic relationships and the obligations such relationships may entail. Intimability could be one way to experience intimacy without such obligations. If the quest for intimacy is or is not more common among older people is a question for further empirical investigations. Moreover, the older dancers analysed in this study form a homogenous group in some senses: they are heterosexual and white. To understand intimacy better, there is a need to study other age groups as well as different ethnicities, geographical contexts, sexualities, and so on. We propose that intimacy, like sociability, is a phenomenon that refers to a common human experience. However, it is likely that the phenomenon of intimacy varies in terms of how boundaries are drawn and the ways it is connected or disconnected from the rest of society. This, we suggest, constitutes an important area for future scholarly inquiry.

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## Ethical approval and informed consent statements

All procedures performed in this study were conducted ethically according to the ethical standards of the Swedish Research Council 2017. Permission to conduct the interviews for the purposes of this research was obtained from all interviewees, who were fully informed about the purposes of this research and how their responses would be used and stored.

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## Data availability statement

The datasets generated during the current study are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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