Erika Nauman, University of California, Santa Barbara

The *Danseur*: American and Russian Attitudes toward Male Participation in Ballet

Throughout my experiences studying dance in California, I noticed that ballet classes tend to have a disproportionately high number of female dancers compared to male dancers. This claim is difficult to prove quantitatively, since my preliminary research has not yielded any published statistics on the actual ratio of boys to girls. However, I can extrapolate from my own observations in ballet classes and the experiences of my peers who have taken ballet: everyone unanimously agrees that females heavily outnumber males and that there are often no males enrolled in classes at all. Since California is known as one of the most progressive states in the country, it is likely that ballet studios across the country reflect a similar, if not worse, gender discrepancy. These observations led to the initial research questions of my study: In a country that strives for gender equality, where women are encouraged to cross the gender barrier and participate in male-dominated fields, why does this disparity exist? Why isn’t there a push in the other direction, encouraging males to take interest in the performing arts in general, and more specifically, in the art of ballet?

According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Ballet training for girls usually begins between the ages of 5 to 8…. Boys often begin their ballet training between the ages of 10 and 15” (Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010–2011). Perhaps this drastic age difference in the onset of ballet training can be attributed to a lack of parental encouragement. Unlike girls who start ballet at a very young age, usually at their parents’ discretion, boys seem to make the decision to themselves, as adolescents.

When Jane Lowe, a female University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) dance major, was asked why her three brothers never participated in ballet, she answered without hesitation: “I
know my mom always dreamed of having her little girl be a ballerina, but my brothers did boy sports like water polo and baseball” (Lowe 2011). Her response reflects the strict gender roles present in American attitudes toward dancers. Girls can do ballet; boys participate in other activities.

In contrast to American society, how does Russian society perceive male ballet figures? In a former Soviet country that produced world famous male ballet dancers and choreographers such as Baryshnikov, Nureyev, and Balanchine, do the same negative stereotypes exist? Through primary and secondary research, I strove to examine various factors contributing to the gender discrepancy in ballet and the concept of masculinity with regard to the role of the danseur. The central question addressed in this study is as follows: How do American attitudes toward male ballet participation compare to Russian ones?

**Review of Literature**

Little has been published on the American social attitudes regarding the danseur, or about the reasons behind the lack of male participation in ballet. The only statistic easily found regarding male dancers was that “Ballet training for girls usually begins between the ages of 5 to 8 ...Boys often begin their ballet training between the ages of 10 and 15 ” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010–2011). This information, however, does little to offer insight on what social reasons contribute to America’s less than tolerant approach.

PBS reporter Jeffrey Brown discusses the gender discrepancy in American ballet in his interview with Ballet Arizona’s artistic director Ib Anderson, who remarks:

I mean, in my company we have nationality—I don't know of how many—but it's from all over the place. I would [say] half of them are foreigners maybe and half of them are from America. There’s not as many American trained males (Brown 2010).
Anderson’s answers indicate that even at the professional level, the number of American male ballet dancers is low, so foreign dancers are needed to bridge the gap.

From what can be gathered, the American public holds a negative stereotype of male ballet dancers. In a small study conducted by Katherine Hicks and Thomas Alley, a majority of high school students consider ballet to be a feminine activity (Alley 2005). Additionally, dancer Abdel Salaam opines in his interview with Celia Ipitois that there exists a hesitation among American males to try ballet, due to the pervasive pressures of machismo culture. He discusses his involvement in a project promoting dance among school-age boys, and how his efforts are often returned with skepticism (Ipitois 1989). Salaam’s commentary strengthens the notion that the gender discrepancy in ballet can be attributed to male gender anxiety.

In Alexander Bland’s book Men Dancing: Performers and Performances, only one of the ten-plus prominent male ballet dancers featured was American, while the majority of dancers were Russian. This suggests that Russians’ attitudes toward male ballet dancers are more tolerant than Americans’, due to Russia’s esteemed history in the arts and in producing accomplished male dancers. Since there has been a lack of prominent American male ballet figures, progress can still be achieved in the American ballet scene, specifically by encouraging males to appreciate ballet.

By analyzing American and Russian social attitudes toward male ballet dancers, I aim to reach a more thorough understanding of the gender discrepancy in ballet, while also providing tangible statistics on the topic. It is important to note that in order to overcome the gender divide in pre-professional ballet, notions of American masculinity need to be understood and redefined.
Methodology

Subjects

Two populations were surveyed to compare general attitudes toward male ballet dancers. The first population consisted of sixty-seven male and female American college students ranging in ages from eighteen to twenty-four years old. A majority of the students polled were from UCSB. Students from other universities, however, were also considered.

The second sample consisted of thirty-five male and female Russian college students from various universities, also ranging in ages from eighteen to twenty-four years old.

Design

Both surveys were designed through SurveyMonkey, a website specializing in customized survey production, and were then administered to convenience samples in both the U.S. and Russia.

The American survey was written in English and consisted of seven questions, each designed to gather an objective response regarding appropriateness, masculinity, and the likelihood of male ballet participation. The American sample was accessed through Facebook, a popular social networking website. A copy of the American survey can be found in the appendix.

The survey administered to the Russian population was translated from the English version with the help of Larry McLellan, a continuing lecturer of Russian at UCSB. The Russian survey was identical in question length and format to the English version. The Russian sample was accessed through Vkontakte, a popular Russian social networking website. A copy of the Russian survey can be found in the appendix.
American Results

Data from the surveys were collected anonymously over a weeklong period during May of 2011, and were examined using SurveyMonkey’s analysis tools. The responses from the American sample will be discussed first.

The questions asked in the survey were designed to prompt participants to rate how they felt about certain scenarios regarding males in ballet. The first question pertains to the survey participants’ gender. In the American sample, thirty-nine respondents (58.2%) were female, and twenty-seven (40.3%) were male.

In response to the second question—Have you ever participated in ballet?—71.2% of the American sample responded “no,” and 28.8% responded “yes.” Of those that replied “yes” to this question, 94% were female, which shows a strong tendency for ballet participants to be female. These figures are presented in the graph below:
The third question—How likely would it be for you to participate in ballet?—was based on a 1–5 scale, with 1 being “not likely” and 5 being “extremely likely.” 53.7% of participants chose the lowest rating of 1. This data can be further analyzed when filtered by gender. The majority of both males and females answered with a response of 1, showing no difference in attitude based on gender.

The fourth question—How feminine or masculine do you consider ballet?—was also based on a 1–5 scale, with 1 being “strictly feminine,” 3 being “neither feminine nor masculine,” and 5 being “strictly masculine.” 56.7% of participants responded with a 3, and there were no differences in the responses between the majority of male and female survey participants.

The fifth question—How acceptable is it for males to participate in ballet?—was rated on a 1–5 scale, with 1 being “very unacceptable,” and 5 being “very acceptable.” 43.3% of participants responded with a 5, but males and females showed a slight discrepancy in their support for male participation in ballet. The majority of male participants responded with a 4, while the majority of female respondents responded with a 5. These results are displayed in the figures below:
Male Response to question 5: “How acceptable is it for males to participate in ballet?”
The sixth question—Is being a ballet dancer a suitable profession for males?—was also based on a 1–5 scale. 44.8% of participants responded with a 5, meaning it is a completely suitable profession for males. There was a slight discrepancy between the male and female responses to this question. A majority of females responded with a score of 5, while a majority of males responded with a score of 4.

The seventh and final question—How likely would it be for you to enroll your son in ballet?—was also based on a 1–5 scale. 35.8% of participants answered with a 3, meaning they feel indifferent toward enrolling their son in ballet. When filtered by gender, the male majority response was split evenly between a score of 3 and 2, which means that it would be unlikely for
the male participants to enroll their son in ballet. The majority of female participants responded with a 3.

**Russian Results**

Thirty-five male and female Russians responded to the Russian survey over a weeklong period in May of 2011. The first question asked for participants to state their gender. Twenty-two respondents (62.9%) were female, and thirteen (37.1%) were male.

In response to the second question—Have you ever participated in ballet?—85.7% of the Russian sample responded “no,” and 14.3% responded “yes.” All of the respondents who answered “yes” were female.

In response to the third question—How likely would it be for you to participate in ballet?—37.1% of participants responded with a 1, meaning “extremely unlikely.” The majority response from the male sample was a 1, while the majority response from the female sample was a 4, meaning “likely.” The graphs displayed below depict the differences in opinion between Russian males and females regarding this question. No males answered “likely” or “extremely likely.”
Male Response to question 3: “How likely would it be for you to participate in ballet?”

Female Response to question 3
When asked the fourth question—How feminine or masculine do you consider ballet?—71.4% of participants responded with a 3, meaning that ballet is neither a feminine nor a masculine activity. The majority of males and females shared this view.

In response to the fifth question—How acceptable is it for males to participate in ballet?—60% of participants responded with a 4, or “acceptable,” which is a slight contrast to the American sample’s popular response of 5, meaning “very acceptable.”

When asked the sixth question—Is being a ballet dancer a suitable profession for males?—48.6% of participants responded with a 4, or “suitable.” This is a slight contrast to the American sample’s majority response of 5, meaning “completely suitable.” The Russian males and females participating in this survey disagreed about this question. A majority of Russian males responded to this question with a 2, or “not suitable,” whereas a majority of Russian females responded with a 4, meaning “suitable.”

The seventh and final part of the survey asked for participants to respond to the question—How likely would it be for you to enroll your son in ballet? 37.1% of participants responded with a 2, meaning it would be unlikely for them to enroll their son in ballet. The average Russian response of 2 rated lower on the scale than the average American response of 3. When filtered by gender, the Russian males and females demonstrated a slight discrepancy in attitudes toward this question. Whereas the majority of males responded with a 1, “extremely unlikely,” the majority of females responded with a 2, or “unlikely.”

Discussion

The results of both the American and Russian surveys mildly contradict my hypothesis. I had predicted that Americans would be less tolerant toward male ballet dancers than Russians, but the data suggests the opposite. The American sample was more tolerant toward the idea of
the danseur than the Russian sample, but not dramatically so. Americans and Russians participating in this survey possessed similar viewpoints in the first four questions, but they differed in the last three. The differences, however, are not extreme. In response to the sixth question—Is being a ballet dancer suitable for males? —a majority of the Russians responded that it was “suitable,” whereas a majority of the Americans responded that it was “completely suitable.” This slight difference may indicate that Russians are not as comfortable, compared to Americans, with professional male ballet dancers, but it still suggests that they are tolerant of the idea. Similarly, in response to the fifth question—How acceptable is it for males to participate in ballet? —a majority of the Russians selected “acceptable,” whereas a majority of the Americans responded that it is “completely acceptable.” From these results, it appears that both the American and Russian survey participants view male ballet participation as suitable or acceptable, although the Americans seemed more enthusiastic about the notion.

When asked about the possibility of their own sons participating in ballet, both the Russian and American samples demonstrated a neutral or negative opinion on the matter. This appears to indicate that neither group particularly cares if males outside their immediate circle engage in ballet, but that they seem to be hesitant when regarding males within their family sphere. This could be attributed to social constructs of masculinity in both the U.S. and Russia, where males are expected to be financially independent. For example, in the U.S., athletic scholarships to universities are competitive and highly rewarding, which then may fuel participation in sports at a younger age to reach an athletic standard worthy of such a scholarship. Perhaps if universities were to offer competitive ballet scholarships, male interest in this art could increase. In Russia, social concepts of masculinity are reverting back to traditional ideologies, where men serve as the financial head of the household (Levant 2007). If Russian
males are expected to serve as financial pillars in family, more support may be given to activities that help males to excel in school and in their future careers rather than to dance, which typically is an unstable source of income. Why encourage one’s son to try ballet when he can be focusing on other activities that may yield more financially promising opportunities?

Interestingly, the American males and females did not differ extremely in attitude toward male participation in ballet, whereas the males and females in the Russian sample did, specifically in response to the third and sixth questions.

In regard to the third question—How likely would it be for you to participate in ballet? —the Russian sample demonstrated a strong gender divide with regard to their willingness to participate in ballet; males disapproved of participation in ballet, while females were more open to the idea. Similarly, the American males participating in the survey proved to be very unwilling to try ballet. In contrast to the Russian females’ willingness to participate in ballet, the majority of the American females responded that it would be unlikely for them to do so. Evidently, Russian females are the more willing of the two sample populations to try ballet.

In response to the sixth question—Is being a ballet dancer a suitable profession for males? —a majority of the Russian males responded with a 2, while a majority of the Russian females responded with a 4. This is evidence that the females of the Russian sample were more tolerant of the danseur, and saw little issue with male participation in ballet. The Russian males participating in the survey disapproved of the concept of the professional danseur. In the American sample, males exhibited more tolerance than their Russian counterparts. The majority of American males responded to this same question with a 4, compared to the Russian male majority response of 2. The majority of American females responded with a 5, whereas their Russian female counterparts had a majority response of 4. This portrays that the American
females were the most tolerant of professional male dancers, even though they responded that it would be unlikely for them try ballet themselves. The results of both surveys suggest that gender expectations and conformity are stricter in Russia than in the U.S.

In an article comparing contemporary American and Russian concepts of masculinity, R.F. Levant writes that, “… Russian male and female respondents endorsed traditional masculinity ideology” (Levant 2007). This could mean that males should serve as the financial head of the household. This tie to traditional gender roles could explain why Russian males exhibit a slightly intolerant attitude toward male ballet participation. In this light, engaging in the arts does not help support a family perhaps in the way that a conventional full-time job could. It is interesting to note that the majority of Russian males considered ballet to be “neither feminine nor masculine,” but they still did not support the idea of male ballet participation. Perhaps this is due to the disproportion of females to males in ballet. With concern to contemporary Russian gender roles, P.K. Kerig and Y.Y. Alyoshina note the following:

The average boy will not have the opportunity to achieve one of the few positions of leadership and prestige that are available in society, and the totalitarian nature of the Soviet state contributed to pervasive feelings of powerlessness, dependency, and an external locus of control. The response males make to this situation is one of inaction, malaise, and withdrawal from activities considered ‘feminine’ or performed along with girls…This passive ‘masculine protest’ leaves men disaffected and without many avenues for self-fulfillment, but it may seem preferable to refuse to participate than to become a ‘nonman’ (Kerig and Alyoshina 1993).

Rather than participating in an activity alongside females, the typical Russian male prefers to meet gender expectations and preserve his sense of masculinity. The Russian male sample did not view ballet as a feminine activity, but they still preferred not to engage in it, instead favoring male-dominated activities.
Conclusion

It is important to note that of the Americans surveyed, most, if not all, were from California, a highly progressive state. The American results, therefore, do not speak as an accurate representation of the whole American public’s attitudes toward the matter. The same is true for the Russian sample. Most of the respondents were from Russia’s capital city, Moscow, and their responses do not accurately reflect the attitudes of the entire Russian public.

In order to refine this study and gain more detailed results, the questionnaire could be expanded to include questions such as—How likely would it be for you to enroll your daughter in ballet? This would be helpful in observing whether a child’s gender would impact a parent’s likeliness of encouraging participation in ballet.

The survey sample would also benefit from change; data should be gathered from a random sample rather than from a convenience sample. In order to accurately reflect the attitudes of an entire nation, the sample population should be expanded to include more participants from across both the U.S. and Russia. Additionally, employing a mixed methodology that utilizes interviews would be helpful for future research in gaining qualitative insight to complement the quantitative results.

Though this preliminary study has its shortcomings, it is a start in uncovering possible explanations for ballet’s gender discrepancy and provides a bit of commentary on current social similarities and differences between two former Cold War powers. It is hoped that by exposing this gender bias, more consideration will be given to male involvement in ballet, helping to pique male interest and improve the quality of ballet classes by introducing balanced ratios of males to females. This could in turn help strengthen American ballet companies by potentially increasing the number of American-trained males auditioning to join an ensemble. Additionally, exposure
can help to one day make ballet a more socially acceptable pastime among males and a more widespread activity in schools and universities, promoting ballet appreciation in the student populace. Understanding gender imbalances in society can help bridge gaps between male-dominated and female-dominated activities, bringing forth undiscovered talents and loosening strict gender ideologies that can hinder progress in the arts.
Works Cited


Appendix A

AMERICAN SURVEY

1. What is your gender?
   MALE
   FEMALE
   OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)

2. Have you ever participated in ballet?
   YES
   NO

3. On a scale from 1-5, please answer the following question:
   HOW LIKELY WOULD IT BE FOR YOU TO PARTICIPATE IN BALLET?
   NOT LIKELY  LIKELY  INDIFFERENT  VERY LIKELY  EXTREMELY LIKELY

4. For this question, please consider the following definitions:
   MASCULINE- SUGGESTIVE OR CHARACTERISTIC OF A MAN; MANNISH
   FEMININE-CHARACTERIZED BY OR POSSESSING QUALITIES GENERALLY ATTRIBUTED TO A WOMAN.
   HOW MASCULINE OR FEMININE DO YOU CONSIDER BALLET?
   STRICTLY FEMININE  FEMININE  NEITHER FEMININE OR MASCULINE  MASCULINE
   STRICTLY MASCULINE

5. Considering the previous definitions, please answer the following:
   IN YOUR OPINION, HOW ACCEPTABLE IS IT FOR MALES TO PARTICIPATE IN BALLET?
   VERY UNACCEPTABLE  UNACCEPTABLE  INDIFFERENT  ACCEPTABLE  VERY ACCEPTABLE

6. Please rank the following question:
   IS BEING A BALLET DANCER A SUITABLE PROFESSION FOR MALES?
   COMPLETELY UNSUITABLE  UNSUITABLE  INDIFFERENT  SUITABLE  COMPLETELY
   SUITABLE
7. **On a scale from 1-5, please answer the following question:**

**How likely would it be for you to enroll your son in ballet?**

- Extremely unlikely
- Unlikely
- Indifferent
- Likely
- Very likely
Russian Survey

1. Пожалуйста, укажите ваш пол.
   - Мужской
   - Женский
   - Другой

2. 1. Вы когда-нибудь занимались балетом?
   - Да
   - Нет

3. 3. Пожалуйста, ответьте на следующий вопрос.
   С какой вероятностью вы бы занимались балетом?
   - Совсем маловероятно
   - Маловероятно
   - Затрудняюсь ответить
   - Вероятно
   - Совсем вероятно

4. Пожалуйста, считайте следующие значения:
   - Мужской: относящийся к мужчине, мужчинам; свойственный мужчине; предназначенный для мужчин
   - Женский: свойственный женщине или самке, особи женского пола, или имеющийся у женщины, самки, особи женского пола
   - До какой степени вы считаете балет мужским или женским занятием?
   - Совсем женский
   - Женский и мужской
   - Мужской

5. Пожалуйста, ответьте на следующий вопрос.
   Принято ли, что мужчины занимаются балетом?
   - Совсем
   - Ни принято ни принято
   - Затрудняюсь ответить
   - Принято
   - Совсем принято

6. Пожалуйста, ответьте на следующий вопрос.
   Как вы считаете, балет — это подходящая профессия для мужчин?
   - Совсем не подходящая
   - Не подходящая
   - Затрудняюсь ответить
   - Подходящая
   - Совсем подходящая
7. Пожалуйста, ответьте на следующий вопрос.

С какой вероятностью вы бы предложили своему сыну заниматься балетом?
совсем маловероятно маловероятно затрудняюсь ответить вероятно совсем вероятно