Partner dance can force us to confront insecurities about ourselves and our relationships. Dance psychologist Dr Peter Lovatt tells Nicola Rayner how social dance can become antisocial.

Social dancers dance for fun – the clue is in the name – but it’s not always that straightforward. Pairing up with a stranger and dancing around the room with them can be challenging in all sorts of ways we don’t anticipate. Perhaps they don’t like the way you dance, perhaps you can’t execute a move together, perhaps you take an immediate dislike to each other – or the opposite. You can’t always tell until you’re in someone’s arms, at which point it becomes difficult to disengage.

“The reason I’m so fascinated by dance as a psychologist is that it holds a microscope over all of your insecurities,” says Dr Peter Lovatt, Reader in the Psychology of Dance at the University of Hertfordshire. “It’s an incredible environment. It’s a petri dish that we climb into and it magnifies everything that’s going on inside our heads and our bodies.

“One thing that is interesting about social dancing is that I work with some couples who find it almost impossible to co-operate with each other. They’re constantly not leading, not following, not accepting signals or they’re taking strides of different lengths. They are simply not coordinated and they argue and bicker and there are those confrontations on the dance floor that happen.”

So what’s going on? “I find that one partner might be transferring their insecurities, or inabilities, or
concerns, on to the other partner,”
explains Dr Lovatt. “If person A can’t
do something, they blame person B for
their own inability. There are power
dynamics in every relationship we
have, and it’s no different on the
dance floor – you have these
different amounts of control.
What I’ve found with some
couples is they’re both blaming
each other, but when I dance
with each of them, they know
perfectly well what they’re doing.
Then you bring them back together
again they start bickering again.”

Is that because people feel
vulnerable? “Yes, it’s a very intimate
space...It’s much closer than you
would normally stand with someone
in a social setting. All those rules about
allowing people into your personal
space, we break them completely...
and sometimes that feels very
awkward. If you’re dancing freestyle
in a nightclub and someone comes
to dance very close to you, you can
move away, but in social dancing,
when there’s a set routine to learn, you
might have competency issues about
whether you’re doing it right with
somebody, who when you take hold
with them, you might immediately
dislike, and that’s entirely valid.”

Of course, in partner dance, the
opposite can happen too. “I knew a
woman once who hadn’t danced for
many years and we spoke for a long
time about why she hadn’t,” says
Dr Lovatt. “She told me this story:
she went social dancing at a place
where you have to change partners
several times as you’re learning the
dance and she said that she took hold
with this man and felt herself falling
into him, falling in love. She had a
Cinderella moment – she just fell
into him emotionally. When she left,
when she went back to her husband,
she cried all the way home...just
because the chemistry when they were
dancing had unlocked something
in her that hadn’t been unlocked in
a very long time, though nothing
happened between them sexually. The
next morning she told her husband
and he was furious and said, ‘You’re
evitably being unfaithful to me.’
She hadn’t been couple dancing
since then, because she was afraid
what would happen emotionally.”

What can we do about challenging
encounters on the dance floor?
“It’s not about the other person, it’s
about you,” says Lovatt. “The only
ting thing we can be certain of is we can’t
change anyone else, but we can
look at why there’s that tension.
If there’s a difficulty in the
[dance] relationship and we
have been arguing, we can ask
ourselves: what am I doing
to contribute to this difficult
relationship on the dance floor?
Is there a gap in terms of our
abilities or expectations?”

He continues: “There’s a great
paper by [Nicolas] Rohleder
who found that cortisol levels
went up significantly on ballroom
competition days – of course, cortisol
is a stress hormone – because, they
discovered, people feel they are
being judged on their social identity.
You’re being graded on you.

“If you have an expectation that
you’re a ten on the dance floor and
your partner is bringing you down
to a six, that’s a fairly fundamental
gap in your social identity, so
you need to step back and think
about why you dance. Are
you dancing purely for social
reasons or are you dancing
competitively? Are you dancing
to achieve higher grades? Then
you might like to think about what
your partner’s reasons for dancing
are and, if there’s a mismatch, that
will need to be addressed. I think
‘know thyself’ is the answer here.”

One of the major differences between
partner and solo dancing is that there
is no sense of letting other people
down in the latter. “If you’re in a solo
jazz class and you mess up the routine
halfway through, it doesn’t matter that
much – it doesn’t matter at all, in fact,”
says Lovatt. “But if somebody else
is relying on you to get it right, that
adds a different stress and managing
that relationship is absolutely
vital to the success of the team.

“I did some work, several years
ago, on Strictly Come Dancing: It
Takes Two and I was asked to watch
all the rehearsal tapes of the couples
dancing together. It was fascinating.
In some partnerships, the relationship
off the dance floor was really strong;
there was a really good relationship.
People were being considerate and
respectful with one another – they
might have had a laugh and a giggle.

“There was a psychological
connection between the couple and
that translated into the ability to
learn the routines and to understand
each other’s insecurities and each
other’s successes. Other couples
were very distant from each other
and seemed only to come together
for the dance, so relationships are
fundamentally important for the dance.

“When they’re performing, you can
see the relationship coming through
and we, as an audience, believe those dances
more if the relationship is good, don’t
we? We believe there’s something real
there that they’re communicating, rather
than it simply being a technical exercise.
It doesn’t matter how brilliantly you
dance, if there’s no relationship there,
it can be quite dull to watch.”