

Why I cannot dance the Tango:¹ Reflections of an incompetent member of the “milongas porteñas”²

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the idea that members are fully competent at what they do. With that aim, I start with a Schutzian and Ethno-methodological account of what it is like to be a member of the tango scene in the dance halls of Buenos Aires. I specify different degrees and kinds of competences. On the one hand, there are fully competent members (sanctioned dancers) and incompetent members (the “beginners”³). The incompetent members are the vast majority in comparison to the few fully competent ones. On the other hand, there are technically competent members and socially competent ones. Technical competence is very hard to acquire, thus it is very rare. Social competences, instead, are accessible to all members. These different ways of being a member are heterogeneous and indicate a significant diversity of competences and skills. I conclude that not all members are alike and that each one is challenged in a particular way.

Key words: membership, rules, embodied knowledge, competences, diversity

Tango is my passion. A passion that has taken me from *milonga* to *milonga*, trying to become the kind of dancer that I always felt I was. Five years and

¹ I am grateful to Clare Huish for her help in proof-reading this paper.

² “Tango dance clubs of Buenos Aires.”

³ I will use quotation marks when recollecting members’ categories and natural language.

eighteen different *milongas*⁴ are testament to my absolute dedication and to my absolute failure. There can be no doubt of my incompetence in this field of dance.

However, didn't I manage in some way to become part of, a member of, that Milonga scene? How is it that I was able to interact with numerous *milongueros* that share the same feeling as me for tango even though, much to their amusement, they express this with all the grace that I lack? Furthermore, how did I manage to anticipate my failure? I mean, how did I manage to comprehend that you don't dance like that, that that just isn't Tango?

When I became fully conscious of my dancing ineptitude, I felt like I'd turned into a kind of sentimental *milonguero*, the kind of dancer who is all emotion but lacks skill. I was incapable of dancing and I knew it because in fact I was already able to tell that I felt the tango just like everybody else. Finally I knew with absolute certainty that dancing the Tango is not my thing and was able to give the reasons why because I had learnt to see myself just as anyone else on the dance floor would see me – I had internalized the “Generalized Other”⁵ – . With that, I'd acquired that critical, sarcastic way of looking characteristic of my “significant others”⁶. I hadn't learnt to follow the rules of the dance (I mean I couldn't do what was required of me on the dance floor) but I could recognize that in the actions of others and I had learnt to recognize how they viewed my clumsy steps. Somehow, I had become a member of the milonga. But, what did that mean?

1. *What is it to be a member?*

My status as an eternal beginner faced me with a crucial dilemma: Am I or am I not a member of the *milonga*? A concern which, in turn, raised another question, prior and fundamental: What is it to be a member?

Ethnomethodologists often appeal to that notion, when speaking, for instance, of the methods that members use to make and make observable phenomena, the study of natural languages, etc. Since the very beginning, this term has been used to account for what makes members a part of social settings. For example, Garfinkel refers to it in his early writings, when speaking of “tribal members” as *bona fide* participants “in the tribal relationships” who share

⁴ In my fieldwork, I visited the following *milongas*, where I have also taken dancing classes: Centro Cultural Torquato Tasso; Chiqué; Club Almagro; Club Atlético Fernández Fierro; Cochabamba 444; El Abrazo; El Arranque; El Beso; Fulgor de Villa Crespo; Grisel; La Argentina; La Catedral; La Ideal; La Viruta; Lo de Celia; Maldita Milonga; Niño Bien; Salón Canning.

⁵ Schutz 1967: 189.

⁶ Berger and Luckmann 1967: 131.

“a socially employed metaphysics” which makes them all “alike in essence.”⁷ The notion of member has also been from there on recurrently used. We can also find it, for instance, in Garfinkel’s latest writings, where he speaks of “member’s methods” when outlining *Ethnomethodology’s Program*⁸ and points out that they provide for descriptions of ordinary things⁹.

The notion of member has also been used in Conversation Analysis. We can find it already in Sacks when he is dealing with practices and methods. From his early lectures – focused on “membership categorization”¹⁰ – and on, he was concerned with “how members, in particular contexts (or classes of context arrived at by examining particular contexts), methodically construct their talk so as to produce a possible instance of an action or activity of some sort, and to provide for the possible occurrence next of various sorts of actions by others.”¹¹

In all these ways, I could say that I am a member of the *milonga* since: I had become a tribal member endowed with a common essence; I managed to make sense of ordinary things; and I was able to methodically construct other’s talk to provide for the possible occurrence of their actions. Thus, the fact that I couldn’t dance did not exclude me from the *milonga*. It just made me a particular kind of member: a member who “cannot dance.” So I learned that the social setting of the *milonga* is partly organized on the basis of negative certifications indicating not only who can dance but also who cannot.

2. *The sanctioned dancer*

In my ineptitude, I played a central although undesirable role. I was the one who “stomps,” the one who cannot dance. I was at the bottom of the *milonga*. At the other end, at the top, you will find the expert dancers, among them, outstanding amateurs and even some professional dancers who frequent the *milongas* to soak up “the grime and the grit” of tango.

I heard about this for the first time from Miguel Ángel Zotto, one of the most respected professional tango dancers. In an interview for an official magazine of the City of Buenos Aires he told me that he went to the milongas “very often” for two reasons: “for my pleasure and to not lose the ability to improvise.”¹² He even bases part of his shows “on what the *milongueros* tell me

⁷ Garfinkel 1956: 423.

⁸ Garfinkel 2002: 72-73.

⁹ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰ Schegloff 1989: 205.

¹¹ Ibid., 197.

¹² Zotto 2001: 125.

during the dances”¹³: “I took specific things from the *milongas*: steps, ending positions.”¹⁴ By doing this, he continues what he used to do with his teacher, Antonio Todaro¹⁵. That’s one of the reasons why he wants the male dancers in his show to be “popular dancers” (like he is) who have “the grime and the grit of tango,” and that’s why he sends the female dancers (who are classical and contemporary dancers) to the *milongas* so they can “learn the grime and the grit.”¹⁶

Another thing I learned is that, at the *milonga*, professional dancers are measured by the same standard as any other dancer: Can he dance? For instance, one time someone said to me “Zotto can dance.” Moreover, I came to notice that there is considerable proximity between professional dancers and experienced amateur dancers.

In particular, those who have embodied tango by having lived through its “golden age” (the ‘40s) are well respected. These “*milongueros viejos*” (old dancers), that were “breastfed” on “old time tango,” are cherished by the most demanding of fans because of their practical embodied knowledge that is transmitted only through dancing.

This is why tango teachers encourage their students to dance with as many partners as possible: because there is something related to inter-corporality that can only be passed on by actually dancing. Usually they say out loud several times during the class: “switch partners,” to induce their students to interact with different dancers endowed with different backgrounds, techniques, personal styles and bodily skills – briefly, endowed with different “stocks of knowledge”¹⁷ – . Sometimes, couples who are taking the class “together” are reluctant to change partners. In that kind of situations, teachers might insist and even choose a different dance partner for their students in a polite although firm manner.

Back to these “*milongueros viejos*” who are “the living history of tango,” they have a status of their own albeit as prestigious as some professional dancers who, like Zotto, frequent the *milongas*. The level of respect given to them is also comparable to that of well-known teachers. At times, they join them as assistants in their classes, both to show the steps and to dance with the trainees. This was the case of another acquaintance of mine: Julián¹⁸, a man in his 60’s who became an outstanding amateur dancer by attending the *milongas* on a daily basis after his first divorce. In a few years he become such a good dancer

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Schutz 1967: 38-39, 146; Schutz 1964: 45, 49.

¹⁸ All names used in this paper are fictional, unless quoted from published articles or interviews.

that the teacher at one of the *milongas* he attended asked him to become his “assistant.” Julián was really proud and was boasting about how he was this professor’s “assistant.” He pretended to pretend that he was proud about it, only to conceal the fact that he was actually proud about it.

However, the dancer’s status is clearer than that of “professor” as the former status comes from others while the latter is self-appointed. Even some old *milongueros* are quite skeptical about many self-called “Professors.” As the famous tango by Enrique Santos Discépolo “Cambalache” says (which Julián quoted when talking about this), “a great professor is much the same as a dumb-ass.”

Of course, apart from personal initiative and a share of narcissism, a professor needs students who follow him and, more importantly, who pay for instruction; but that is not an expert opinion. So he might well lack the recognition of his alleged peers and still have – by virtues not related to the dance such as likeability, “*pinta*”¹⁹ and business sense – a hefty clientele. But in order to “really dance” it takes much more than this.

3. The Dancer’s Status

At the *milonga*, not everyone can dance. You have to acquire the status of a dancer but of course you can’t give this to yourself, only others can give it to you. Experienced dancers and some regulars used to say, or whisper as if they were revealing a secret, that “so and so dances” when they wanted to acknowledge or point out someone’s talent. But this isn’t just said about anyone. The distinction applies not only to *milongueros* but also to professional dancers.

Amongst the dancers there was a guy, named Cachito. He was 83 when I first met him and he was quite a name on the *milonga* scene and at a Dance Academy. Some people even used to go to the *milongas* just to dance with him. He was invited to dance at different events. He travelled abroad to other countries with his dance partner to display his talents. People said that it was Tango that kept him alive and it was true. Despite a medical condition, he continued dancing for many years against all odds, especially at the beginning when his prognosis was far from hopeful. Tango kept his spirit alive too. Returning to the dance floor helped him get over his wife’s death, with whom he had shared most of his life. He not only rediscovered his *joie de vie* but he also made new friends. At the *milonga* he met people from all walks of life, from ruffians to former Government Ministers. He, who had been an admin.officer all his life, was now rubbing shoulders with members of the local aristocracy,

¹⁹ In the slang of tango, “*pinta*” means: “Elegance, distinction in dress // look of a person.” (Rodríguez 2014)

with professionals, business men, artists and politicians. All thanks to this new social life that the *milonga* was opening up for him and where, besides being well liked, he also felt respected. A respect that came from “he can dance.”

His status as a dancer was not only important to others but also and more importantly to himself. One day at his home, with the background Tango music coming from the City’s radio that was never switched off nor tuned into any other station, he told me that on one occasion, after having frequented the local *milonga* infinite times and having displayed his talent there, a respected dancer came up to him and said, “you can dance.” Cachito recalls that moment with particular emotion. It was a significant moment that marked a before and after in his life. He experienced it and relates it as a rite of passage. From that moment on he felt like a dancer. He took to the dance floor with his confidence tripled and he now felt authorized to be able to share his talent with his usual dancing companions and with gentlemen who looked at him with admiration (and perhaps a secret envy) and with friends to whom he offered advice and shared some secrets about Tango. Aside from this, Cachito managed to get a “dance partner.”

Every good tango dancer has a steady dance partner especially for those occasions when he has to show off his skills. That woman was Myrna, an attractive woman, 35 years younger than him and Cachito was platonically in love with her. On top of that Myrna had her own Dance Academy where she taught Tango, apart from running a number of successful businesses with work both in Argentina and abroad²⁰. Thus it was only Tango that brought them together.

One day Cachito showed me a letter he once wrote to Myrna, expressing his sincere and respectful love towards her. “She drives me crazy” he confessed. However, their relationship never went further than strictly Tango. She didn’t reject his letter nor his other demonstrations of affection. He never went further than these gallant manifestations. It was more like the love of a courtesan than post-modern sexuality. It was all about dancing. That was their thing. Everything else paled in comparison to the attraction of the *milonga*.

Having gained recognition from experienced dancers and the admiration of his fellow companions, being constantly asked to dance by the ladies and now having his own steady “dance partner,” Cachito was indeed a real dancer.

4. *The Incompetent One*

Cachito and I appeared to have absolutely nothing in common. From the experienced dancers I received nothing but criticism. Some could not fathom how difficult those few, clumsy, grotesque steps were to perform. My

²⁰ For instance, as an artist she was selected to show her work at the Venice Biennale.

incompetence seemed, for moments, to overwhelm teachers of vast years of experience with students of different ages, nationalities and expectations. You don't see many people with as little talent as mine on the dance floor. The experienced *milongueras* wouldn't dance with me even out of pity. What's more, my fellow beginners would correct me as if they were the experienced dancers.

I remember one of them in particular, a woman older than me but who was also starting to learn Tango. She wanted to teach me to indicate (*marcar*) by pressing her fingers into my back frenetically trying to show me what to her was obvious but what to me was a mystery.

In the dance of tango, "*marcar*" (to indicate) and "*mandar*" (to command) are two things that indisputably the man does²¹. That is why we speak of "the man's role" and "the woman's role": because, unlike most dances, in tango we have two different although coordinated choreographies for each member of "the couple".

Although this makes up a gender division of dancing labor, on particular occasions these roles can be performed either by the man or the woman. For example, in the early tango, it was common that men in the brothel, while waiting for their "turn," would practice between them. Also, at working-class neighborhoods, young men thought to their younger or less experienced friends and practiced along with them while preparing for the dances. In addition, teachers and professionals "know both roles," as they must teach "the man's role" as well as "the woman's." It is also estimated that every competent dancer knows "the role of the other" and even sometimes, to coordinate with her/his dance partner a special or new "step", s/he will show what is meant by doing "the other's part."

So gender roles have much to do with technical coordination.²² Of course, it also serves to mark a gender difference but not a rigid boundary since the ability to put oneself in the shoes of the other, to interpret (i.e., to do) what the other does, involves a reciprocity²³ which is complementary to the difference

²¹ See Carozzi 2015: 179-184.

²² Some other interpreters of tango, however, think that the division of gender roles is related to "a love ritual" and "a way of symbolic coupling before the intercourse" representing in the dance "what will happen next in bed." (Varela 2005: 46) While it may be admitted that tango is related to sexuality, this is unspecific and abstract because, from a Freudian point of view (which obviously underlies the interpretation discussed here), the same applies to all human activity. Moreover, this stance is questionable for its being too simple, for subordinating the dance of tango to an instrumental role and, in particular, for assigning the woman a passive role since she is depicted as "submissive" and "awaiting" the man, who "rules the direction and pace with his chest and shoulders." (Ibid.) On the contrary, the aim of this paper is to depict the practice of dancing tango (in both, male and female roles) as an active, prolific and skillful production.

²³ As Zotto says, man and woman have to know "50%" in order to dance the tango. (Zotto 2001: 125)

established, in what would otherwise be mere gender domination. It could be said in Schutzian terms that this involves “the idealization of the interchangeability of the standpoints”²⁴.

Back to my incompetence, that was so vast and basic, I had failed, in the eyes of my circumstantial partner, to assume the basic role of “the man” for being unable “to command.” Carrying out these functions on her own was proof that my partner judged me as incompetent. So she lost patience before I did and then avoided me on the dance floor for the rest of the night.

Both things (pointing out someone’s mistakes and avoiding dancing with her/him) are practical procedures that members use to decide that somebody cannot dance.²⁵ I got a lot of this at the milongas. I knew I couldn’t dance not only because I intend to be a reasonable person but also because in the few attempts to dance in the milongas (in the real dances, not in the class) I was almost immediately rejected by women (usually with kind euphemisms like pretending there was someone waiting for them) and criticized by men (a few of them with a friendly attitude, as if they were giving me advice, the others with a tough attitude or even a sarcastic one). So, by pointing out my mistakes and by refusing to dance with me, my circumstantial partner was telling me that I was not a member. Anyway, who was she to judge me that way? Indeed, I complained by saying: “Were both beginners!” She should be as incompetent as me...

5. *The eternal beginner*

Regardless of what my partner thought, I believed that after more than a decade of circulating the Milongas of Buenos Aires I was allowed to say that, in some way, I am a member since I have been formally admitted as an aspiring member from the time I started taking classes. I was assigned a rather weak and marginal status within the world of tango which made me a part of it – not the best one but a member after all.

I still remember the first class I ever had. It was at a *milonga* not far from home and from work. Julián (the talented dancer I mentioned before) recommended the place to me as well as the teacher. So I went there, climbed up the stairs and paid my ticket (5 Argentinian Pesos, which by then was equivalent to U\$ 5). I entered a big room with a tiled floor. Three rows of small tables

²⁴ Schutz 1967: 11-12.

²⁵ This kind of strategies are well described in a tango by Merico and Trongé: “Si vas a los bailes, parate en la puerta, / campaneá las minas que sepan bailar, / no saqués paquete que dan pisotones... / ¡Que sufran y aprendan a fuerza’e planchar!” [“If you go to the dances, stand in the doorway, / watch the women who can dance, / don’t invite to dance “that thing” because she will trample you... / Let them suffer and learn from rejection!”] (Merico and Trongé 1929)

seating 4 each, covered with table cloths surrounded the dance floor on each side and at the back. At the front, there was a big stage. Tango music was being played and some people chatted sat at the tables. I asked the guy at the door: "how do I start taking classes." He told me to wait for the teacher and talk to him. When he arrived, I approached him and said that it was my first class. He asked me if I could dance. I said no. "Go to beginners", he said.

"Beginners" was the first group of students. We gathered by the stage. Our instructors were not the main, well-known teachers but a couple of younger "assistants." The main teacher just passed by once in a while to check on us, maybe to praise a talented student and correct one or two who were doing not so well (a couple of times, the corrected student was me). He might even "show us" how the steps were supposed to be done by dancing with one of the female students. Then he went back to the groups of "Advanced" and "Intermediate" students, where he spent most of his time. At the end, he gathered us all ("beginners" to "advanced") together for a short simple practice before dismissing the class. After that, some stayed for dinner or for a drink or to socialize, some others joined new dancers who were not part of the class and started dancing. That was my first time as a member of the *milonga*. I was at the bottom but I was in.

Feeling a member of the *milonga*, I started taking classes in different places – which is something "typical" (in Schutz's sense): once you're into Tango, you try to make the most of it by attending as many *milongas* as you can. After several months of intense practicing (which I did mostly for my pleasure, not so much to acquire new skills as a dancer), I was promoted from the category of "beginner" to "intermediate." It was my greatest achievement as a vocational dancer.

This happened in a different *milonga* from where I had started taking classes and was first admitted as a member, although it worked pretty much the same way.²⁶ I had been attending for a few months on a weekly basis. One day I walked into the group of beginners as I usually did, just as the class was about to start. The female instructor looked at me and told me: "No, you go to 'intermediate'." I said: "Really?" "Yes," she replied while pointing with her finger to the group next to me. Her partner showed his agreement by saying "yes" with words and nodding his head. That was it! A very simple, unexpected rite of passage. I was promoted and feeling happy.

²⁶ Both sites were centers of immigrant's communities whose cultural activities included tango dancing. Here is how these places usually work: Someone is in charge of organizing the dancing (to play the music, collect the entrance fee, and make sure that everything is fine). The people who run the place offer drinks and meals, and have their own staff of waiters and barmen. They usually pay a fee to the organizers (a percentage of the sales). Finally, someone who is a well-known dancer (who is also into teaching) organizes the classes (with his own staff of assistants) apart from the general ticket you pay to enter the *milonga*.

At “intermediate” I had new instructors and could perform more demanding and gratifying steps. I felt entitled to attend “intermediate” classes wherever, not just at this particular *milonga*. And I got accepted as such just by saying “intermediate” when a new teacher asked me what my “level” was. Just once I had to explain where and when I was promoted. Usually, just a mention of my level would suffice.

As an “intermediate” student I had one of my most gratifying experiences. It was at Club Almagro, with Suzuki Avellaneda. Some people remember her as a very demanding teacher. In my mind, she is the most generous one. I had the feeling that she was really training me, passing on a volume of wisdom and skills that I might get elsewhere but only over a much longer period of time. In a few weeks I learned the most sophisticated and elegant steps I have ever performed. I even started to feel that I could dance. It was the pinnacle of my amateur carrier.

Unfortunately, for reasons not connected to the dance I had to step out of the *milonga* for a few months, after which I returned to the category of “beginner,” a position I could never surpass again. My only consolation was to know that Husserl also felt like a perpetual beginner...

6. *Native and professional categories in the milonga*

It’s interesting to note how native categories can differ from professional categories. I mean, how the way ordinary dancers see each other might diverge from the way teachers and assistants see students and practicants. This will be easier to understand if we take as an example the case of that female dancer who refused to dance with me (as narrated in “The Incompetent One”). I was being categorized by my partner as “not a dancer” while the teachers had categorized me as a “beginner dancer.” In her eyes I was totally different from her (I sucked, she didn’t); in the teacher’s eyes we were both the same (just a pair of “beginners”).

To better understand this I will describe members’ and teachers’ classifications of dancers as Membership Categorization Devices (MCD). These devices “are collections of categories for referring to persons, with some rules of application” that members apply to populations to say things about them and which they “use together or collect together” as a set, i.e., as “categories-that-go-together.”²⁷

What dancers and teachers do can be described then as a MCD to classify dancers and students. I will call these MCD “native” when they are produced by ordinary members in the course of an interaction in the *milonga*, and “professional” when they are produced by teachers and assistants in the course of a tango class or lesson. This will allow us to make some meaningful comparisons.

²⁷ Sacks 1995: 238.

First we note that both kinds of devices classify the same population, since most of the students stay late for the *milonga* and many of the dancers were or still are advanced students. Also they both produce a very similar hierarchy: at the *milonga*, either you “can dance” or you “cannot dance”. Having tango classes, either you are a “beginner,” an “intermediate” or an “advanced” student.

Secondly, the native Categorization Device (CD) is simpler: it only uses two categories (“can dance” / “cannot dance”) in comparison to the professional CD, which uses three categories (“beginners” / “intermediate” / “advanced”).

Thirdly, the divergences between both CDs are stronger at the bottom than at the top. The professional CD specifies two levels of non-competent members (“beginners” and “intermediate”) while the native CD only specifies one (“cannot dance”). But they both acknowledge only one kind of fully competent member (those who “can dance” or who are “advanced” practicants). Furthermore, these higher categories include the same population (usually who “can dance” is or was an “advanced” practicante) and make dancing a “category-bound activity” since “Members take it are done by some particular category of persons”²⁸ and used “as an explanation of the position” of a member²⁹.

Fourthly, there are significant gender differences between both CDs. The native CD makes things harder for the man who “cannot dance,” while the professional CD tries to even up the differences. As an experienced female dancer told me once, “it’s harder for the man to learn how to dance [the tango] because he has to lead, so he should know better, instead the woman can let herself go. All she needs to do is to be carried along [*dejarse llevar*] by the man.” That is why women are rarely rejected by skilled dancers if they are pretty or dressed sexy and so they get the chance to be taught whereas the man can only learn by getting someone (a friend or a teacher) to instruct him before the dance. He cannot learn from dancing but has to already know in order to be allowed to dance. On the contrary, the professional device makes things even for both genders since it matches dancers or trainees with similar skills and group them in categories according to those skills.

Anyhow, both MCDs sent me off the dance floor since they certified that I am not a qualified dancer. So, I’m an incompetent. But I’m not the only one...

7. The Plethora of Incompetents

Given that practitioners are classified according to their skills by two or three levels of increasing skills (according to who is categorizing), the whole set is based on the least competent stage, that is, on the “group” of those

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 425.

who “cannot dance” or who are “beginners.” This is the largest group of all. Therefore it makes an important contribution not only economically (as they are the majority of those who pay for the classes, drinks and meals) but also to the whole dynamics of this social setting as it is the one that provides a substantial amount of members. It can be said that the incompetence of a large number of members is essential for the functioning of dance classes and, given its closeness to the *milonga*, it also helps to enhance it. Thus, it is important to describe how the incompetence of the many is routinely produced as a condition of the competence of the few.

Much of its production happens during the tango classes. Contrary to how people learned to dance tango in the old times (spontaneously and guided by friends and acquaintances rather than “teachers”), nowadays its learning is mediated by professional instructors, it is systematized by a set of teaching techniques (which are diversely given, as they say that “every teacher has his own book”) and, above all, it is institutionalized so that, except in a few exceptional cases, they are run as academies rather than as dance halls (usually when they are run by famous tango dancers). This makes it possible to categorize in a standardized way the population of trainees into three different “levels” and to distinguish a few sanctioned dancers from the plethora of incompetents.

As a result, the class is nowadays an annex of the dance floor. What is most common is that it starts before the *milonga* begins so that those who are competent enough can first practice and then dance. This also adds an extra public as quite a few beginners, and even curious companions, stay as spectators and participants in the social life of the *milonga* – which of course involves buying a drink or even having dinner there. So nowadays, classes and *milongas* usually work in conjunction with one another.

In this context, the class is organized in a collection of practitioners based on their competences where the “teacher” knows the competences and incompetences of each student and also addresses the “class” in general, interacting with each of the “levels” separately and with all of them together.

One of the main purposes of this organization of the classes is the labeling and subsequent classification of practicants. As already seen in this paper, they are categorized into three levels: “Beginners,” “Intermediates,” and “Advanced.” This categorization is a stratification based on the skills and competences acquired. The transition from one level to another occurs when the teacher thinks that the practicant is competent enough (even in cases where promotion comes after the request and insistence of the person interested). There is not an “exam” but rather an ongoing evaluation.

Since only a few make it to the top, the technical incompetence of the many supports the continued production of the exceptional competence of the few. This can be defined as “a performative elitism” which makes most of the members of the *milongas* something like “incompetent members.”

8. On the pleonasm “competent member”

How can we speak of members who are not competent? Aren't members supposed to be competent? To address these kind of questions and to account for experiences like the ones I have just related, it requires further specification about what is it to be a member.

For many ethnomethodologists, to be a member is to master a natural language, to recognize what is evident for everyone, to know what everyone knows, etc. In addition, the word “member” is usually associated with words such as “achievements” and “skillful,” which suggest that he is successful in his tasks and capable of “doing” what everybody does. This gives the idea of fully competent members who are able to perform in an effective way, achieving the goals they're supposed to, and mastering natural languages and bodily movements. Some even treat the notion of member as equal to mastery – for instance, Heritage when he speaks of the “mastery of natural language’ or ‘membership’”³⁰ as if they were both the same. Anyway, it is not a personal idea held by Heritage but a widespread conviction that the notion of “member” – which “is the heart of the matter” – must be referred to as the “mastery of natural language.”³¹

In this respect, members are “skillful”³², which means that they are “unanimous” in some respects, that their methods are “unavoidably used” in a certain way, and their practices are somewhat invariant³³. All this leads to the idea that members can make an “adequate application” of precepts based on their competence³⁴ and produce an orderly social setting. One could say, then, that Ethnomethodology is quite optimistic as regards members' skills and that it tends to emphasize the perceived normality in social settings.

This sort of infallibility of members is based, in part, on the idea of rule that is involved with the idea of competence. If “learning to follow a rule *is* learning what to do”³⁵, then there is no way that a member who, as such, understood the rule, could be incompetent to follow it.

“The idea that someone could ‘understand the verbal formulation of a rule’ but not understand ‘what to do’ where the rule is to be applied is an absurdity. [...] Someone who has mastered a rule has not learnt the verbal formulation of a rule, but has learned how to do something, namely, apply (or follow) the rule. [...] if you have understood what you have been told to do this is the

³⁰ Heritage 1992: 155.

³¹ Garfinkel and Sacks 1986: 160.

³² *Ibid.*, 170.

³³ *Ibid.*, 173.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁵ Sharrock and Button 1999: 203.

same as knowing what to do (because what to do is exactly the same as what you are supposed to do i.e. what you have been told to do).³⁶

Accordingly, from this perspective, the only way of being a member is to succeed in following the rules, in accomplishing what must be done, in achieving the expected goals. It is a very high standard and, on special occasions, it might become almost impossible. Indeed, some ethnomethodological accounts have shown that skills and accomplishments can be diverse and that members face different challenges. See, for instance, how difficult it was to become “vulgarly competent” for some of Garfinkel’s students.

“Garfinkel’s students would have to become ‘vulgarly competent’ with the methods they were studying. Not only would they have to learn by doing, but their mastery itself would provide the basis for, and subject of, their investigations. This requirement presented no initial difficulty for studies of competencies the students had already mastered, but it did create a demanding prerequisite for those of us who aimed to investigate specialized practices in mathematics, law, and the natural sciences [...]. In a different way it was a problem for those who investigated the competencies of persons with severe disabilities [...] and members of exotic cultures.”³⁷

Lynch’s testimony about Garfinkel’s students is a crucial contribution since it depicts different kinds of competences which pose different kinds of challenges to the ethnomethodologist. It also depicts three different types of situations. The first type is that of competencies already acquired, which naturally provide an adequate base for research. The second type relates to specialized practices whose specific competencies are difficult to acquire. Finally, the third type refers to members of exotic cultures and people with severe disabilities, whose competencies are impossible to fully acquire by most ethnomethodologists.

I would like to focus on two issues implied in Lynch’s description of Garfinkel’s studies, which are deep insightful findings. The first is that not all memberships are the same type and that it is possible for members to significantly interact within certain social settings regardless of the fact that they have different competencies. In this respect, a bias in some ethnomethodology studies is to assume that competencies are distributed uniformly within social settings and produce invariant results, while at times they are diverse and heterogeneously distributed. Indeed, social settings may be heterogeneous and require precisely this heterogeneity to exist. In short, social settings can be described according to their degree of internal diversity. The second issue

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

³⁷ Lynch 1999: 218.

is that the occasions described by Lynch can be reduced to two circumstances: one, in which competencies are accessible to all and, therefore, they can be universalized and distributed homogeneously among the members; another, in which competencies are specific and difficult to acquire and therefore are distributed heterogeneously.

Heterogeneity can take different forms. One of these, which is particularly relevant for this paper, is the distinction made by Francis and Hester between social and specialized competencies. On one hand, “social competence consists in the ability to use [...] structures in producing and making sense of social interaction.”³⁸ It has to do with the requirement that, in any social setting, members “pay attention to, and make sense of, what is happening around them.”³⁹ On the other hand, in specialized populations, most people might find it difficult (or, I would like to add, even impossible in certain cases) to achieve specific competencies.

“When the subject of research is something that most persons participate regularly, like ordinary talk, the game of tic tac toe, driving, walking, etc., the unique adequacy can be assumed for most persons (persons with disabilities, who may lack ordinary competence, may nevertheless have revealing understandings of these common tasks). However, with regard to practices that have specialized populations, like science or policing, unique adequacy can be very hard to achieve. An ethnomethodologist pursuing unique adequacy within a specialized population may spend years in a research site becoming a competent participant in its practices.”⁴⁰

9. Social and technical competencies in the milonga

The distinction between social and specialized competencies serves as a basis for distinguishing two different kinds of memberships in the *milonga*. So far, I have distinguished two paradigmatic cases, the one of Cachito, an exceptional dancer and a fully competent member, and mine, being member of a remarkable technical incompetence but still able to interact in the *milonga*, make sense of what is going on, and act a certain role in this social setting. In the words of Francis and Hester, I can say that I am a socially competent member of the *milonga*. Besides, people who attend the *milonga* make up a specialized population. This explains the enormous difficulties I have faced in my frustrated learning attempts. This is indeed a difficult competence to acquire. But there is something more to it than specialized knowledge.

³⁸ Francis and Hester 2004: 5.

³⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 26-27.

From the point of view of the specialized competencies, the difficulty is universal: “it’s tough for everyone,” as they say. But in the case of Cachito, as a sanctioned dancer, there is a much more restrictive membership because, as I said before, the dancer’s status is given to a select few people. It is assumed, then, that anyone who “can dance” does something that not any socially competent member can do: he has a unique competence. Unlike social competencies, potentially available to anyone who makes the necessary efforts, the type of competence developed in domains such as the arts and scientific and technological innovation are fully achieved only by a few exceptional members who exhibit a talent that is out of the ordinary. So there is an aspect of competencies that fall outside ordinary and are therefore prohibitive to most people. Furthermore, unlike social competencies which all members possess pragmatically – in the sense that they can do what they are supposed to do (i.e. practically act as expected) –, technical competencies dismantle the unity of understanding and action, meaning and practice, which characterizes ordinary memberships as described by Sharrock and Button in the passage quoted above.

Both types of competencies are involved in the social setting of the *milonga*. On one hand, there is a social competence common to all, according to which members are able to assign meaning to the interaction and to what goes on there. From this point of view, I was a competent member since not only could I interact significantly with *milongueros*, teachers and other participants in the tango scene, but I had also come to understand the social and moral aspects of this particular lifestyle, and had even come to internalize the basic rules of Tango dancing. I just could not execute the steps, but I knew what I was supposed to do and why I could not do it.

One of the many experiences which made me aware of this distinction happened in one particular *milonga*. There, those who “cannot dance” actually dance and they are even the majority. In that particular *milonga* I attended both the classes and then the dance. I also watched audacious young couples dance who made the dance floor their own, particularly on Fridays. But I didn’t feel a part of it because “that just isn’t tango.” I, who couldn’t dance, somehow knew what it means to dance Tango. Plus, I could recognize what those people were doing as strange (“not Tango”) in that environment devoted to tourism and flirting but not so much to proper tango dancing. There I was allowed to dance but my *milonguero* instincts made me feel an aversion to it. Of course, “instinct” is just a way to put it. It feels like instinctive behavior because it’s not rational thinking but a global, emotional sense of the situation grasped perceptibly and shaped by past experiences sedimented which engender a perceptual based aesthetic that structures in its own fashion a taste of what’s likeable and what’s not. It’s a kind of embodied sense of what “real tango” is. Well, because of that sense I didn’t feel like dancing there, although

I was allowed to. That place only led me to start dating a new girlfriend, not to learn to dance the tango; meaning that to me it was a suitable social setting but not a specialized tango ambient.

10. The misadventures of a left-handed dancer

I was a poor dancer not just because of my general limitations for dancing, whatever the genre, but also for being left-handed in the context of a dance floor where everyone is expected to move in the same direction. So I faced an additional difficulty since all steps “left me backwards.” I consulted with my teacher, asking her: “What can I do?” Her answer was blunt: “You’re fucked.” Be that as it may, what I needed, and I began to assume that it would be definitely impossible for me, was to acquire technical competence. My membership, then, was limited by the same boundary separating social from technical competencies. I had become a regular at the *milonga*, but I would never be a dancer.

My frustrated attempts as a dancer led me to channel my passion for tango into guitar playing.⁴¹ I realized that being left-handed posed no problem when learning to play the guitar.⁴² As I’d started learning by peering through the key-hole at my brother’s guitar classes and then furtively taking his guitar and music book and practicing by myself, I had felt obliged to hold the instrument like “normal” people (i.e. right-handed people). I was able to learn enough to hold my own as a guitar player on social occasions even if not at a professional level. However, being left-handed did constitute a problem when it came to dancing.

This surely has something to do with the fact that one can play an instrument alone, whereas one dances tango with a partner. To have to coordinate your steps with someone else who is doing different steps and keep those other steps in mind whilst you hold your partner in a very particular way and with one hand give them subtle directive commands with your fingers on their back whilst your other hand hold is holding theirs; commands that are, what’s more, expressed during the course of an interaction that takes place on a busy dance floor where dozens of couples move at the same time in the same direction (which, to me, feels like the wrong direction) all this back-to front-world exponentially multiplies the complications of Tango. I had to perform the steps in the opposite direction to what to me was natural, beginning with

⁴¹ In a previous paper (Belvedere 2011) I make an account of my experience as an amateur guitarist.

⁴² I came to this understanding thanks to the enlightening comments received at the 2013 annual conference of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences regarding a previous version of this paper.

the “wrong foot.” This is quite something given that, according to various teachers I’ve had, Tango is an extension of the way of walking particular to *porteños* and that’s the reason why one of the basic exercises for beginners (like me) is “walking the dance floor.”

So, besides walking backwards, I had to develop a sequence of steps that to me seemed unnatural. I could only do it “thinking about it,” meaning capturing reflectively that which for others was a pre-reflexive body expression. On top of that, I had to anticipate my partner’s steps (something which any dancer does) but adding in an extra mental step given I was *thinking* about them as a left-handed person and then inverting the steps in my mind to get a mental image of a step for right-handed people. This means that my unfulfilled anticipation of the movement sequence that I expected my partner to perform had an extra step more to it than for “normal” people, given I had to first think about it in my way and then convert it imaginatively in order to be able to communicate it and execute it on the dance floor.

Only at that point was I able to “indicate” with my fingers on my partner’s shoulder the way to go and I had to do this with my less able hand. After this I had to coordinate my steps with hers, going once again in the wrong direction. All this ended up being an unmanageable difficulty, the reason being I left the *milonga* and focused on playing guitar at a Tango bar (or *peña*⁴³) where my left-handedness posed no problem.

11. *The consecration of the virtuoso*

As I said before, at the *milonga*, I was not the only eternal student. Many who go from class to class never make it to the big dance. Even though, they take part in the *milonga* by admiring the ones who can dance while sharing a drink with friends to liven up the night. I was one of these members. Was I supposed to become an outstanding dancer? I can think of possible analogies with other ethnomethodological studies. How good a piano player do you have to be in order to be able to account for jazz sessions? Do you have to win a Nobel Prize to describe the interaction doctor - patient? Do you have to make it to the top or does it suffice to assume a secondary role? If so, my limited membership would not impede me to describe what goes on in the *milongas* of Buenos Aires. In fact, it allowed me to understand that, as in other social settings, there are two types of memberships which, in turn, have different scopes.

⁴³ *Peña* literally means club. Tango *peñas* usually gather at nights at some neighborhood restaurant or café to listen to local singers and sometimes to sing along to popular tangos that the crowd knows by heart.

Indeed, these two forms of membership have different reaches: social competence is universal, technical competence is restricted. All of us who know what goes on in the *milongas*, who can assign meaning to this encounter of dancers and perceive the obvious as such (in particular, the *pathos* present in the embrace in tango), we are competent members in the first sense. But only those who have incorporated bodily schemata through habits and achieved a personal synthesis of the historic *milonguero* style and a distinctive personal way of dance, are members in the second sense. The category of technically competent member is, and is expected to be, highly restricted. It implies aristocratic values with which the *milonga's* community distinguishes “the best” dancers: those few members admired for their style, for their elegance, and for keeping alive “old fashioned tango” by renewing it through what in the future will be remembered as “this guy’s style.” The reader will have understood too well that, sadly, I am not included in this category. In short, I have become a socially competent but technically incompetent member.

By saying this, I don’t aspire to earn the reader’s sympathy. The category of technical competence in tango dance is deliberately built to be exclusive. It is known that the vast majority will never reach it; which condemns us to the role of mere spectators. There is a moment in the *milonga* where all but two people are spectators: it’s “show time.”

Every *milonga* – particularly at peak times – have starring dance partners. It is known that “today so and so dancers are performing.” This creates expectations among the people there. When the dance is at its peak, the floor empties, theatre lights (where available) are switched on and everybody watches from their tables or stands on the edge of the dance floor while the starring couple dances a few tangos. This moment marks the distinction between the two meanings of membership in the *milonga*: those “who can dance” and those who, as spectators, consecrate the exceptional virtuosity of the most eminent members of the tango scene. My friend Cachito occupied that place. I, however, was in the antipodes. But I still was a (social) member, even though the most (technically) incompetent of all. Anyway, as we say back there: “*Quién me quita lo bailao*”⁴⁴ (“No one can take the dance away from me”).

12. Differently challenged members (final remarks)

I started this paper with a question. I would like to finish with some answers. Not referring to Tango but to what is it to be a member. My own experience as

⁴⁴ This phrase is cited repeatedly in the tango scene and has turned into a *topos* or a saying. It comes from the tango “*Aguate corazón*” (“Hold on my heart”), by Oscar Valles.

a non-talented Tango practicante is just an instance of a much larger issue that I would like to discuss here: Are all members supposed to be alike?

My claim is that not all memberships are the same type. It is possible for members to significantly interact within certain social settings regardless of the fact that they have different competencies. Social settings are heterogeneous and require precisely this heterogeneity in order to exist. Thus, they can be described according to their degree of internal diversity. Some competences are accessible to all and therefore can be universalized and distributed homogeneously among members. Some others are specific and difficult to acquire and therefore are distributed heterogeneously.

Heterogeneity can take different forms. In this paper I explored the heterogeneity between social and specialized competences. The first type of competences is potentially available to any member, the second type is fully achieved only by a few exceptional members – they fall outside of the ordinary and therefore are prohibitive to most members. So, technical competencies dismantle the unity of understanding and action, meaning and practice, which characterizes ordinary memberships. Accordingly, these two forms of membership have different reaches: social competence is universal, technical competence is restricted. This makes meaningful the expression “incompetent members,” since not all socially competent members are technically competent. Plus, in some particular settings, competence and incompetence are strictly related.

As I have shown in this paper, at the *milonga* the incompetence of a large number of members is essential for its existence. The incompetence of the many is routinely produced as a condition of the competence of the few. The technical incompetence of the many supports the continued production of the exceptional competence of the few. This performative elitism makes most of the members “incompetent members.”

We all are, somewhere and to some extent, incompetent members. This means that members are differently challenged because they are endowed with different skills which are not evenly distributed. Moreover, social settings require the participation of incompetent members who appreciate, celebrate and legitimize their most competent members. These set the course and the rest follow them with a half-way understanding. An incompetent member cannot excel in what the gifted can but he can appreciate it. Nor can he set trends but he can follow them and give his approval to the courses marked by technically competent members. So a minimum of incompetence is distinctive of group members, full competence being only and rarely accessible to a few.

This shows that social settings are more heterogeneous than we think, that there are different ways of being a member, and that imperfection and limitations do not exclude us but define us as members of a specific kind. Perhaps one of our outstanding debts as phenomenologists and ethnomethodologists

is not having yet learned to fully perceive, acknowledge and account for the diversity of possible ways of being a member, including a variable but always significant dose of incompetence.

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