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# Tops Off to Dancing: An Exotic Form of Nightlife

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TOPS OFF TO DANCING: AN EXOTIC FORM OF NIGHTLIFE

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Jessica Sanspree

\* \* \* \* \*

Western Kentucky University  
2010

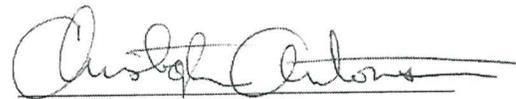
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## ABSTRACT

This ethnographic research investigates the culture of exotic dancing in two exotic dance clubs in Bowling Green, Kentucky. By conducting interviews with a former exotic dancer and completing ethnographic observations in the field of an exotic dance club, I explore how exotic dancers in Bowling Green create and perform sexuality as a method of making money. I examine the rules and regulations, such as “Dancer’s etiquette,” established and enforced by dancers in order to enforce social order. Furthermore, I assess my informant’s perception of identity regarding her role as an exotic dancer, including her reaction to the negative stigmas that continuously surround her culture.

Keywords: exotic dancing, sex work, sexuality, dancer’s etiquette, narrative resistance, identity.

Dedicated to my mother

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Honors Area Studies

Minor Fields: Women’s Studies, Sexuality Studies

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

Exotic dancing is a type of sex work where dancers remove all or most of their clothing in a sexually suggestive manner for an audience in a performance environment (Skipper and McCaghy, 1970). Once considered a taboo subject in academia, the culture of exotic dancing has been widely underrepresented and misunderstood in the past.

The number of exotic dance clubs in North America has more than doubled since 1990 calling for an increase in social research in order to better understand this progressively popular industry (Liepe-Levinson, 2002). Previous ethnographic research has been conducted in the fields of sociology, anthropology, feminist theory, and other forms of social academia (Bernard et al., 2003).

Existing scholarship focuses on a broad and diverse range of studies, including motivation for entering the industry of exotic dancing (Enck and Preston, 1988; Lewis, 1998; Sweet and Tewksburg 2000), interactions among and relationships between dancers and customers (Boles and Garbin, 1974; Ronai and Ellis, 1989; Egan 2003), power and exploitation (Chapkis, 1997; Nagale, 1997; Wood, 2000; Wesley, 2003;

Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009), and socialization and gender and class organization (Bernard et al., 2003; Trautner, 2005).

My research explores the culture of exotic dancing from a micro, or individual, level using the perspective of a former exotic dancer. Based on ethnographic interviews and observations, I reveal how exotic dancers in Bowling Green, Kentucky construct and perform sexuality, how they establish rules and social order, and how my informant develops a perception of self and identity within a stigmatized culture.

## CHAPTER 2

### Methods

In order to explore the culture of exotic dancing at the micro, or individual, level, I conducted 10 in-depth ethnographic interviews with a former exotic dancer and spent over 30 hours in the field conducting ethnographic observations of exotic dance. My interviews and observations took place in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Bowling Green is a medium-sized city with a population of approximately 55,100 people (U.S. Census Bureau website). Because of the existence of a large university and an active immigrant refugee center, Bowling Green has a diverse population of citizens consisting of all economic classes, immigrant populations, and college-aged students. The diversity of Bowling Green's population is evident in the type of customers observed in the exotic dance club.

I used a case studies and ethnographic approach for which I focused the majority of my research on the knowledge and perspective of a single informant. This approach was advantageous because it provided an in-depth perspective of the culture of exotic dancing. However, the disadvantages of a case studies approach is that additional or differing information may have been provided if I used more than one informant. My

informant for this research, Brooke, a 22-year-old white female, was an exotic dancer in Bowling Green, Kentucky for more than one year. The interviews took place in Brooke's home and were each approximately 1-2 hours in length. The interviews provided the foundation for my ethnographic research and my observations contributed still more to the knowledge I acquired during the interview process.

My observations took place at club Rendezvous in Bowling Green where I participated as a paying customer. My interactions with the exotic dancers were limited to those of any customer and stranger. Similar to ethnographic research by Mary Nell Trautner (2005), I took on the disposition of a naïve and curious customer unfamiliar with of the atmosphere in order to gain a better understanding of my informant's perspective on the culture that surrounded me. The role of the naïve customer allowed me to blend in with other customers so that I could observe a more natural setting in which I observed the performances of the exotic dancers with little influence and interference.

As a paying customer, I was able to observe (1) the environment in which the exotic dancing took place, (2) the methods the dancers used to make money, and (3) the interactions between the dancers and customers. All names of persons and places have been changed in order to protect the privacy and safety of those involved in the research process. My field data was collected between August 2006 and December 2008.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Construction and Performance of Sexuality

In his famous work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman compared life and social interactions to theatre and theatrical performances. He found that each of us manage representations of ourselves according to our surroundings at any given time. Goffman's theatrical metaphor describes each specific social setting, for instance a person's workplace, as a stage with performing actors and observing audience members (1959). An exotic dance club, such as Rendezvous, represents a staged setting where dancers, the actors, interact with and depend on the fantasies of their customers, the audience, in order to construct and perform a sexualized world.

#### *The Setting*

The setting of an exotic dance club is a very important feature in the performances of sexuality that take place within. Goffman explains that the "setting," such as furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background features contribute to the scenery and stage props for the performers (1959, p. 22). Sociologist Mary Nell Trautner's research further describes how the physical characteristics, including state of the surroundings, quality of

lighting and furnishings, and overall physical arrangement of the club signal to customers what type of sexual experiences they are to expect from the performers (2005).

Sociologists Mindy Bradley-Engan and Jeffery Ulmer found that exotic dance clubs create social worlds that provide the arenas where sexual performances take place. They determined that there are different types of exotic dance clubs, contingent on a class system that offers different styles of sexual performances. On the basis of Bradley-Engan and Ulmer's findings, the club that I observed would be considered a "social club" where it promotes the image of a "local neighborhood bar" and it consists mostly of working-class and a diversified (varying age groups, race, and ethnicity) audience (2009, p. 45).

Rendezvous is located in an older section of northern Bowling Green. It is positioned in a secluded part of the town, away from immediate traffic and public buildings. The outside of the building appears small and rundown and is surrounded by a simple, gravel parking lot. When you first walk in, you enter a tiny closed off space where a bouncer takes your ID and money at the door. You must be at least 18 years old and pay a 10 dollar cover fee in order to get in.

Once inside, you are surrounded by dim and flashy lighting and loud music, which varies depending on the dancer performing at the time. In the middle of the room is a small stage with a pole in the center where dancers perform most of their maneuvers in order to impress the on-looking audience. There is a large mirror on the back wall which the dancers often stare into while dancing. The mirror also serves as a reflector for

the flashing, colored lights, creating a club-like, party atmosphere. The stage is surrounded by a bar and set of chairs, or what the dancers call the “tip table,” where men and women sit and tip the dancers. There are small tables and chairs placed away from the stage so that customers can view the exotic dancers at a distance or hold conversations with other customers and dancers.

The disc jockey, or D.J., is located in the front of the room near the entrance. This is where you find the manager and bouncers located as well. There is a small, single bathroom on the right-hand side with a broken door and appears in need of repair. The left-hand side of the main floor has an adjacent room set up with small, open booths where the dancers give customers private lap dances as a bouncer stands by the doorway. The dancer’s dressing room is located in a doorway behind the stage where the girls can change from their floor outfits into their stage outfits.

Because of Kentucky state law, customers cannot be served alcohol in the same vicinity as the performing dancers. The bar is part of the main building, but customers have to exit the performance area in order to enter the bar at a separate entrance. There is a window inside the bar where customers can view the dancers while drinking, but alcohol is not allowed outside of the designated drinking area.

My informant Brooke was an exotic dancer at a different dance club called Big Daddy’s that no longer existed in Bowling Green at the time this research took place. Although she did not dance at Rendezvous, Brooke was very familiar with the

Rendezvous' club culture. The club that she describes in her interviews, Big Daddy's, was very similar to the club that I observed, Rendezvous, with the exception that Big Daddy's was a fully nude, private gentleman's club where as Rendezvous was a partially nude and public exotic dance club, meaning that the club was open to anyone in the public.

In order to visit Big Daddy's, a man has to become a member. Brooke explains that to become a member, a man has to first fill out an application, go through a three day waiting period, and then he can obtain his membership card:

When he receives his card, he has to hold up his right hand [imitating] and give the membership promise, which is "I solemnly swear that I will not touch the ladies or solicit the ladies in any way. I am not offended by nudity or sexual acts of any kind, and I am not a law enforcement officer of any kind." After that, he can enjoy drinks and the company and entertainment of various sexy ladies.

Women can get in free, but must be accompanied by a male member of the club. According to Brooke, law enforcement officers were not allowed to be members for fear of investigation of illegal activities:

They won't let cops in the building because it's totally nude and the cops are there about once or twice a month trying to bust us for prostitution, just because we are totally nude. Which I mean I've seen it go on up there,

but you know. The city of Bowling Green is constantly trying to shut that place down.

The city essentially closed down Big Daddy's for the reasons that Brooke suggested above.

Brooke describes the surroundings of Big Daddy's in great detail and then draws a map of the upstairs of the night club, as shown in Figure 1.1. Big Daddy's was similar to Rendezvous (Figure 1.2) in that it was located in a small, rundown building with the stage as the central focus of the main dance floor. Big Daddy's was a two-story building with the bar located downstairs, separating it from the performing dancers. The center stage did not have a pole and was much longer so that the girls had more space to dance across. Private lap dances took place in a single room beside the D.J.'s booth. It had a small sectional couch where the customer and dancer could sit. A decorative table with a lava lamp was placed in the corner to add a more personal touch. The private dance room also had a window connecting to the D.J.'s booth so that the D.J. could keep an eye on the dancers and customers. The setting and the appearance of the exotic dance clubs reflect the expectations and appearances of the dancers.

### *The Dancers*

Brooke does not fit the traditional dominant cultural ideals of the perfect female

body. She considers herself heavier than most exotic dancers which does not follow along with current cultural standards; however, men love to see her take her clothes off. Brooke is a seemingly ordinary female by day and transforms into the ultimate heterosexual male sexual fantasy by night. “Appearance” of the performer, according to Goffman, conveys status and provides clues to the audience of the roles the performer will play (1959, p. 24). Brooke describes that the appearances the dancers have while performing are very different than their everyday appearances outside of the club setting: You could see these girls out on the street and you would never know that they were a dancer. They wear their sweats and their hair thrown up in a ponytail and look like I do now because they were up all night the night before trying to look gorgeous, and yeah.

The appearances of the dancers while in the club help to create an atmosphere of desire and fantasy. Every dancer must look and act as if she is single and interested in the customers, even if she is not, in order to achieve the fantasy image. Philip Sijuwade (1995) describes this deception and façade as “counterfeit intimacy” which is necessary in order to accomplish the overall performance of the sexualized world of exotic dance.

It was not very difficult to become an exotic dancer at Big Daddy’s. Brooke only had to show the owner her breasts, and she was hired on the spot. A dancer did not need

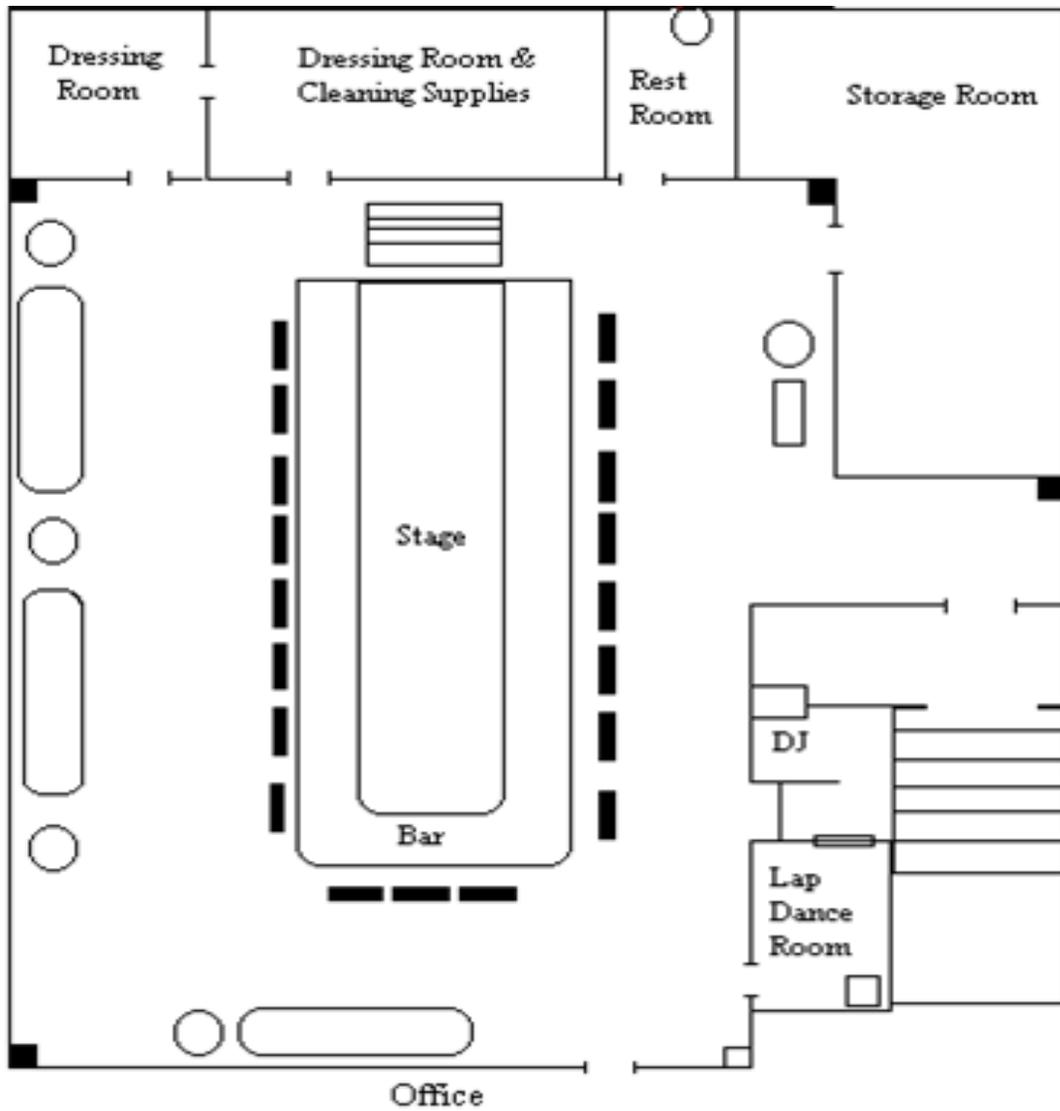


Figure 1.1 Map of Big Daddy's

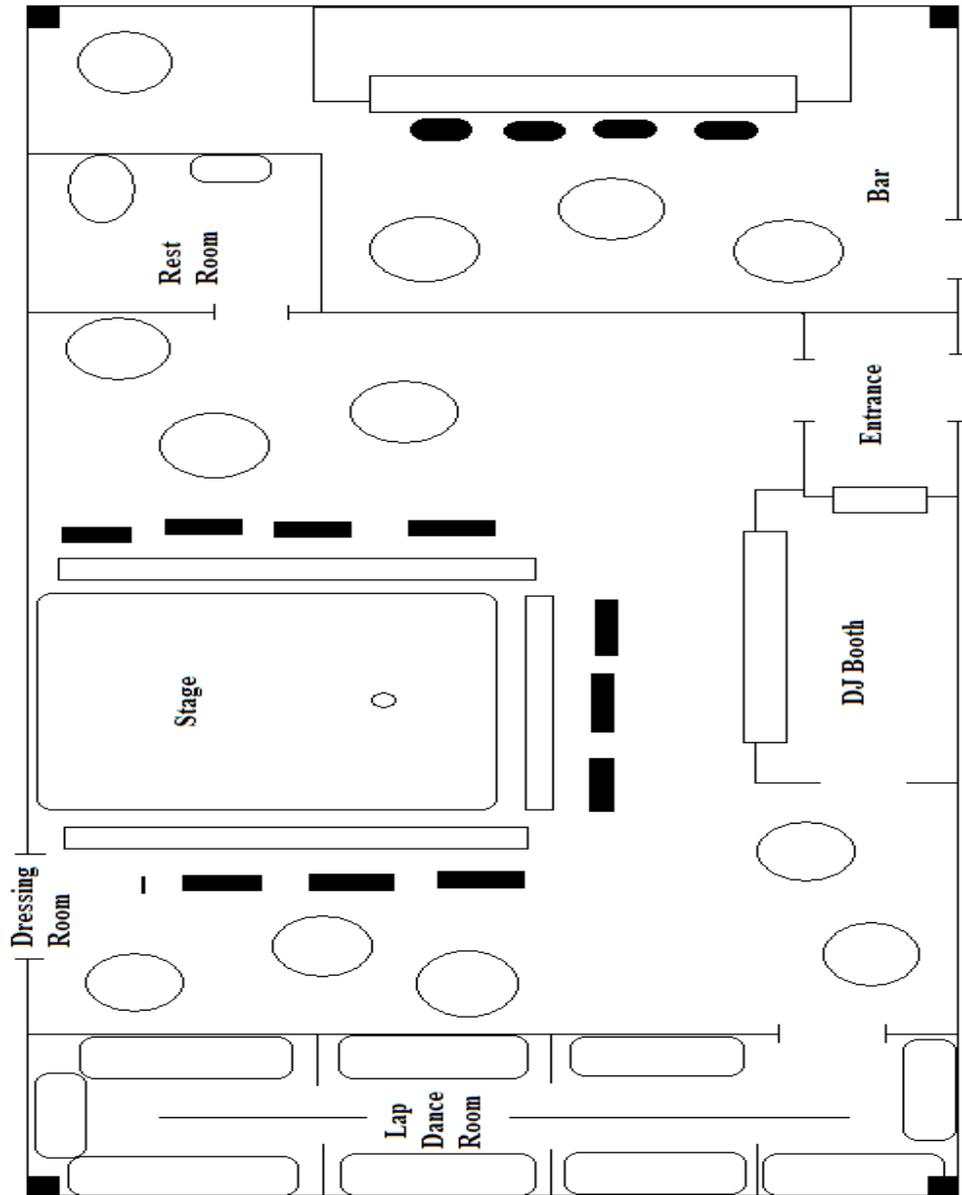


Figure 1.2 Map of Rendezvous

to be a specific age or body type in order to get a job as a dancer at this club. State law requires that dancers have to be at least 18 years old. The dancers that worked with Brooke were from 18 to 48-years-old with the majority of the dancers being in their early 20s. I observed the same age ranges among female dancers at club Rendezvous as well. Brooke claimed that the body type does not matter because “men like a variety of women.” However, based on my observations at Rendezvous, I found that the well-manicured dancers with slimmer figures and larger breasts were tipped more generously than dancers with other body types, most likely because they conform more to the cultural ideals of the sexualized, female body.

Naturally, the dancers have to portray themselves as sexual and be very comfortable with their sexuality. They also have to have enough confidence to get up on a stage and do the things that they are expected to do. It is necessary to be a social person because many different types of customers come to the club, including people from different races, different classes, and people from different countries. Although confident, social, and seductive attributes are essential for dancers, each dancer exhibits her own personality through costume and manners of dance.

Costumes and dance styles play a major role in creating the sexual world of exotic dance. Sociologist Mary Trautner found that dancers at certain clubs display specific clothing and accessories that vary depending on the socioeconomic class of the club. The class generates a symbolic performance where dancers’ appearances differ and depend on

what the customers desire and expect. At upper-class clubs, dancers conform to more dominant cultural ideals of attraction where they wear themed outfits, such as a Catholic schoolgirl or dominatrix, or lingerie that covers the breasts and buttocks. Women in these clubs also wear make-up that draws more attention and focus to their eyes, which suggests that “they are meant to see and be seen” (Trautner, 2005, p. 779).

Based on Trautner’s findings, dancers from working-class clubs address the raw and varied sexual fantasies and expectations of working class men. The costumes, accessories, and make-up styles are more diverse and individualized (Trautner, 2005) which reflect the costumes styles I observed at Rendezvous. I found that each dancer’s costume played upon specific personalities. There were dancers who wore dark, leather costumes that suggested a “bad girl” image as well as dancers who wore pastel colors and knee-high socks that portrayed innocence and youth. I also found sporty, cowgirl, and dominatrix themes as well as simple lingerie or neon clothing that reflected the club’s lighting.

Brooke explains the costumes worn at Big Daddy’s:

You could wear just lingerie, but there was a costume lady that comes by and she has these costumes that are black light responsive and glow, and are very sexy and have themes. You could be a cop or a little red riding hood. I had this really awesome Betty Boop style corset dress. . . .

The styles Brooke describes were equivalent to the costumes that I found at the public, exotic dance club.

I observed many different styles and accessories worn at Rendezvous, including chokers, sparkling belly chains, baseball caps, and extremely high platform shoes. Most of the shoes exhibited a 2-3 inch platform with 5-7 inch heels, which added focus and length to the dancer's legs. Brooke explains that customers prefer the variety: "definitely the more original you could be with your dance moves and themes, the more money you are going to make. It's all about entertainment."

### *Stage Dancing*

The main feature of entertainment at both Rendezvous and Big Daddy's is the stage performance. Trautner explains that the stage is the dancer's primary method of being seen, making eye contact with the customers, and finding customers to sell private lap dances to (Trautner, 2005). Brooke reveals that most of the exotic dancers in Bowling Green, including herself, became dancers because they were able to make a lot of money in a short amount of time. The amount of money a dancer makes greatly depends on her dance skills and performance on the main stage.

Dancers at Rendezvous make tips, usually one dollar bills from awaiting customers, on stage by performing sexualized dance maneuvers and stripping off their costumes and lingerie down to a small g-string. The dancer can make between 2 to 50

dollar bills during a single performance of a song on stage. The dance moves and styles of dancing depend on the type of music chosen by the dancer. Dancers' personalities and themed costumes match their music. For example, I observed dancers dressed in youthful and innocent costumes dance to contemporary pop and hip music and appeal to the younger, college-aged audience. Dancers who wear darker or dominatrix-style costumes dance to heavy metal and hard rock. Generally, the music follows a slow, sensual beat to which the dancers move and bounce their bodies in a seductive manner.

Brooke expresses and demonstrates a specific type of move that dancers perform for their customers.

J: So are there a lot of common moves that you guys use?

B: Yeah, one really cool one is to, um one really cool one is to put your head between the guy's legs and rest your shoulders on his knees and flip up where your butt is in his face.

J: Wow, I would have to see that.

B: [She grabs a kitchen chair to imitate] It looks like a roll, like...the guy's sitting here...and you put your hands here, your head down, pick up, and your butt is in his face.

J: Oh I see. Was that a stage dance move?

B: Yeah, because what is really cool about that club [Big Daddy's] versus the other club [Rendezvous] in town is that you can actually come off the

stage into a customer's lap as long as your bottoms were still on. So you get a lot more up close and personal.

I observed this same move by dancers at Rendezvous, although it was more difficult based on the placement of the stage and the customer's position next to the stage. Brooke also explained that a common move would involve the dancer picking up a dollar bill out of the customer's hand or off the stage with her breasts or buttocks.

In my fieldwork, I observed dancers performing on the stage or pole for part of a song where they would climb and swing around the pole, bending their bodies to simulate motions of having sex. This was the first part of the stage performance which accomplished the goal of grabbing the overall audience's attention. The next part of the stage performance included going around to each customer at the tip table, giving them individualized, special attention.

The dancer would utilize different moves for each customer, switching maneuvers as she made her way around the stage and tip table. A dancer may start off by lying back in front of the potential tipper, spreading and moving her legs along with the music, drawing attention to her genitals while simultaneously licking her lips and caressing her breasts and thighs. Dancers would commonly position themselves on all fours, bouncing their buttocks to the music or stand in front of a customer bouncing her buttocks in his or her face or they would turn around and rub their breasts in their customer's face.

Although customers were not allowed to touch the dancers, dancers were able to feel and caress the customers, depending on the customer's approval. Brooke explained that "you just had to be really good at judging the character of the customer. Some customers are not comfortable being up close and personal, whereas some prefer it and put out more money when you do." Dancers have to be careful not to offend anyone, especially female customers, but by displaying more personal contact they are able to show audience members what to expect during a private lap dance.

Sociologist R. Danielle Egan explored the relationship between customers and exotic dancers and found that a dancer's primary goal is to make the customer feel desired and desirable (2003). Trautner's research reveals the different strategies exotic dancers use in order to make their customers feel important, which includes whispering into the customer's ear while caressing his chest or genitals with her hands. Based upon male customer reports in her research, the whispers were not necessarily sexual. In the majority of cases, they are light conversation starters that made the customer feel singled out and special (Trautner, 2005). My observations are congruent with Trautner's findings as far as how exotic dancers react to male customers, but I found that the dancers respond very differently to females at the tip table.

Dancers at Rendezvous were more reluctant to approach males with female friends or escorts for concern that they may upset a girlfriend or spouse. Although I found that once a malcontent female is identified, dancers find ways to keep the unhappy

female from costing them customers while “handling the situation.” I observed one case when a girlfriend of a male customer was sitting on the lap of her boyfriend at the tip table, where customers are expected to tip the performing dancer on stage. She appeared very angry and irritated at the performing dancers and would yell out vulgarities show disrespect towards the performing dancer. She made statements like, “You’re too fat! Your fat-ass needs to get off the stage!” Surprisingly the other dancers reacted very calmly and would attempt to further annoy the disgruntled female by displaying no concern and would dance very close to her as if to mark their boundary. I discovered later in the night that one of the dancers sneaked and put gum in the exacerbated customer’s hair for vengeance and to make further statements of territory.

Male audience members reacted with excitement when a dancer performed for and touched another female. Similar to Trautner’s observations of dancers’ interactions with male customers (2005), the dancer would whisper in the female customer’s ear while caressing the female’s body and breasts. Some dancers would go as far as blowing hot air and vibrating their tongue over the female’s lower genitals. The dancers would whisper casual conversation starters such as, “Have I seen you in here before?,” “Are you a dancer too?,” or “Do you mind if I touch you?” They would also whisper seductive phrases such as “You are so hot” and “Oh my god, I want you!” If a dancer was more comfortable with a female customer, they would whisper phrases like, “God! I’m starving,” “I’m sorry, I just ate Taco Bell,” “We are giving them a show aren’t we?” and

“Can you believe that bitch?” The whispers were different than what Trautner found in that their purpose was less about making the female customer feel desired and more about creating a performance for the gazing audience. The more desirable and appealing the dancer’s performance on stage, the more likely customers would be to purchase private lap dances from the dancer.

### *Private Dancing*

Offering private lap dances is another way that dancers earn money while dancing at the clubs. According to Brooke, Big Daddy’s had a single lap dance room for which dancers had to wait and take turns to give lap dances. Rendezvous had a larger room with up to ten booths for dancers to perform private dances at the same time. Usually private dances cost an average of twenty dollars for a dance that lasted one song. The dancers were only able to keep half of the money and the other half went to the club.

The private lap dances involved grinding and thrusting moves. The dancers would simulate having sex with the customer over clothing. The law required that dancers have on bottoms, such as a g-string, if there was to be any physical contact with a customer. Even in Big Daddy’s, the fully-nude private club, the dancers were not allowed to touch the customer. Brooke explains:

The totally nude lap dances were more expensive and different because we could not sit on the customers lap if our bottoms came off so most people

opted for the topless private dance because they actually got to have the girls on their lap.

Dancers would perform dance moves similar to those they did on stage, such as rubbing their breasts in the customer's face or blowing hot air over the customer's clothed genitals. Although, the dancing is supposed to take place over the customer's clothing, if a bouncer is not looking or if a dancer tips the bouncer so that he will not look, a dancer will sometimes caress a customer under the clothes in order to create more sexual pleasure for the customer and convince the customer to continue spending money on the dancer.

The most common customers at Rendezvous were Hispanics. According to Brooke, the Hispanics might tip really well or really poorly, but they were prone to solicit the dancers and asking them for sex. This was most likely due to the different cultural expectations and the false assumptions that the dancers were also prostitutes.

Brooke told one story about when she had to give a young and exceptionally drunk Hispanic male a private lap dance:

So I walk in and I'm like "Do you want to buy a lap dance? And he was like "Si. Si. Senorita!" So I walk in and it's only like twenty dollars so he hands me twenty dollars and I'm doing my thing you know and all of a sudden he whips it out, and I was like "You can't do that! No!" And he was so drunk and he was like "What?" [laughing] And he keeps pulling

me towards it and I'm like "No, no! Leave me alone, I don't do that!" So I grab my twenty dollars and I grab my clothes and I bolted. I was like "Dee Dee! No! I can't do that!" So she goes in there, and Dee Dee the manager, a big ol' girl. She's a hoss. And I tell her "Dee Dee I can't do that. Tell him to put it back!" And she goes "What in the world is going on?" And she looks into the window and goes "Aw shit...I know him" And she goes in there and she is like "Hose. Zip up your damn pants and go home." I was rollin' [continuous laughter].

Although I did not observe the dancers being solicited for sex during my field work, Brooke explained that it was not an uncommon experience.

## CHAPTER 4

### Dancer's Etiquette: Rules and Relationships among Dancers

Social researchers have already examined rules and regulations of exotic dance club cultures. In "Sex Rules: the Edicts of Income in Exotic Dancing," Deshotels and Forsyth analyzed organizational rules that regulated and controlled the interaction between customers and dancers. They found that rules allowed dancers to be in "control of their sexuality" and they offered financial benefits (2009, p. 486). Enck and Preston's research investigated rules that exotic dance clubs established concerning dancers and also concluded that the rules provided financial benefits and a sense of control for the dancers (1988). However, social scientists have yet to unveil the rules and regulations that dancers have established among themselves.

"Dancer's etiquette" is a folk term used by exotic dancers to describe a set of spoken and unspoken rules that dancers share with one another. Dancers learn these rules by customary example or by being told by other dancers. The term can be divided in two ways: "what to do" and "what not to do." Brooke explains:

Dancer's etiquette is just simply respecting the other girl's things and her money. You don't come into another territory basically if she is sitting

there and working a customer and she is making money off of him, you don't come in and cut her throat. Now if she invites you in and says "Why don't you buy my friend a drink" and he takes you both down and buys you guys a drink, that would be fine. But she was with him first, you know it's just simple respect for other people.

According to Brooke, if dancers violate any of these rules, the consequences may cost them money, their job, or even their safety. These rules are both taught by and enforced by the former and more experienced dancers at the club.

Dancer's etiquette begins with one important and basic rule: dancers have to respect other dancers and their money. A dancer can join a conversation between a customer and another dancer only if they are invited to do so by the first dancer engaged in conversation. Dancers can "make a move" on the customer only if the other dancer has moved on to someone else.

In order to ensure a more productive and friendly environment among the exotic dancers, dancers need to give everyone a chance to make money, especially if there are few customers. Brooke explains:

One thing that we would do for each other is help each other make money. If one of your friends is not making a lot of money and you've got this customer that is just spending, spending, spending. "Would you like to

buy my friend a drink?” Introduce them. “Would you like to buy a dance from the both of us, twenty dollars a piece?”

It is good Dancer’s etiquette to bring customers up to the stage from the walls of the room and encourage them to tip the dancer on the stage if she is not making that much money.

An imperative rule is that dancers must listen to and give respect to the dancers who have been employed at the club the longest. In our interviews, Brooke discloses how difficult it is for beginner dancers. New dancers have to earn the esteem of the other dancers over time in order to take advantage of the benefits of dancer’s etiquette. Although former dancers may not have been the primary attraction for the customers, they served as leaders to the newer dancers and are the first to enforce the spoken and unspoken rules.

Rules that guide dancers by “what not to do” are important as well. Do not strike up a conversation with a customer who already has his attention on another girl. This is called “cut throat” like you are cutting the throat of the other dancer by taking away her chance to make money. Other forms of “cut throat” are taking a girl’s customer if she has to leave to go on stage, or taking the attention of a customer who is sitting at the stage while another girl is dancing. Brooke also explains the rules that take place in the dressing room:

Dancers should not touch or even move another girl's things in the dressing room. In the dressing room, you definitely did not want to touch any of the girls things. I mean to the point even if you move something out of your chair and the girl wasn't in there, you looked at another girl and said "I'm going to move her stuff" and then moved it. Because everyone was so paranoid about clothes and money and make-up coming up missing because it would.

Dancers obviously should not steal from any of the other dancers and should not falsely accuse other dancers of stealing. It is also bad if the dancers have an attitude that suggests that they think they are better than the other dancers which ultimately decreases the amount of respect the dancer will receive. Dancers do not ask each other personal information unless it is offered. The most important rule of all is as Brooke states: "Whatever you do, do not break any of these rules!"

Rules of Dancer's etiquette are very important and there could be serious penalties if they are broken. Several girls have gotten into physical altercations over breaking a Dancer's etiquette rule. Brooke tells how one dancer had shown disrespect for an older dancer by accusing her of stealing:

You don't want to mess with Baby Rose. Well one girl accused her of stealing money out of her bag, and it didn't go over too well, and she held her cool and then uh as the night progressed and we closed and we were

all getting into our cabs or whatever to go home...um the girl started running her mouth again. And she was counting her money and said “I know you took money from me because I had this much and now I have this much.” Of course she had been drinking all night and she probably spent a lot of it, and then she [Baby Rose] just had all she could take and she just stomped her in the parking lot. We never saw that other dancer again after that.

Most conflicts that arise at Rendezvous’ happen when a dancer is accused of breaking a rule. These rules enforce social order and a hierarchic system among dancers, where dancers who have more experience have greater authority and power.

I found the relationships between dancers to be a significant attribute of the cultural world of exotic dance. One night, I observed the interactions between a young, petite dancer and an older dancer while on the main floor. The younger dancer was slim and blonde and a very popular attraction for the evening, based on the customers’ reactions to her. She also appeared nervous. She followed the older dancer around the entire evening, sitting close to her while talking to customers, hugging her on occasions, and she even remained by the older dancer’s side when visiting the restroom or bar. The older dancer resembled a mother-type figure to the young dancer since she was supportive and protective. Although the younger dancer was more attractive and achieved

more attention from the customers, she looked at the older dancer with respect and admiration.

Constituting good relationships and earning respect from other dancers is important from the beginning. Sociologists Bradley-Engen and Ulmer found that cooperation and support among dancers help to assimilate new dancers into the club culture which provides an overall positive image of the club (2009). Most beginner dancers do not remain in the business of exotic dancing for very long for various reasons. Brooke explains: “Sometimes it’s families, sometimes its drugs, sometimes the girls just can’t *handle it*. Different things.” The dancers who have remained at the club longest have well-established relationships with other dancers and have described to me feelings of comfort, trust, and safety. Brooke states:

We looked out each for other. We all wanted to go home with money and all had the same goal, and we helped each other. And if you didn’t you were scorn...if you didn’t get on board. We were a team.

The culture of exotic dancing is also a very competitive environment because dancers have to compete with one another for the attention of the customers. Engen and Ulmer conclude that this competitive atmosphere is caused from the “stress of meeting quotas and selling dances as the primary method of making money” (Engen and Ulmer, 2009, 43). It is more difficult for new dancers to assimilate into the culture without the

acceptance and support of the other dancers because they are viewed as a threat to their established social order.

I observed two new dancers being trained on a slow weeknight. One of the older dancers was required to show them different dance maneuvers while the regular dancers continued their performance of the stage. One dancer became particularly annoyed with the new girls and told customers, “They are never going to make it. First of all, they are too fat. Second of all, they can’t dance!” The dancer revealed to me later that she was also upset that the girls were distracting the customers and keeping her from being able to make money.

“Cycling,” or the constant coming and going of dancers, is very common in this culture. It is necessary for a dancer to develop solid relationships with one another in order to be successful in this type of competitive work. New dancers can gain the respect of the older dancers as long as they establish respect and follow the rules of Dancer’s etiquette.

## CHAPTER 5

### Perception of Self and Narrative Resistance

Sociologists and feminist theorists have been studying the roles of exotic dancing within the social norms of American dominant culture for many years. Constance Bernard et al. (2003) imply that it is important to understand the culture of exotic dancing in order to “better understand, within a larger sociocultural context, gender, sex roles, and perceived appropriate behavior” (p. 2). Exotic dancing has been stigmatized as a “deviant” subculture by researchers because it is a type of sex work (Thompson and Harred, 1992). However, this historic judgment that exotic dancing is “deviant” may reflect and at the same time reinforce the negative stigmas that surround this art form and the culture of those who perform it.

Women who are exotic dancers are consistently defined by negative stereotypes. Brooke, exotic dancer at Big Daddy’s in Bowling Green, explains that, “We are assumed to be whores, or women who have been sexually abused, or just desperate for money.” Many feminist theorists argue that sex work, for which women capitalize on their sexualized bodies, facilitates the objectification and dehumanization of women. Historically women have been objectified to the point at which their value has been

reduced to merely that of their sexualized bodies (Wesely, 2003). Sociologist Jennifer Wesely claims that women in cultures in which they are reduced to sex objects, such as exotic dancing consistently perceive themselves as devalued (2003). Although my research does not dispute that sex work reflects the social problems of gender inequality and exploitation of women in a larger cultural context, my research with Brooke on the individual level reveals that not all exotic dancers view themselves as exploited or devalued while dancing at an exotic dance club. Brooke felt powerful, confident, and desirable while dancing on stage. She enjoyed dancing as well as the positive reactions she received from her adoring audience.

Brooke may not feel devalued while on the stage, but when she leaves the confinements of the exotic dance club, she faces the negative stigmatizations and lack of support from her community, or from people that do not understand her. In order to cope with the negative stigmas that surround the culture of exotic dancing, Ronai and Cross find that exotic dancers develop a defense strategy in storytelling when describing to others the work that they do. This strategy is called “narrative resistance” and is a response to discursive constraints which emerge from and integrate an alternative stock of knowledge within a stigmatized group (1998, p. 105). Dancers do not passively internalize their identities as negative and will resist adverse internalization by comparing themselves to others that are considered more negative or deviant. In other words, dancers will tell themselves or other people that what they do is not bad in comparison to

what someone else does, such as a prostitute. Ronai and Cross also imply that narrative resistance is universal, or not culture-bound, because “everyone in their self-talk sets up other individuals and/or groups as examples by which to compare themselves and triangulate identity” (1998, p. 117).

My research exemplifies the use of narrative resistance as a method of storytelling when describing the stigmatized culture of exotic dancing. In our initial interview, Brooke felt that she had to justify her position as an exotic dancer:

It was my way of making money really fast. Anybody would with what little education I have at my age, I couldn't make much money doing anything else. I had my daughter to support and I had some bills left over from my ex-husband. They were going to repossess my car. I was just in a fix you know.

Brooke's attempt to explain why she became an exotic dancer is an example of narrative resistance described by Ronai and Cross.

Later on in our interviews, Brooke became enthusiastic and excited when describing her experiences with exotic dancing. When she felt comfortable with me and realized that I was not there to judge her but to learn from her, she was able to step away from narrative resistance and describe her true feelings of self and identity as an exotic dancer:

I loved being on that stage. I'm a really sexual person, as you know, and when I was out there dancing, I felt like that was the only place I could be myself. I was free. Free from all of those society rules outside of the club that tell me I'm worthless or a whore for what I do. I love sex and being a sexual person. Here I could be me.

Brooke found exotic dancing liberating. She described to me how she felt in control of her sexuality and the choices that she made were her own.

The issues of power and control within gender relationships have been continually debated. Radical feminists find that exotic dancers are being exploited by male customers who objectify and reduce women to their body parts, whereas sexual radicalists find that exotic dancers are the ones exploiting and manipulating customers through "counterfeit intimacy" (Sijuwade, 1995). My research demonstrates how the comprehension of power very much depends on the individual's perception of self and identity. Based on Brooke's perception of power, she felt that she was the one exploiting the customers by pretending to be interested in them in order to take their money.

Social scientists have found that many female exotic dancers have conflicting identities. That is, their perceived self, the role that they play as an exotic dancer, does not reflect that of their ideal self, who they really are (Bernard et al., 2003). Outside of the club environment, women are reluctant to include their work as exotic dancers as part of their identity because of the negative images associated with this role. Jennifer Wesely

explains, “It is different for many women who work as exotic dancers to avoid internalizing stigmatized and stereotyped labels ascribed to them” (2003, p. 486). Some women do not feel authentic, or that they are displaying their true personalities, when performing their role as exotic dancers, however, as Erving Goffman discusses in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, every representation a person gives is authentic. A person’s everyday performances emerge in any given setting to reflect the needs of that person. His findings indicate that everyone has different but true aspects of self that they display to different audiences (1959).

Brooke describes how she loves being an exotic dancer because she is able to freely express her sexual self which is otherwise inhibited outside of the culture of exotic dancing. She loves the attention and positive feedback from her audience like any other “entertainer.” She is also aware that she is a performer to an audience in which she expresses only a portion of her identity. When Brooke leaves the stage she becomes a very different person for a very different audience. She states:

The mask came off. The mask came off. We were cussing, we were on our periods, we were constipated, you know...we were just women. We didn’t have to be sexy. We didn’t have to suck our gut in [laughing]. We didn’t care behind the stage. There were so many nights that I would plop down after a set, kicked my shoes off, put my shit on top of the table, and ate

some Taco Bell, while nobody was looking, because you didn't want to eat in front of the customers because that's not sexy. We were just women.

Brooke demonstrates the complex levels of identity and role-play she experiences as a dancer. She is balancing her love for sexual expression with her identity as a typical female in society as well as the social pressures outside of the club atmosphere.

Jennifer Wesely argued that complexity of identity problems eventually lead to self destruction for women (Wesely, 2003). Although identity conflict may lead to negative internalization, I found that my informant's conflict with self had more to do with an overall lack of support and understanding outside of the club culture. Brooke described her experiences as an exotic dancer as positive because she was able to be expressive in a world where sexuality was acceptable and expected and she had established strong connections and relationships among other dancers.

## CHAPTER 6

### Conclusion

Exotic dancers are performers whose job is to create an atmosphere of sexuality and desire for paying customers. The physical layout and appearances of an exotic dance club establishes the setting of the sexual atmosphere. The appearances and costumes of the dancers aid in the performance of sexuality and display the different personalities portrayed by dancers. Dancers perform erotic dance moves, both on stage and privately, in order to obtain tips from customers. The more intense the dancer makes the sexual experience, the more money she expects to receive.

Based on my findings, successful female exotic dancers in Bowling Green, Kentucky have established strong relationships with one another and adhere to a set of rules, commonly known as “Dancer’s etiquette,” which are established and enforced by dancers. Exotic dancers form this culture reward in the protection and financial benefits when these rules of Dancers etiquette are followed, and risk their employment and their safety when they are not.

My research also indicates that exploitation and coercion are not universal experiences in exotic dancing. Because every dancer has an individual and unique

worldview and perception of self regarding their performance, it is important to understand the culture of exotic dancing on the individual level. Exotic dancers' experiences vary depending on the positive nature of the experiences as well as the support structure they establish within the club culture.

This research contributes to the knowledge and understanding of the culture of exotic dancing at the micro, or individual level; however, further research is necessary in order to better understand how individuals' perspectives of the culture of exotic dancing reflect and factor into the greater, dominant culture in American society. It would also be beneficial to examine the culture and performances of male exotic dancers, which was not represented in exotic dance clubs in Bowling Green, Kentucky. A comparison of male and female experiences in exotic dancing would bestow further knowledge of gender inequality and perception of self regarding the role of an exotic dancer.

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