

EXOTIC DANCERS: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SOCIETAL REACTION, SUBCULTURAL TIES, AND CONVENTIONAL SUPPORT*

by

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ABSTRACT

We explore the world of female and male exotic dancers. Utilizing Hirschi's Bonding theory, we look at gender differences in societal reaction, subcultural ties, and conventional support among dancers in a large metropolitan area. We surveyed 56 respondents from 18 exotic dancing establishments. Female dancers are less likely than male dancers to receive community support for dancing as a way to earn a living. Female dancers are also less likely than male dancers to recommend this work to a friend. The majority of female respondents dance for a living. Few of our male respondents relied on dancing as their primary source of income. While strong bonds are established within the subculture of exotic dancing, dancers also maintain bonds within mainstream society. In other words, a majority of the dancers had strong conventional ties (Hirschi's attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief) as measured by education, religion, and supportive family, friends, and significant others.

ON EXOTIC DANCERS

Little research has been done on the topic of exotic dancing. Popular research on exotic dancing is interesting and informative; however, most of it lacks empirical data. Research to date focuses on how one becomes an exotic dancer and the adaptations one must endure within this profession (Calhoun, Fisher, and Cannon, 1998; Calhoun, Cannon, and Fisher, 1998; Cannon, Calhoun, and Fisher, 1998; Lewis, 1998; McCaghy and Skipper, 1969; Carey, Peterson, and Sharpe, 1974; Forsyth, 1992; Forsyth and Deshotels, 1997); the relationships and interactions between dancers and customers (Wood, 2000; Boles and Garbin, 1974; Petersen and Dressel, 1982; Enck and Preston, 1988; Ronae and Ellis, 1989); and the use of neutralization techniques by the dancers in order to justify their occupation and accept the stigmatizing components attached to the role of an exotic dancer (Peretti and O'Connor, 1989; Thompson and Harred, 1992; Reid, Epstein and Benson, 1994; Maticka-Tyndale et. al., 2000). Past researchers assume that exotic dancing is a deviant subculture. More recent research examines the roles of

male exotic dancers and how those roles compare and contrast to female exotic dancers (Tewksbury, 1993; Calhoun, Cannon, and Fisher, 1996).

An “exotic dancer” is defined as one who removes all or most of her clothing in a sexually suggestive fashion to a paying audience in a performance environment (Skipper and McCaghy, 1970). This definition purposely excludes males because of the identity and role differences between male and female dancers. In this paper, we will use the terms interchangeably between female and male dancers. Exotic dancers are also known as “strippers,” “stripteasers,” “table dancers,” “go-go dancers,” and “adult entertainers” (Skipper and McCaghy, 1970).

Many reasons have been cited as to why women become exotic dancers; however, the overriding motivation is to make money. The more attractive the dancer, the more business she generates. Therefore, beauty and sexuality act as the currency in this profession (Forsyth and Deshotels, 1997). There are no job prerequisites to become an exotic dancer. Formal training is minimal. Dancers learn a set of rules, such as: never leave money unattended (Enck and Preston, 1988); never leave the club with a customer; and never refuse a table dance (Forsyth and Deshotels, 1997). As long as she can “sell” herself, she is capable of becoming an exotic dancer.

The setting of a dance club is prone to deviant activity, such as prostitution and illegal drug use; therefore, the profession of exotic dancing is generally considered deviant (Boles and Garbin, 1974, 1977). Further, other conservative forms of “deviance,” such as lesbianism, may arise. Boles and Garbin (1974, 1977) argue that exotic dancers become lesbians because of their isolation from effective social relationships and their overall dissatisfaction with males. McCaghy and Skipper (1969) argue that women enhance and broaden their sexual activities through lesbian relationships. They then carry those attributes into their profession. Finally, Peretti and O’Connor (1989) suggest that because female exotic dancers are continually exploited, they may develop hostile and frigid attitudes towards men. Thus, lesbian relationships provide greater sexual fulfillment (see Skipper and McCaghy, 1970).

In their work, Schwartz and Rutter (1998) examine sexual behavior and gender (see also Weitz, 1998; Lindsey, 1997). Given that dancing is a type of sex work, it is important to better understand, within a larger sociocultural context, gender, sex roles, and perceived appropriate behavior. Schwartz and Rutter (1998) argue that both men and women prefer sex and intimacy in a relationship; however, if that is not an option, men are more accepting of casual sex than are women. Women’s sexual desires tend to be more relational compared to men’s (see Ellis and Symons, 1990; Hatfield and Rapson, 1996). Thus, men’s sexual desire “is more likely to allow for sex just for fun” (Schwartz and Rutter, 1998: 45). Thus, the intimacy and fantasy exotic dancers sell plays better to a male than female audience. Symons (1979) argues that, for men, sex is lust and physical gratification. The fantasy of casual sex with no plotlines fires the erotic imagination. Women, on the other hand, tend to fantasize about a partner and the relationship. It is not surprising that most exotic dancers work at clubs that cater to men and the male sexual fantasy. Female and male dancers are playing to vastly different audiences. Female dancers offer fantasy sex; the few clubs that cater to women, with a largely “virgin” clientele, sell fun and entertainment – not the fantasy of sexual pleasure (see Montemurro, 2001).

Ronai and Ellis (1989) suggest that exotic dancing “pays well, but cost(s) dearly.” The reason for this is because of the negative stigma associated with exotic dancing.¹ When revealing one’s occupation, a person may be seeking immediate social acceptance from others. However, when an occupation is considered illegal, immoral, or improper, social acceptance is not granted (Ritzer, 1977). Thompson and Harred’s (1992) work focuses on how dancers manage this stigma. They posit that most dancers “divide the social world” by only revealing part of their identity. In other words, dancers reveal only a part of their identity in order to avoid being characterized by the stigmatizing attributes associated with exotic dancing. Also, dancers employ some of Matza and Sykes’s (1957) “techniques of neutralization” in order to rationalize and justify their profession. These techniques include: denial of injury (the dancer assumes that his or her performance is not hurting another person); condemnation of the condemner (exotic dancing is not illegal; “other people are doing it, so I can do it too”); and appeal to higher loyalties (some dancers use their profession for attention and to gain acceptance from others).

Most research indicates that at some point a dancer has felt exploited by customers, management, or other dancers. The most common complaint from dancers is being portrayed as an object or instrument rather than a person (McCaghy and Skipper, 1969; Boles and Garbin, 1974). While dancers feel this exploitation, they also admit to exploiting their customers (Bell, Sloan, and Stickling, 1998). The dancers are using the customers for money. They sell the fantasy of sex but do not follow through with the act. One dancer commented that the customers are “suckers” for giving the dancers money just for their physical attraction (Bell, Sloan, and Stickling, 1998). Pasko (1999), though, maintains that dancers, in an attempt to acquire a tip or monetary reward, sell more than attractiveness and fantasy; they feign feelings of intimacy and emotional connectedness for their customers.

Because of the social stigma and the continual exploitation, some research has been done to explore a dancer’s perceived self versus her ideal self. Peretti and O’Connor’s (1989) work aims to better understand how an exotic dancer’s perceived and ideal self effect her emotional stability. They posit that the greater the discrepancy between a dancer’s perceived and ideal self, the greater the effect on a dancer’s emotional stability. Reid, Epstein, and Benson (1994) suggest that many dancers are adjusted to their role, but they may not feel that their role as an exotic dancer (perceived self) is an accurate reflection of who they really are (ideal self). In other words, dancers do not consider this occupation to be a defining measure of their ideal self. Dancing does not display one’s core values and ideologies. Rather, dancing is a means to earn money and is not perceived by most dancers as defining their identity.

A more recent area of study centers on male exotic dancers. Research shows that the roles of male exotic dancers differ from those of female dancers (Tewksbury, 1993; Ronai and Cross, 1998; Montemurro, 2001). The male exotic dancer is not as apt as the female dancer to be seen as deviant. Dressel and Petersen (1982) found that men voluntarily pursue the profession of dancing in order to show off their bodies. Further, Ronai and Ellis (1989) argue that male dancers rarely engage in prostitution, while this deviant act is a “component” of female exotic dancing.

Male strippers often feel the same level of exploitation by the customers as female dancers; however, men are more in control of the audience than are women (Tewksbury, 1993).

In other words, male dancers are able to maintain a sense of power even when being portrayed as sex objects, while females seem to lose this sense of power as soon as they come on the stage (Tewksbury, 1993). Thus, male dancers may not experience the same amount of humiliation and degradation as female dancers (Calhoun, Cannon, and Fischer, 1996).

HIRSCHI'S SOCIAL BOND THEORY AND GENDER IN THE WORLD OF THE EXOTIC DANCER

We utilize Hirschi's social bond theory to better understand gender differences and similarities in the world of the exotic dancer. Social bond theory contends that people have rational choice and are free to engage in any kind of behavior; however, one's behavior is a reflection of their degree of morality (Hirschi, 1969). Hirschi assumes that conventional society governs the perspective from which behavior is viewed. The social bond has four dimensions: *attachment*, *involvement*, *commitment*, and *belief*. We believe female exotic dancers will have greater subcultural ties than male exotic dancers because of gender differences in how societal reactions to the profession are experienced. We assume that society's negative reactions toward female exotic dancers, in particular, will result in stronger subcultural ties for female than male dancers. Finally, we explore conventional support systems available to the dancers. We expect female exotic dancers to have less conventional support than male exotic dancers. Again, we expect it will be more difficult for women than men to integrate their professional and personal lives because of differences in perceived societal reaction to dancing.

METHOD

Our survey consisted of demographic variables and questions to capture perceived societal reactions to exotic dancing, subcultural ties to the dancing profession, and conventional support systems available to dancers. *Societal reaction* includes questions asking how respondents believe their family, friends, and significant others view their choice of occupation. We also asked respondents if they would recommend their line of work to a friend or sibling. *Subcultural ties* assess one's formal and informal ties to the subculture of exotic dancing. We asked questions pertaining to both physical barriers and perceived restraints related to the exotic dancing profession. Issues addressed include whether dancing serves as one's primary source of income, feelings of entrapment, the time spent preparing for a performance, and relationships that exist within the subculture of exotic dancing. To measure *conventional support*, we look at one's formal and informal ties to the conventional society. Issues addressed in these survey questions include: marital status, education level, religion, and childhood environment. Again, we are especially interested in how societal reactions, subcultural ties, and conventional support differ between male and female dancers.

Sampling and Data Collection²

Our sampling frame, consisting of 33 clubs, was compiled from all the exotic dancing organizations in a large suburban area of Virginia (Appendix A). We included all clubs advertised via the newspaper and the phone book, including male and female exotic dancing clubs, Go-Go clubs, Strip-o-Grams, male reviews, and private affairs. The managers of each of these organizations was then contacted by phone and asked if we had their permission to enter

their premises for the purpose of speaking with workers about their experiences. Twelve of the clubs refused to voluntarily participate in this research, while 18 willingly agreed. The remaining three organizations granted our request to enter their premises; however, we were unable to get any of the dancers to voluntarily complete a survey. Data for this project were obtained through a survey consisting of 91 questions. Roughly one-fourth of the questions were open-ended, and completion of the survey took an average of 25 minutes.³

Two researchers visited each of the participating clubs.⁴ Upon entering, we again informed the club manager about the purpose of our research and asked how they wished us to proceed with the distribution of surveys to the dancers. We were instructed to sit either in the dressing room or in the lobby. At this point, we had only received permission from the club management to enter the club; however, it was not guaranteed that the dancers would participate in the study. The management left it to the discretion of each individual dancer whether or not he or she completed a questionnaire.⁵ The researchers approached each and every dancer that they observed on the premises. Therefore, the sample for this research is comprised of a convenience selection of willing dancers from those clubs that willfully admitted the researchers. On the average, five dancers were on hand at each club. After completing the survey, some dancers identified others they felt would voluntarily participate in this study. All participation was anonymous and voluntary. Given that our variables are measured at the nominal level, we examine chi-square statistics to see if significant gender differences exist among exotic dancers.

Sample Description

A total of 56 respondents completed the survey, 16 males and 40 females. This gender distribution is in line with the exotic dancing population nationally (see Forsyth, 1992). Most (69 percent) of the respondents are white (63 percent of the males and 72 percent of the females); 22 percent are black (25 percent of the males and 20 percent of the females). The dancers range in age from 19 to 40, with a median age of 24. Dancers are most likely to be single (30 of 56) or divorced (12 of 56). Among the other dancers, nine of the respondents are married, three cohabitate, and two are separated. A majority (58.9%) of the respondents have children. The range of highest level of education is from 11 years to 20 years, with the mean at 13 years. Most (89 percent) of the respondents self reported as heterosexuals. Only four percent self reported as homosexual or bisexual (seven percent). The vast majority (89 percent) were raised in a religious home. Few (five percent) were raised in a home where a family member was an exotic dancer. Almost half (48.2 percent) of the dancers are self-managed, 34 percent are club managed, and 14 percent are private service managed (in other words a service outside the club books their appointments). The majority of women (57 percent) are self-managed or club managed (40 percent). Among men, half are private service managed ($X^2 = 24.47$; $p = .001$).

SOCIETAL REACTION

Investigating societal reactions to exotic dancers, we found that the vast majority of respondents felt that their friends (75 percent) and significant others (65.4 percent) accepted their work.⁶ Respondents' families were less enthusiastic about their job choice. Only 46 percent of them, the dancers perceived, accepted this as a way to earn money; nine percent of family members were intolerant or repulsed by this line of work. Most respondents (86.3 percent)

considered exotic dancing a legitimate line of work; eight percent think dancing is prostitution as well. Most dancers (89 percent) would recommend dancing to a friend. Notably, all the male respondents would recommend dancing to a friend; whereas, 15 percent of female dancers would not ($X^2 = 2.69$; $p = .10$). In fact, one male dancer volunteered that he “would do it [dance] for free!”

We asked respondents how community knowledge about their profession affected them. The majority (73 percent) felt the community responded positively to exotic dancing as a way to earn money. Again, though, a gender difference appeared. All male respondents said they felt community knowledge about their profession positively affected them; whereas, only 62 percent of female dancers felt this positive community support ($X^2 = 8.19$; $p = .001$).

SUBCULTURAL TIES

While the vast majority (88 percent) of dancers have friends who also dance, few (10 percent) have other family members who are exotic dancers. Many dancers (49 percent) were comfortable or very comfortable in revealing their occupation to others. Interestingly, most (52 percent) respondents viewed exotic dancing as a promiscuous activity. Most (63 percent) dancers have never dated a customer. Of those who dated customers, male dancers are more likely to date (75 percent) a customer versus comparable females (21 percent) ($X^2 = 14.05$; $p = .001$).

For dancers generally, this is not their sole source of income. However, more women than men rely on dancing for primary support. The majority (56 percent) of female respondents versus 12 percent of males dance for a living ($X^2 = 8.89$; $p = .003$). Besides the money, dancers noted the thrill, attention, and atmosphere of the dancing environment. Both male and female dancers, though, believe they could change to another type of work. Some dancers, however, have experienced problems. One dancer commented, “I have lost jobs in the past because employers found out [that she danced].”

CONVENTIONAL SUPPORT

The majority of dancers (66 percent) were raised by both their mother and father. If a mother and father were not present, gender differences in care emerged. Almost one-fifth (19 percent) of male dancers were raised by their father only. None of the female dancers were raised in a lone father household ($X^2 = 9.63$; $p = .02$) (only two percent of the sample as a whole was raised by a guardian). The vast majority (91 percent) of respondents feel close to their parent(s).

We asked respondents if they were exposed to pornography or sexual nudity during their childhood. Most (78 percent) were not exposed. If they were exposed, males were more likely to experience this material (44 percent) than comparable female dancers (12 percent) ($X^2 = 6.36$; $p = .01$).

CONCLUSION

As expected, female exotic dancers experience less community support for dancing as a way to earn money than do comparable males. We argue that this relates to what male and female exotic dancers are selling. Female dancers offer a sexual fantasy to their clientele, whereas male dancers sell fun and entertainment. Perhaps this explains why female dancers are much less likely than male dancers to recommend dancing to a friend. While strong bonds are established within the subculture of exotic dancing, dancers do maintain bonds with mainstream society. In other words, a majority of dancers had strong, conventional ties (Hirschi's *attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief*) such as education, religion, and supportive family, friends, and significant others.

We expected that the more one is involved in the subculture, the greater the chance that a dancer will be labeled negatively. We assumed that females would be more involved in the exotic dancing subculture because they experience more negative societal reactions to their work compared to male dancers. We found that female dancers are more likely to rely on dancing as a way to earn a living versus comparable males. Perhaps this is why female dancers do not feel the same positive community support as do males. Whether or not dancing displays the female dancer's real self, this is how she spends much of her time. Given this time investment, she is identified, more so than male dancers, by this occupation. This means the negative connotations associated with exotic dancing are more likely to be applied to her, and she recognizes this. This may well shape the gender difference we find in recommending dancing to others. Female dancers have more reservations about recommending dancing than do male dancers. This supports the work of Egan (2000) who argues that it is difficult for female exotic dancers to keep work and personal "selves" or roles separate and distinct.

Male dancers, on the other hand, enter the occupation for economic as well as other reasons (to show off the body). They feel more positive about dancing and, in fact, perceive community support for this work. This, too, helps shape the gender difference observed in regard to dating customers. Among those who dated customers, we found that male dancers were more apt to engage in this behavior than were female dancers. For males, dancing may well enhance their social opportunities. Female dancers, on the other hand, may be more apt to see dancing as prostitution, which leads them to divide work from pleasure.

ENDNOTES

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1. A stigma is any attribute that sets people apart and disqualifies or discredits them for social acceptance (Goffman, 1963).
2. This project was reviewed and approved by Old Dominion University's human subjects institutional review panel. Respondents who provided information for this study did so voluntarily.

3. Initially, five informal surveys and interviews were voluntarily completed by male and female exotic dancers in order for the researchers to pretest the dancers' willingness to participate in the project and the quality of the questions being asked. As a result, some of the wording of the questions was changed for the purpose of clarity.

4. All the researchers were female. The researchers went into clubs as a pair but conducted the interviews one-on-one.

5. The overwhelming majority of dancers approached were eager to participate in this study. In the few cases when a dancer declined to participate, there was a problem with regard to time commitments. We interviewed dancers at 18 of the 33 clubs in our sampling frame. We believe the 56 dancers interviewed are representative of dancers as a whole. There was no bias in club selection (all clubs in the area were in our sampling frame). We believe that those clubs that did not let us enter do not pose a problem of systematic sampling bias (we make the assumption that clubs who declined to participate are missing at random).

6. Respondents were asked about the perceived reaction of their friends in general.

APPENDIX A
A LIST OF ALL EXOTIC DANCING ORGANIZATIONS IN THE TIDEWATER AREA
OF VIRGINIA

<i>Club Name</i>	<i>Response to Request</i>
1. About Face Enterprises	*
2. A Class Act	*
3. Ambush	**
4. American Male Dancers Company	*
5. Apollo Productions	*
6. Chevy's	***
7. Clancy's	***
8. Dancers Unlimited	***
9. Discreet Enterprises	**
10. Eloquent Beauties	**
11. Flight Deck	***
12. Foxy Ladies	*
13. Fantasies	*
14. Fantasy Lounge	***
15. Garry's	***
16. Gold Club	*
17. Grinders	*
18. Guy's Fantasy	***
19. Heart Break Café	***
20. Intimate Dreams	***
21. JB's Gallery of Girls	***
22. Knickerbocker's	***

23. Lovely Ladies	*
24. Paradise Enterprises	***
25. Picassos	*
26. Pretty Lady's	***
27. RC's Inn	***
28. Sorority Sisters	***
29. Sugar and Spice	***
30. Super Sexy Strippers	***
31. Sweet Dreams	***
32. Shadows	***
33. Tailgators	*

KEY: * Club said "NO" to our request in conducting the survey on their premises
 ** Club admitted the researchers, however, the dancers did not agree to participate
 *** Club admitted the researchers and the dancers complied (i.e., filled out surveys)

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