ARTICLES

The naked truth: A glimpse into the lives and experiences of exotic dancers

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Abstract

The investigation explores the lives and experiences of female exotic dancers with the aim of gaining an empathic understanding of their involvement in the stripping industry. Exotic dance is often falsely associated with illegal forms of sexual labour, as well as with ‘deviance’, thus promoting the view that exotic dancers are pathological. The stereotypes and generalisations of exotic dancers and the stripping industry undermine the exotic dancer’s ability to be seen as an individual with her own story and her own experiences. The participants were selected through convenience sampling and consisted of three, female exotic dancers. The first author interviewed the participants, using a semi-structured interview format and focused on the participants’ experience within the exotic dancing industry, their family history, relationships, and personal lives. Data were analysed using thematic network analysis. The thematic networks are often contradictory and inconsistent with the common stereotypes and ideas held about exotic dancers. The findings further indicated that some exotic dancers experience meaning, healing, gratification, and power within their work and live responsible, productive lives.

Keywords: erotic labour; exotic dancers; nude dancing; stereotypes; strippers; thematic network analysis

Schiff (1999) defined nude dancing as a sexual act that is directly intended to arouse prurient interests, sexual desires, and fantasies. Exotic dancing entails selling an erotic portrayal of one’s body through nude sensual dance, seductive movement,
and other sexually-suggestive behaviours within a commercial enterprise for the purpose of economic gain (Forsyth & Deshotels, 1998; Reid, Epstein, & Benson, 1994).

Exotic dancers are perceived as deviant within the social norms of ‘acceptable’ and respectable femininity (Barton, 2001), and are stereotyped as drug-dependent, ‘easy’ women with limited intellectual abilities or ambition. Many people also perceive exotic dancing as dirty and immoral (Forsyth & Deshotels, 1998), and associate it with illegal forms of sexual labour, as well as with ‘deviance’, thus promoting the view that exotic dancers are pathological (Egan, 2003a). Exotic dancers are seen as ‘deviant’ or ‘bad’ because they challenge social norms by removing their clothing for financial gain (Sweet & Tewksbury, 2000b). The inevitable judgement of others for stepping outside this definition is something all exotic dancers experience at some point. The factors that contribute to this controversial career choice are important in understanding the life choices and context within which the exotic dancer operates.

EXOTIC DANCING AS A CAREER CHOICE

Philaretou (2006) describes several commonalities regarding the lives of female exotic dancers, which include, amongst others, a low socio-economic status and dysfunctional family backgrounds; considerable monetary payoff of the work compared to other low paying jobs, low skill or high wage, high skill full-time jobs; the exciting and interesting nature of the job in comparison to average jobs; the temporary illusionary feelings of female power experienced on the job; the sexual titillation experienced from engaging in sensual erotic dances in front of a cheering male audience, as well as the companionship, social support, and fun times experienced with fellow co-workers. Other common characteristics of female strippers are an athletic background, entertainment background, childhood abuse, and the ‘ugly duckling syndrome’ (Sweet & Tewksbury, 2000b).

Some dancers learn from an early age (through sexual and emotional abuse, dysfunctional family relationships, and neglect) that acting provocatively and emphasising one’s sexuality got them attention, affection, and even a sense of power (Wesely, 2002). The sexualised body consequently becomes the only clear point of identity for a developing sense of self (Wesely, 2002). This experience could result in a young girl growing into a woman who uses her sexuality, through exotic dancing, to feel powerful and satisfy emotional and relational needs.

Power

Power is an important factor that draws women into the exotic dancing industry. Power, within the exotic dancing context is understood to be a contested, negotiated social resource that is constantly being enacted during interpersonal encounters, and
is relational in nature (Wood, 2000). Beauty and sexuality act as the currency in this profession (Bernard et al., 2003; Downs, James, & Cowan, 2006). Using the body to obtain economic rewards results in power—however, according to Spivey (2005), this dimension of power does not measure up in the larger social, political, and economic realm.

Wood (2000) argues that interactions between strippers and their clients provides them with the means to receive attention, and creates the possibility for the enactment of masculine power, as well as erotic entertainment. Eroticism is only part of what draws men into strip clubs (Wood, 2000). According to Wood (2000), eroticism allows for the conveyance of something more, namely; attention. It is the possibility of interaction, in the form of attention, that sets exotic dancing and erotic videos apart (Egan, 2003a; Wood, 2000). In the strip event clients are able to experience desire in being desired, desiring the other and even desiring oneself (Egan, 2003a). Wood (2000) also argues that the attention a customer receives in a strip club is most valuable when it allows for two things, namely; witnessing and the ability of the client to imagine the personality and history of the dancer. This creates the possibility for the enacting of masculine power.

Masculine power is defined as power that differentiates men from women, is ordinarily attributed to men, and when acknowledged in women, it is downplayed, de-emphasised, or construed as unfeminine (Wood, 2000). There are two socially-constructed characteristics, which contribute to the definition of masculine power, namely; being desirable to women and being able to financially take care of a woman (Wood, 2000). Giving money to a woman for something she has provided lends power to that money. By making the actions of another person the object of this financial exchange, the money does not only carry value, but power also (Wood, 2000). The power being affirmed during the striptease interaction is relational. This is created when the attention being purchased is noticed by others and distinguishes the client being from other customers who are not receiving the attention of the dancer (Wood, 2000). The dancer then becomes a symbol that is exchanged with witnesses in return for recognition of the customer’s momentary desirability and financial power (Wood, 2000). Strippers increase the status of men through labour, aimed at creating an impression for the men themselves – the impression of being interesting, sexy and desirable (Wood, 2000). The creation of this illusion is bi-directional as Wood (2000) confirms that men would even resort to giving false information in order to create positive images of themselves for the strippers.

Exotic dancers are powerful within the club context, and this power is based on becoming a sexual ideal—however, this role does not elicit such power in mainstream society (Pasko, 2002). Spivey (2005) suggests that the symbolic meanings connected to behaviours are constantly being negotiated during the transaction in a strip club. The exchange is also guided by larger macro dimensions of power. As men dominate and control societal institutions, women respond with micro dimensional forms of
power, that is, women attempt to direct interpersonal relations (Spivey, 2005, Wesely, 2003b). Egan (2003b), however, acknowledges the dancer’s power in the strip club context and how she uses her position strategically to make money and to find a position within masculine desire and fantasy without simply being reduced to it.

The context of the strip club reinforces the general social construction of women as available sex objects, despite the fact that dancers actually maintain a certain form of power in their interactions (Pasko, 2002). Exotic dancers may uphold power in their individual exchanges with customers; however, their work is perpetuated by inequality and its performance has negative social and psychological consequences (Pasko, 2002, Wood, 2000). Researchers argue that what nude dancers really sell is not the opportunity to gaze at a naked form, but the possibility for men to buy a position of sexual dominance in the eyes of sex workers and other men (Barton, 2001). Barton (2002) maintains that the fact that exotic dancing is such a lucrative occupation, relative to other low skill jobs, traps many women in the industry—this is in essence, a consequence of our capitalist patriarchal system. This argument illustrates the fluid nature of power within the exotic dancing industry, and that power is operative on many levels.

Dancers expressed that they are feeling powerful on stage, and that dancing has healed old wounds from the past. They also stated that their self-esteem was connected to how much money they have made. Dancers also indicated that they are the dominant party in the sexual transaction, and that offering money for sexual services is perceived as an expression of weakness on the part of men (Deshotels & Forsyth, 2006). Mestemacher and Roberti (2004) maintain that by subverting societal convention, the stripper takes on masculine attributes and defies feminine passivity. She is allowed to exercise unchallenged command over her body, freely expressing her sexuality, while simultaneously forbidding the role of the man (Mestemacher & Roberti, 2004).

Dancers’ self-concept and identity

Barton (2002) found that the longer a woman danced, the more fragile her self-perception grew. He theorised that this is because of the negative, often abusive, and hurtful experiences women have working in strip clubs, along with the low social status of dancing and the high consumption of drugs and alcohol. Dancers also experience discrimination in obtaining housing, employment, and medical care and often hide what they are doing from family and friends (Barton, 2002). In addition to the discrimination, dancers are often stereotyped as being drug-addicts, stupid, sleazy hookers or victims of sexual abuse (Barton, 2002).

Sweet and Tewksbury (2000a) supported these findings in their study; namely, that women who had worked in the industry the longest were most adamant that stripping should be avoided. There seems to be a dichotomous experience of working in the stripping industry. Barton (2002) describes how many dancers feel worse about
their bodies, their sexuality, their intelligence and their overall identity in the social world, while some women can experience dancing as liberating and rewarding, at least for a while. Murphy (2003) found in other studies on professional and amateur stripping that many of the dancers expressed joy and pride in their performances on stage. The experience of dancing seems to be very personal and changes with time.

According to Spivey (2005), dancers experience identity conflicts as they attempt to separate the physical body from the larger identity issues. Reid et al. (1994) found that the role identity of exotic dancer is not a significant identity for most of the strippers, and that their role as ‘stripper’ is used to benefit other roles such as ‘mother’ or ‘student’. Many dancers express neither pride nor shame about their work—they regard it simply as an occupation rather than a lifestyle and identity (Sweet & Tewksbury, 2000a). Many strippers attempt to separate their ‘working’ identities from their ‘real’ ones (Murphy, 2003). However, even though exotic dancers would try to separate their occupational roles from their authentic identities, identity confusion was often not limited to the club context, but spreads to all aspects of their identity and personal life (Wesely, 2003b).

Exotic dancing often results in conflict with the definition of self and a questioning of that definition. The exotic dancer is reduced to physical attributes and the complexity of their individual identities is lost (Wesely, 2003a). Although strippers attempt to keep their two identities separate, in reality the idea of a ‘real’ self and a ‘performative’ self may be a rational ideal. If dancers could truly separate their occupation from their authentic selves then, according to Murphy (2003), their self-esteem would not be affected by participating in this stigmatised profession.

The act of stripping may result in dancers compromising their own values and standards, which threatens and undermines their self concept. Strippers start out in the industry with firm personal boundaries about how ‘far’ one should go with a customer. Over time, however, these boundaries are compromised, and this results in identity conflict, numbing and dissociating from the body (Wesely, 2003b). It is not necessarily the perceptions of others which conflicts with a dancer’s self-concept, but rather the act of compromising her ideas of personal boundaries that challenges the way dancers understand themselves (Wesely, 2003b).

Creating an illusion

According to Schiff (1999), nude dancing is a form of erotic fantasy formation. The dancer creates the illusion of relation through a strategy called ‘counterfeit intimacy,’ which is defined as the false affection, attraction or sexual desire that the dancer enacts with the customer (Boles & Garbin cited in Erickson & Tewksbury, 2000). The sexual desires created by the stripper are never meant to be satisfied; the dancer’s power resides in being the cause of desire rather than the object of desire (Uebel, 2004).

The concept of ‘counterfeit intimacy’ as a means of manipulation and feigned relationship is challenged by Forsyth and Deshotels (1997). They claim that this
concept is too limiting as a construct and overlooks the intricacies of the emotional states of both the dancer and customer. The interaction between the dancer and customer is affected by a multitude of factors, including prior involvement with regular customers, offsite interactions as well as the attachment to the customer as potential lover, mate or friend, amongst others. Interactions between the dancer and the customer should not be labelled with a single blanket term. It should be considered that at least some relationships between dancers and their customers are not simply a result of financial need and hard work.

In support of this argument, Uebel (2004) noted a completely different interaction between customer and dancer, where the stripper takes on a therapeutic and supportive role with the client. Some of the dancers in his research expressed a wish to support men and their impaired masculinity through a ‘talking cure’. The interaction between stripper and client becomes redefined from a voyeuristic one to a meaningful interpersonal experience

**Belonging and acceptance**

Female exotic dancers enjoy less community support for dancing as a way of earning money than their male counterparts (Bernard et al., 2003). Although strong bonds are created within the subculture of exotic dancing, dancers do maintain bonds with mainstream society and have strong, conventional ties such as education, religion, and supportive family, friends and significant others (Bernard et al., 2003). To work in an industry that is regarded as deviant, such as exotic dancing requires a highly sexualized presentation of self, and this isolates exotic dancers from the activities, sexuality and social relations of other women (Pasko, 2002).

Many dancers find a sense of belonging and acceptance in interactions with their colleagues. Dancers form a certain camaraderie backstage, in which they share grievances and gossip and gain a sense of self-worth (Spivey, 2005). Within this backstage environment, dancers create a social site for group solidarity by reframing from dominant discourses and validating their own voices and desires through conversation. Dancers change from object to subject through creating both a narrative and bodily agency by desexualizing the body (Spivey, 2005).

There are multiple aspects to a career as an exotic dancer. Belonging, judgement, power, social norms, gender relations, and sexuality are all important themes within the experience of exotic dancers, which are highly personal, fluid and contextual.

**Research focus**

Exotic dancers or ‘stripers’ are often associated with drugs, drinking, promiscuity, and prostitution, and are considered ‘deviant’ because their career choice is not within the parameters of socially-defined norms. Exotic dancers are often stigmatised, stereotyped, and morally judged. Stereotypes are discriminatory generalisations
that lose sight of the individual and silence alternative ‘truths’. This study aims to investigate the ‘truth’ behind the image of the exotic dancer through understanding her experience and giving her the opportunity to tell her story. In providing a space to tell her story, the first author hoped to gain some insight into the life of an exotic dancer and acquire some understanding of her reality.

**Research design**

The study was conducted from an interpretive perspective. The interpretive approach aims to harness and extend the power of ordinary language and expression, and to provide a better understanding of the social world we live in (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). The challenge of interpretive research is to understand the meaning of the text rather than to measure, generalize or predict outcomes from the data as is the case in the large, random sample of quantitative research (Walker, 1996).

According to Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999), it is important in interpretive research to stay close to the data and interpret it from a position of empathic understanding. The meaning of human creations, words, actions and experiences, can only be ascertained in relation to the contexts in which they occur; including both personal and societal contexts (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999).

A thorough description of the characteristics, processes, transactions, and contexts that constitute the phenomenon as well as the researcher’s role in constructing this description provides a rich and deep subjective account of the data. The phenomena studied should be understood within context and elicit new and different perspectives of behaviours or events (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). The context for this study included the world of the exotic dancer her personal life, the participant’s history, as well as the participants’ relationships with others, including her family, colleagues, and partner. Genograms were therefore, obtained from the participants in order to understand their personal context.

It is important to recognise that although the data were analysed according to verified qualitative methods, the subjective interpretation of the first author cannot be eliminated. Her own perspectives, opinion, and experiences may have influenced the understanding, interpretation, and communication of the data and results.

**Participants**

Participants were selected by convenience sampling and consisted of three female exotic dancers. A small sample is appropriate for the interpretive approach because the research findings are not intended to be generalised. Convenience sampling was used as it was difficult to gain access to participants. The owners, managers, and bouncers of strip clubs (gatekeepers) are often adverse to people wanting interviews with dancers. The limitation of this, however, is that the sample becomes ‘self-selected’. The dancers who agreed to participate might have particular personality
traits and experiences that might have led them to participate. This may result in findings that are similar in some ways and may limit the ‘richness’ of the data collected.

**Data collection**

The data were collected through personal, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The interviews were approximately an hour long and took place where it was convenient for the participant. Follow-up interviews and telephonic conversations also took place.

The interview format consisted of questions relating to the participant’s personal experience as an exotic dancer. Interview questions included:

- How did you become an exotic dancer?
- What are the difficulties and challenges you experience as an exotic dancer?
- How does exotic dancing make you feel?
- Who are you behind the scenes?
- How do you experience power as an exotic dancer?
- What are your relationships like with other dancers?
- What do you think about the stereotypes of exotic dancers?
- How does exotic dancing affect your personal life?
- How would you describe your experience as an exotic dancer?

**Procedure**

The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and were transcribed. The first author visited strip clubs in order to gain a better understanding of the context, atmosphere and working environment of exotic dancers. She visited three strip-clubs and spent approximately 17 hours interviewing female exotic dancers, observing the context, and conversing with managers as well as male and female exotic dancers not included in the formal data collection.

**Method of analysis**

Interpretive research methods attempt to describe and interpret a person’s feelings and experiences in human terms rather than through quantification and measurement. Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999) suggest a basic starting point for analysing data from an interpretive perspective, but concede that interpretive analysis rarely proceeds in such an orderly manner. Thematic network analysis was used to organise the themes through multiple levels of abstraction. The following steps were followed:
1. Familiarisation and immersion
   The first author worked with the text (transcribed interview) and immersed herself in the text in order to gain insight and understanding. This required reading and re-reading transcriptions, conceptualising, and incorporating experience and context in generating ideas and thinking.

2. Thematising
   Themes that underlie the research information were inferred. This required her to form links between the data and integrate common and contradictory information.

3. Coding
   Similar instances were grouped under common headings or themes. The first author created a framework from which to work with the themes and experiment with structure and integration.
   
   The themes were organised into thematic networks such that Basic Themes, Organising Themes, and Global Themes form a grid (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Thematic networks systematise the themes elicited from the data into lowest-order premises evident in the text (Basic Themes). The Basic Themes were then grouped together to summarise more abstract principles (Organising Themes). The Global Themes represented the highest level of abstraction and encapsulate the principle metaphors in the text as a whole (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

4. Elaboration
   The first author studied the themes more in-depth to gain a fresh view and to explore deeper and alternative meaning. Dialoguing occurs between the first author, the context, and the participant’s context; between the first author, her supervisor, colleagues; between the first author and the account itself, her own values, assumptions, interpretations, and understandings.

5. Interpretation and checking
   This refers to the final account that relates to the research question or phenomenon studied. The first author also reflected on her role in the whole process and included her personal experience within the research context.

**Ethical considerations**

During the investigation, three ethical principles according to Durrheim and Wassenaar (1999) were considered—these are autonomy, non-maleficence, and beneficence. The principle of autonomy required that the participants were aware that their participation was voluntary, was for the purpose of the research, that they have the freedom to withdraw at any time, and that they have the right to anonymity.
in any publication that may arise. These requirements were communicated to the exotic dancers verbally and through an informed consent form, which was signed and dated by both the first author and each participant. The anonymity of the dancers was protected through pseudonyms.

Non-maleficence meant that no harm should come to the research participants or any other person or group of persons (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). No harm was expected to come to the participants during the research. However, the first author was aware and vigilant, throughout the research process, of any physical, emotional, or psychological harm that may have come to participants.

The principle of beneficence required that the first author designed a study that would be of benefit to the research participants, or to other researchers and society at large (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). The research aimed to give a voice to members of society who are often judged and stereotyped. The narratives of the experiences and lives of exotic dancers had provided a new perspective and a better understanding of women who are employed in this line of work within the sex industry.

FINDINGS

The three exotic dancers who participated in the study are referred to as Anastasia, Natalie, and Poison. The thematic network analysis for each dancer will be presented in a table format (See tables 1, 2, and 3 below).

The participants displayed commonalities in their relationships, demographics and family histories. The three dancers are aged between thirty-five and thirty-eight, all of them have been divorced, and all of them have children. All three dancers have a child living outside the nuclear family home, but for different reasons.

All three participants perceived themselves as responsible mothers, who provide for their children, and protect them from the industry in which they work. Murphy (2003) describes how strippers may struggle to integrate and satisfy the conflicting messages and demands they receive from the multiple contexts in which they live and work. Within the strip club, ‘bad girl’ practices are required and legitimised; while the dancer is simultaneously required to maintain a ‘good girl’ performance in other areas of her life (Murphy, 2003). The three participants contradicted Murphy’s findings as they demonstrated a mature and responsible way of creating appropriate boundaries between their work and their personal lives. This may be because the three women are older and more experienced than other exotic dancers and are therefore, better at adapting, transforming, and integrating their different roles.
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**Table 1: Thematic network for Anastasia**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic themes</th>
<th>Organising themes</th>
<th>Global themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Discovery insight  
• Learning  
• Role flexibility  
• Confirmation of self | Differentiation/autonomy | Transformation |
| • Abuse  
• Ambiguity  
• Diffuse family Relationships and relational inversion | Crisis/history |  |
| • Exotic dancing as self-expression/Enjoyment  
• Helping/instructing  
• Income/contributing to the family | Gratification | Conservation |
| • Defining relationships  
• Creating the context for the exotic experience  
• Retribution/revenge |  |  |

**Table 2: Thematic network for Natalie**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic themes</th>
<th>Organising themes</th>
<th>Global themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Belonging in childhood  
• Belonging through exotic dancing  
• Belonging and non-belonging with men and women  
• Acceptance by society | Belonging | Participation |
| • Energy and self-confidence  
• Energy and performance  
• Creative energy | Energy exchange |  |
| • Personal growth  
• Self-esteem and body image  
• Helping/instructing  
• Courage and overcoming fear  
• Empathy | Healing and growth | Individuation |
| • Power, intuition and self-protection  
• Creating the context for the erotic experience  
• Power in personal relationships  
• Exploitation at work | Power |  |
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Table 3: Thematic network for Poison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic themes</th>
<th>Organising themes</th>
<th>Global themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Learning</td>
<td>Identity formation</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Discovery/insight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Expanded thinking/Challenging stereotypes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Morality and values</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dancer self vs. authentic self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Divorce and foster care</td>
<td>Crisis/history</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sexualized parent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Exotic dancing as enjoyment</td>
<td>Gratification</td>
<td>Conservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relationships with other dancers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Income/contributing to the family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self created reality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Creating the context for the erotic experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal power and resilience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion and integration

The findings are discussed on the organising and global level of the thematic networks across all three dancers. The limited space of the article does not allow for the discussion of the basic themes. The organising and global themes are summarised in Table 4, and provide an overall view of their experiences as exotic dancers.

Table 4: Summary of organising and global themes across the three participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic themes</th>
<th>Global themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Differentiation/autonomy</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Crisis/history</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identity formation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Gratification</td>
<td>Conservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Power (Anastasia and Poison)</td>
<td>Individuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Healing and growth</td>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Power (Natalie)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Belonging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Energy exchange</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Transformation

The global theme *transformation* is composed of three organising themes, namely; differentiation/autonomy, crisis/history, and identity formation. Transformation, therefore, describes the process of change, development, and growth.

The dancers’ lives, histories, and family experiences were similar in many ways. The dancers had all experienced difficulties, crises, and hardships in their past. All three participants had experienced instability, unpredictability, and insecurity in their childhoods and all had been isolated, hurt or abused by their family members. All three had been betrayed or abused by their husbands or partners.

The participants described personal transformation, growth, and differentiation as a result of their difficult experiences and working in the stripping industry. After working through past trauma with a psychologist three years ago, Anastasia’s strength is evident:

‘I’m actually glad I went through all of that shit, the bad, the good, because that made me a much, much better person. If all that bad stuff didn’t happen to me before, in the past, I wouldn’t be the person that I am today’.

Although Barton (2002) maintains that the longer a woman danced, the more fragile her self-perception grew. Anastasia demonstrated growth, integration, and personal development whilst being a dancer.

Poison has also gained wisdom and strength through integrating her experience and others benefit from this personal power too,

... they think because people went through a hard time in life is much worse off in life than other people. It’s not true, because we are much, much stronger people than other people. I’m not ashamed to say it, but I had a very hard life. Yes, but I don’t like to brag about it either because I don’t want people to feel sorry for me, because it happened, it made me a stronger person. And at the end of the day I can teach my children what’s right and wrong and let them choose their own things in life, make them their own people in life at the end of the day ...

The participants were also able to define who they were and formed an identity in an industry that requires role flexibility and adaptation to ever-changing contexts. Their experiences have contributed to who they are, and have formed an integral part of their personal identities. According to Wesely (2003a), exotic dancing is a job which often results in conflict with the definition of self and a questioning of that definition. The exotic dancer is reduced to physical attributes and the complexity of their individual identities is lost (Wesely, 2003a). The participants, however, demonstrated strong self-concepts and personalities that were used effectively in their work and personal lives. Factors that were important in identity formation included personal integrity, morals, values, personal boundaries, and defining an ‘authentic self’ and a ‘dancer self.’
Working in the exotic dancing industry allowed the dancers to expand their thinking and create a sense of autonomy, personal power, and independence. The three participants all view their hardships, pain, and losses as learning experiences and believed that all these challenges have made them stronger, wiser, and better human beings. Their personal experiences of transformation have also enabled them to transform family patterns, their own lives, and their future.

Conservation

Conservation represents the opposite process of transformation. Conservation describes the process of creating and maintaining stability, consistency, and the status quo. The global theme of conservation is composed of two organising themes—gratification and power. The three participants viewed their exotic dancing experience as rewarding, enjoyable, and meaningful. They described processes of learning, growing, personal power, and helping others in their careers. The knowledge that Poison gained working as a stripper has impacted on many areas of her life:

And you know in this industry you get to know yourself better, you get to know men better, you get to know how to actually work your relationship better’ and ‘Talking to people and actually getting to know people, getting to know yourself better, its unbelievable.

The idea that the lives and experiences of exotic dancers can be gratifying and rewarding seems contradictory to the stereotypes held about strippers and the exotic dancing industry. Participants also reported feeling powerful as exotic dancers and that they define the relationship they have with their clients. Natalie described her own sense of power and control over her male audience, ‘I mean the house could be brought down, I mean that’s such a power trip as a woman. To be the only woman and you can do what you want’. Poison commented on how assertiveness, knowledge and experience are other forms of power which the dancer uses to her advantage:

. . . a lot of women are very innocent and very stupid still; they don’t really know what they’re doing, so at the end of the day, the men will take the power. But somebody like me, I will have the power over the men, cause I don’t keep my mouth shut and I am straight to the point and I love to have the power . . .

Current literature acknowledges that exotic dancers uphold power in their individual exchanges with customers—however, it states that their work is perpetuated by inequality and performed with negative social and psychological consequences (Pasko, 2002; Wood, 2000). The three participants, however, have created better living conditions, stability, and economic independence due to their high income. Their economic empowerment has enabled them to leave unhealthy relationships and provide for their children. Poison found pleasure and meaning through dancing because she is financially stable and can provide and take care of her children,
... I’m quite happy with what I do, I make a lot of money, I provide for my kids. I’m happy’, Anastasia commented, ‘But I like dancing, I like music, I like meeting people. Um, I like to sit and think what makes a guy’s mind tick. I like to climb into a guy’s mind, you know, why guys come to places like this’. Anastasia found her job stimulating and challenging, which contributed to her job satisfaction.

Participants have also demonstrated psychological growth and insight through their experiences as exotic dancers. The sense of belonging, self-confidence, and genuine connection with others were further benefits described by the participants. Anastasia illustrated how her interactions with her clients are more than just financial opportunity, ‘That’s why the girls don’t understand, I’m older, they’re young, but why do I have so many customers and they don’t have so many customers. It’s because the customers know with me it’s not always about the money, it’s about helping them with their wives and their problems’. This undermines the concept of ‘counterfeit intimacy’, which is the primary way that exotic dancers define their relationships with customers. Anastasia expressed a genuine interest in her customers and forms real relationships with them– this supports Uebel’s (2004) findings that the dancer can take on a supportive and therapeutic role with the client. Wood’s (2000) concept of ‘masculine power’ should also be reviewed, as men also seem to seek genuine companionship within the strip club context.

Current literature confirms that some exotic dancers experience gratification and reward in their work. According to Sweet and Tewksbury (2000a), exotic dancers enjoy meeting new and different people, the lifestyle, feeling streetwise, smarter and stronger due to their experiences as an exotic dancer, boosted self-esteem and self-confidence, feeling a sense of happiness, being open-minded and feeling comfortable with themselves. Exotic dancing does not necessarily lead to negative social and psychological consequences, and may enable some women to empower themselves financially and become the equals of men.

The gratification and power that these exotic dancers experience are conservational because these processes allow them to create stability, predictability, and control. As in most careers, success and satisfaction as an exotic dancer seems to be dependent on good decisions, integrity, personal responsibility, and hard work. Exotic dancing does not necessarily lead to negative social and psychological consequences; it depends on the woman herself rather than her choice of career. By enjoying her work, the exotic dancer is gratified and will continue to work in the industry. Simultaneously, the stripper’s identity and meaning are also conserved as she continues to engage in rewarding erotic labour. The power that the women experience as exotic dancers is also conservational because it allows them to be in control of their own lives and create their own experience.
Individuation

The global theme of individuation is composed of healing, growth, and power. Barton (2002) found that the longer a woman danced, the more fragile her self-perception grew and describes how many dancers feel worse about their bodies, their sexuality, their intelligence and their overall identity in the social world. However, all three participants described how they experienced transformation, self-growth, forgiveness, and personal strength as exotic dancers. They demonstrated an integrated sense of self, self-confidence, and self-esteem. This might be because these dancers created boundaries between their professional and personal lives and have ensured that they did not contravene their own morals and values while at work.

Poison mentioned that many exotic dancers do not maintain personal and professional boundaries, and this undermines their self-respect; ‘... if you allow yourself to do extras then eventually you’re going to feel more disrespect’ and ‘... you know it’s ok in the club but put some clothes on when you go out. Have some respect for yourself...’. Poison explained how self-respect is created through the dancer’s own actions, boundaries, as well as responding appropriately to different contexts, ‘... it all depends on who you are what you do’. According to Wesely (2003b), it is not necessarily the perceptions of others which conflicts with the dancer’s self-concept, but rather the act of compromising her ideas of personal boundaries that challenges the way dancers understand themselves.

It is odd to think that exotic dancing could provide the context in which these women were able to find healing and growth–exotic dancing or stripping is not the most conventional form of art and self-expression, but it is still a form of dance. Nudity, erotica, and sensual movements are seen in many contemporary art forms and it is conceivable that exotic dancing could be a creative and expressive experience. Dance and self-expression are widely known to be healing and therapeutic, and perhaps exotic dancing provides the same benefits.

Participants also expressed a sense of personal power as exotic dancers. At some point, all three of them had to rely on their own strength, abilities, and determination to get through their struggles. It could be argued that authentic power is a matter of personal character and internal strength rather than the ability to do, act or accomplish something. Anastasia experienced childhood sexual abuse, domestic abuse as well as multiple rapes. She demonstrated how forgiveness takes tremendous courage and strength; and this form of power needs to be acknowledged:

Mentally if you want to handle what happened to you, you must face it, face the people, you can’t do it with every single one now, but accept it, forgive them and carry on with your life.... If you don’t forgive the person what he did to you, it will still be there.

Forgiveness, faith, and love are forms of personal power that need to be acknowledged. An individual’s inner resources, integrity, values, character, and spirituality are very
powerful and are often not recognised because of their unscientific, immeasurable nature. The power of the human spirit as well as healing and growth contributed to the dancers’ processes of individuation.

**Participation**

The global theme of participation is composed of belonging and energy exchange, and it describes the process of having a place with others. A person can only be defined in reference to others as nothing has a real identity in isolation. It is relationships that create meaning, identity, and belonging. The participants described how they found belonging through exotic dancing; with other dancers, with their audience, with their clients, with other women, and even with society as a whole. Natalie explained that in hindsight, she entered the career of exotic dancing because she wanted to belong—‘I suppose if I look back, I just wanted to belong’. Exotic dancing creates a sense of belonging as it brings together a group of women who accept each other and need each other.

Current literature confirms that strippers find belonging with one another. Spivey (2005) found that dancers form a certain camaraderie backstage, in which they share grievances and gossip and gain a sense of self-worth. According to Sweet and Tewksbury (2000a), exotic dancers enjoy the bonds and friendships with other dancers and the praise and ‘love’ they receive from the audience. Through personal growth and transformation, the dancers formed more rewarding relationships with others and created a more meaningful life.

Natalie had opened a pole dancing studio to teach other women how to pole dance, which created belonging in another way. Natalie sees a meaning in her life path and believes she was guided by a spiritual force to help women in this way:

...the universe pushed me in this direction to be doing this because I know ... that was what I was going to do, was help women.... I had to go through and do the dancing and experience all of that so I could pass that knowledge on. So I’m doing my life’s work, that I know without a doubt, I cannot do anything else, this is what I’m meant to do.

Natalie describes how pole-dancing helps other women:

... it’s to make them realize that it’s got nothing to do with how you look. Stop worrying about that. If you wanna move, I’ve seen the most sexiest girls dance, they were overweight... They move so gracefully because they accept that they are a woman... when your body is acting this stuff out everyday, it starts changing your thoughts after a while, and it happens so subtly, you don’t realize it, until one day you realise, ah, I’m not insecure when I do this.

Natalie has come full circle. She started out her journey into exotic dancing as a way of finding belonging—however, she is now creating belonging for others, ‘... that’s exactly what it does, because these girls start belonging....’
Energy exchange describes the process in which emotional and physical energy is exchanged with others during interpersonal interactions. All performers, including exotic dancers, expend energy in order to entertain their clients and create the context for others’ experience. Often, their energy expenditure is returned through their interaction with their clients or the audience, but sometimes the dancer has to expend more than is returned. One of the dancers interviewed by Barton (2002) confirmed this concept of energy exchange by describing how exotic dancing depletes her sexual energy, and that she gives away more of her sexuality than clients are financially compensating for. Although all three participants expressed that they enjoy their jobs, they also described their work as difficult, challenging, and draining at times. Poison commented on how exotic dancing is not as easy as it seems:

You have to learn how to talk to people, everybody thinks its easy money, its not. It’s a damn hard job. It takes a lot of courage, it takes a lot of self control and it takes a lot of, how can I put this, it makes you or it breaks you. A lot of’ women don’t even make it a month, they can’t take the pressure because they either get too sick or they either feel too bad about themselves afterwards because the men put them down, they don’t have the personality to stand up towards those people so…

Performing as an exotic dancer requires that you invest a lot of emotional and physical energy into your performance. There is a continuous energy exchange between the dancer and her audience as Natalie illustrated – ‘there’s a whole energy exchange there that happens’ and ‘you stop worrying about how you look and you start worrying more about how you can give them more of yourself’. When the performance is not well received, or the dancer is not confirmed by the audience, the energy exchange is limited and seems, according to Natalie, to be a one way flow of energy as the dancer tries to elicit a positive response and ensure the men enjoy the show ‘... you’ve gotta go in there and lift them up. And they just take your energy, they just bleed you dry’.

This illustrates how exotic dancers are often powerless in their interactions with the audience; and although they may invest a lot into their performance, they cannot control how it is received. Sometimes, Natalie explained, the audience is enthusiastic and positive and that feeds her own energy and results in a positive outlook–‘and there’s other days it might be a big party and everyone is just clapping and going mad and you can walk out of there and do another twenty shows because they give you so much’.

The process of energy exchange as well as a sense of belonging creates the experience of participation. Participation is finding a place with others, finding a place in the world and engaging in interpersonal transactions that are meaningful and rewarding.
CONCLUSION

The stories and experiences shared by the participants have illustrated how exotic dancing can provide the context for healing, growth, power, gratification, and transformation. Stereotypes and generalisations are not useful ways of understanding the individual. All three participants demonstrated that there is often no basis in the conceptualisation of exotic dancing being deviant, pathological, or damaging. Exotic dancer’s are not necessarily drug addicts, promiscuous or irresponsible, and can lead productive, mature, and healthy lives. It may have demonstrated that sexual expression, erotica, pole-dancing, and nudity can be healing and therapeutic as the dancers’ expressed how they have found meaning and healing in their work.

Sexual self-expression, nudity, and sensual dance have not traditionally been considered as therapeutic. It may benefit psychology profession to be aware of the possible benefits of pole-dancing, erotica and nudity considering society’s current difficulties with sexual disorders, body-image issues and low self-esteem.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In Western society, the majority of men and women feel inferior to the constant bombardment of images of the ‘perfect’ human form. Women learn that they are valued for their sexual bodies and spend time, energy, and money in an attempt to create this unattainable ideal (Wesely, 2002). Further research could investigate the possible benefits of healthy self-expression within sexual or erotic contexts on body image, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Pole-dancing, for example, has recently become a very popular hobby and this interest could reflect a need to express one’s sensuality, develop belonging with other women or become more confident in one’s sexuality. Many women also want to express themselves sexually without feeling judged, degraded or dirty and may also allude to women’s increased freedom and exploration of sexual contexts.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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