



MINDY S. BRADLEY-ENGEN

NAKED LIVES

INSIDE THE WORLDS OF EXOTIC DANCE

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MINDY S. BRADLEY-ENGEN



excelsior editions

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1

INTRODUCTION

This book draws on field observations, interviews, and my own personal experiences to expose the different social worlds of exotic dance. Rather than making judgments about stripping as a profession, saying whether or not stripping is bad for women, or merely identifying the impact of dancing on women, I investigate variation in the structural arrangement of exotic dance establishments. Throughout the following chapters, I reveal how the organization of work creates different perceptions of work. Strip clubs vary, and types of clubs contextualize the experience of exotic dancing, creating more or less circumstances in which stripping can be good, bad, or indifferent for the women involved. Portraying exotic dance establishments as distinct types of social worlds, I detail the various settings and subcultures within which exotic dancing takes place and specify how each of these contexts gives rise to its own conditions of negative affect, limitation, and obligation, as well as satisfaction and empowerment.

Working in the sex industry carries a large social stigma, of which those involved are very aware.¹ Even with the increased visibility of the sex industry in popular culture, the sex worker is generally not regarded as “normal” by others. A considerable number of federal, state, and local laws ban and/or regulate various types of sex work. The type of sex work allowed varies greatly across location, and erotic establishments are continually subject to extensive regulation. Public opinion polls report that roughly half of Americans feel that stripping should be illegal at bars or clubs (Gallup 1996). Indeed, many wonder how anyone could do this kind of work and question the character of erotic entertainers.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its provocative “deviant” nature, there is limited sociological research on sex work relative to other areas of inquiry. Women in the sex industry are aware of the misunderstandings and judgments associated with their work. Subsequently, sex workers may be suspicious of researchers; they may be resistant to inquiries from “outsiders.” Furthermore, whereas the strip club may be sociologically fascinating for researchers, it is an occupational environment for strippers. Our research field is their job. For these women, scholarly research, theoretical debates, and sociological speculation may very well seem self-righteous, condescending, and completely irrelevant to the pragmatic issues of their daily lives. Dancers are there to work; they may really not want to be bothered by some academic “tourists.”

Furthermore, regardless of numerous books and high-quality articles (mostly in specialty journals), it seems sex work has yet to gain its rightful legitimacy in social science. Those who pursue this line of research may find getting grants or publishing in mainstream academic journals is an even tougher task compared to many of their non-sex work colleagues (regardless of the quality of their work). I recently experienced having an editor of a well-ranked mainstream journal describe my work as “T and A.” He overruled the recommendations for publication made by all of the reviewers and rejected the manuscript solely on its “inappropriate” topic. I suspect this type of rejection, and my subsequent frustration and disheartenment, is not unique. Undoubtedly, some sociologists, possibly out of fear of the stigma associated with being labeled a “sex researcher,” and the corresponding career obstacles, have avoided or eventually abandoned research interests in this area. This is unfortunate; as a consequence, the structure of the sex industry, the organization of sex work, and the social influences on sex workers’ lives remain underexplored relative to other social phenomena.

Recognizing the deficiency in sociological discourse in her recent presidential address to the Midwest Sociological Society, Joane Nagel urged “sociologists to consider sexuality and the role of sexual systems in their own research” (2000, 1). Similarly, recent scholars have stressed the need for more research specifically on sex work (Weitzer 2000a, 2000b; Lerum 1998). Such research is essential for understanding the opportunities and obstacles sex workers encounter, including the organizational and

political influences within the sex industry and making informed decisions regarding relevant legal and social policies.

As a sociologist and former sex worker, I regularly speak to classes and groups about my experiences and research. Many people are intrigued by the sex industry and want to understand how it works. But they also share larger concerns: Is stripping bad for women? Should you feel guilty about going to a strip club? Beyond the sheer fascination with the sex industry, most want to know if they are “hurting” women by patronizing these establishments—if the women who work there have been abused and are being exploited. Are these clubs dens of sin and broken dreams, filled with downtrodden women, selling their bodies out of desperation? Or are these women strong and sexually liberated, making viable career choices? By visiting these establishments, are you degrading women, or are you appreciating the female body? Such questions I regularly encounter, in various forms.

This book is a step toward answering these and similar questions. In short, the quick answers to all of these questions are, sometimes yes, sometimes no, and sometimes yes and no. Yes, sometimes, the strip club is degrading and exploitive. But at times it is not. Exotic dancing is complex and can include a number of diverse and even contradictory experiences. So, yes, on some occasions you should feel bad about going to a strip club. But sometimes you should not. You should go and hand your money over enthusiastically and enjoy yourself, unashamed. And then there are situations that are more ambiguous. Often, you hand over your money, and both you and the strippers have some mixed feelings about the whole situation. *But by all means you should hand over your money.* Now that you have the brief and no doubt unsatisfying answers, in the rest of the book I will try to explain these answers as thoroughly as possible.

Many who study sex work care deeply about this topic and are greatly concerned with the lives of sexually stigmatized groups. As previously noted, to be a sex work researcher, one has to be passionate about the subject matter. As academic rebels, we should respect our tenacity and celebrate our passion, yet be careful to avoid trading empiricism for sententiousness. Polemical advocacy compromises academic rigor. I am concerned when encountering works that initiate research based on the position that sex work is degrading. The authors conduct research that, not

surprisingly, reinforces the view that this work is injurious and speculates as to the various negative consequences of erotic labor.

Interestingly, through my work as a dancer, I quickly learned that dancers themselves are aware of the larger “victims-versus-agents” controversy and use it to their advantage. Strippers, by trade, tell customers what they want to hear. And, based on my own experiences as well as those of fellow dancers, I know that the victim-versus-agency debate is alive and well in the strip club. Dancers draw on this debate regularly when interacting with customers to make money. Indeed, they are aware that people are questioning whether dancers are women down on their luck. They make the most of this guilt and stereotype to increase tips. More than once have I observed dancers playing the “sympathy card” with their regulars, describing how they are in desperate need of cash for their children or rent. This is a valuable money-making tactic, often used independent of actual need. Making men feel sorry for them, dancers often play on a client’s desire to “save” them. It is a common practice to play on the victim status to manipulate clients into giving dancers extra money or paying bills. I have done it myself and can verify that it is extremely profitable.

Whereas some customers are best manipulated by the sympathy card, others find this to be a turnoff. Guilt can be effective for some clients but not for others. If they feel guilty about being at a club, they may not stay very long. If they see the strip club as full of downtrodden, desperate women, they may feel shameful and leave. This can substantially impact dancers’ tips. In order to avoid “scaring them off,” dancers may try to portray themselves as happy and content with their jobs; the upbeat attitude of the sex worker makes people feel more comfortable about patronizing these establishments. Thus, they try to portray themselves as “party girls” who are just young and having fun. This “agent” status relieves customers’ sense of guilt about patronizing strip clubs. When patrons are having fun, they spend money. I learned this early on and quickly became a master of the artificial good time.

Social science has yet to adequately take these skills into account when interviewing dancers or other sexual performers. In these occupations, telling people what they want to hear becomes common practice, if not a job requirement. If a dancer believes a customer needs to feel better about her employment, she will portray herself as empowered. In contrast, if she has a customer who feels sorry for her, she will use that to her advantage as well. In

other words, dancers play out the gendered understandings of the occupation in interactions. This is a talent; dancers are accustomed to reading subtle cues to decide how to portray themselves, especially with regard to the victims-versus-agency issue. Indeed, it is not surprising that sociological works written by former sex workers often find dancers espousing the liberties of dancing, whereas works by advocates or critics of sex work find sex work to be degrading.

For example, in her recent work, *Stripped*, Barton (2006) comments on current research's lack of insight from former sex workers and questions whether her study should include participant observation. She concludes that she could not bring herself to be a participant, and thus does not overcome the same shortcoming she laments. Specifically, she describes her decision not to dance: "I soon discovered that simply watching the show swiftly drained most of my emotional reserves. In the beginning, I felt depressed and exhausted after only forty-five minutes in a club. After a few months of visiting the bars and getting to know some of the dancers, I learned to tolerate the noise, the smoke, and the undiluted testosterone for about one to two hours before I had the irresistible impulse to leave at once. Clearly dancing was not an option for me . . . I quickly grasped that the role of a *sympathetic outsider* would more easily facilitate researching this book" (2006, 4–5, emphasis added).

The sympathetic outsider? Upon reading this, I knew immediately that the subsequent findings would reinforce the researcher's perception of dancers as exploited and characterizations of male customers as "undiluted testosterone." Taking this position, Barton then proceeds to conclude that dancing is emotionally draining and oppressive. However, it is reasonable to suspect that, despite attempts to conceal her negative feelings, dancers may have perceived her distaste for stripping and her sympathy for the women who do it. Her work thus demonstrates the difficulties of interviewing exotic dancers and how these interviews can be easily led by the interviewer ideology.

My own experience with dancers renders her conclusions seriously questionable. In her book, Barton talks openly about her refusal to dance, her revulsion at the idea of dancing, and her pity for dancers. I was thus "underwhelmed" by the conclusion that dancing has long-term negative consequences for women and by her characterization that it is only satisfying to the extent to which