Flying as self-expression: Autonomy and pole dancing in strip clubs

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Abstract

Political battles over strip clubs' existence are informed by research, but existing literature neglects a central component of strippers' work. This study analyzes strippers' pole work and heeds dancers' calls to incorporate their voices. It provides an overview of why strippers engage in this skilled and often voluntary physical labor (drawing from social learning theory), and portrays the functions of poling utilizing concepts from the sociology of work. The study is based on ethnographic data, primarily in-depth interviews with strippers. It develops ideas in the sociology of work by demonstrating how in a non-standard work environment like strip clubs, relative autonomy allowed workers to diversify the end game or work goals despite controlling and self-alienating aspects of the job. Strippers were able to engage in what we refer to as skill optioning (making the most of their skills to leverage gains). The result was that some strippers developed the physical skill of poling and performed for more than monetary rewards; it helped give their work more meaning and enjoyment. Poling built physical capital, minimized emotional labor, developed social networks, and provided psychological benefits.

Keywords

stripper; pole dance; social learning theory; meaningful work

It's way harder than . . . any type of physical activity. . . . more than you could ever imagine. . . . Especially if you have to do it to feed your family . . . People [think] "I just want to be a pole dancer – just take off my clothes." . . . [But] it is literally a profession. It is a sport. . . . I would feel empowered if more women get it. . . . Maybe pole studios should be more normalized. . . . maybe all these old-ass women that be living in these houses could go do some pole work and maybe feel better about themselves . . . but, at the same time . . . I know that I'm strong enough for it, but I don't think that they are. . . . I always loved the stage the best because I felt I was performing . . . like an Olympic show? I felt like I was doing something that if someone saw me – even my dad – he'd be like "Wow." . . . I wanted to prove how strong I was. I wanted to prove [to myself, not customers] that I can lift my whole body by my one arm [laughs]. (Undine, a biracial stripper from the US who had danced for nine years)

Introduction

Stripping is political, with groups from lawmakers to feminists debating what social functions strip clubs serve and if they should exist; for instance, those against their proliferation posit that clubs are objectifying and harmful to women. While much research on workplace dynamics in strip clubs exists, an in-depth analysis of pole dancing is absent. This absence is problematic because an important aspect of strippers' work is being ignored that would contribute to debates about strippers' quality of life and workplace dynamics. This neglect is more glaring due to the way research analyzing the benefits of pole dancing for fitness/leisure/sport exists (e.g. Kim et al. 2022), in effect marginalizing its origins and privileging poling outside of sex work. As Undine's quote illustrates, poling is a physical skill and source of strength. Poling impacted strippers' physical and emotional labor, as well as their feelings and perceptions about the job,

such as the meaning and pride they found in their work. It affected why some strippers started pole dancing, why others continued to stay in this line of work, and questions of if/how their work was objectifying or self-alienating.

This article contributes to the literature by 1) providing an analysis of why strippers engaged in pole work (which is often voluntary skilled labor) and the functions it served in strip clubs; and 2) demonstrating how Laaser and Karlsson's (2022) sociological framework of meaningful work and Akers' (2010) social learning theory, can be applied to a non-standard work environment. The current study is primarily based on 48 interviews with strippers, which are part of a larger ethnographic study. Despite being a non-traditional field that is often labeled low-skilled, oppressive, and self-alienating—relative autonomy in strip clubs helped workers create more meaning in their work because it allowed them to diversify the end goals of their labor, and engage in what we call skill optioning. They had some freedom over developing, choosing, and applying their skills to leverage the particular gains they wanted. Their associations with other strippers who had this skill increased, and since the goals of their labor were diversified, pole dancing was reinforced through rewards beyond financial ones. Pole dancing served various functions, including allowing workers to reduce their emotional labor, foster relationships with clients and other dancers, and build physical strength and ability; it provided a challenging, engaging task which psychologists have argued gives life meaning (Csikszentmihalyi 2008).

Literature

Stripping

Literature on stripping is extensive and grounded in different traditions, including feminist research and symbolic interactionism. Research has examined topics such as: strippers'

pathways into working in clubs, questions regarding strippers' work life such as whether they are objectified or empowered, management of stigma, legal issues, as well as typologies of patrons (e.g. Brewster 2003; Egan and Frank 2005; Forsyth and Deshotels 1997; Frank 2005; Hanna 1998; Roach 2007; Ronai and Ellis 1989; Skipper and McCaghy 1970; Sweet and Tewksbury 2000). Earlier research has been critiqued as biased and moralistic (Ronai and Ellis 1989). A common approach researchers took in the past was to treat stripping as a "deviant" and "negative," "pathologizing" the decisions and characteristics of those entering the profession (Sanders and Hardy 2014:63). Feminist theorizing on stripping has at times been divisive and moralistic. According to the sociologist Barton (2002:586):

> feminist research and theories on sex work have been monopolized by two equally extreme and reductionist positions . . . [roughly] 1) radical feminists who find any kind of sex work, and often even sexuality itself, inherently and irrevocably exploitative within patriarchy . . . and 2) sex radical feminists who theorize sex work as subversive of patriarchy's definition of conventional femininity.

In the political realm, according to Clare, a stripper and sex work activist, "the history of striptease is a chronology of women silently watching from the sidelines while bosses, legislators and radical feminists make decisions about their welfare without their input" (2022:86).

In response, sex workers and advocates argue that sex work should be examined through the lens of work and the voices of sex workers must be highlighted and respected (Bruckert 2002; Clare 2022; Deshotels and Forsyth 2022; Mgbako 2016). Researchers and sex workers argue that theoretical and legal framings should be shifted from whether sex work is desirable or should be criminalized—as this can lead to unsafe workspaces and endanger lives—to discussions of labor rights (Blanchette, Da Silva, and Camargo 2021; Clare 2022). Despite the

wealth of research on stripping and its relevance to political debates, as well as how pole dancing is symbolic of the strip club, this aspect of strippers' work—the physical labor of poling—has largely been neglected. Therefore, this study focuses on poling in strip clubs from the perspective of strippers themselves.

Club context

To understand how pole dancing fits into the work lives of strippers, it is important to understand the larger work environment of "cis-heterosexual" clubs. The experiences of workers in *non-standard*, *middle-range*, or *grey* work environments that lie between traditional rationalized workspaces and self-employment are of especial interest to contemporary researchers due to their growth (Jenkins, Delbridge, and Roberts 2010; Pichault and McKeown 2019). Like other non-standard work environments, strip clubs have contradictory aspects, impacting whether work therein is exploitative, alienating, objectifying, and/or meaningful.

Workers in current strip clubs often enter into contracts with rules and norms that resemble the experiences of more traditional employees, but workers may also be characterized under categories such as self-employed or independent contractor. These contradictions have resulted in lawsuits where dancers argued they carried the burdens of traditional workers/employees without receiving the benefits. For instance, strippers in the US filed a lawsuit against Spearmint Rhino Companies, contending that they were misclassified as independent contractors (Jane Doe 1 and Jane Doe 2 v Spearmint Rhino 2009). They argued that clubs required dancers to report their hours and work a minimum number of hours. Strippers did not receive wages, but paid stage fees and were required to give a percentage of tips to clubs. Clubs dictated the length of shifts, the times workers performed, and more. As another example, in the UK, a stripper took Chandler Bars Group (Nowak v. Chandler Bars 2020; also see

Barbagallo and Cruz 2021) to the Employment Tribunal for similar reasons, arguing that rather than being self-employed she was a type of worker ("limb B worker"). Documents alleged that rules were so strict that dancers were prohibited from chewing gum. In California, controversial AB5 legislation led more strippers to be classified as employees, receive wages, and gain rights like the ability to bargain collectively; however, strippers argued clubs found ways to make workers pay for these changes such as hiring fewer workers and raising fees (for instance, see Chávez 2020). Plus, some dancers prefer to be treated as independent contractors.

Strip clubs often entail a complex work experience that is rationalized for customers and controlling of dancers, as well as provides strippers with some autonomy to deliver a more personalized experience. To some degree, clubs provide a McDonaldized, i.e. controlled, calculated, predictable, and efficient product based on conventional standards of beauty (Deshotels and Forsyth 2022; Frank 2005). The norms and rules of strip clubs can dominate dancers and place the needs of clubs over workers, e.g., house fees where dancers sometimes lose money going to work. Clubs can treat employees as low-skilled and easily replaceable (Clare 2022; Deshotels and Forsyth 2022; Sanders and Hardy 2014). Rules such as how often strippers dance on stage can limit their autonomy; rules can constrict their behaviors beyond the club, such as those about not fraternizing with customers outside of work. Stripping requires a high degree of emotional labor or counterfeit intimacy, which dancers can experience as self-alienation (Deshotels and Forsyth 2022).

On the flip side, relative to other jobs or aspects of their social lives, strippers may have more control over their sexuality and leveraging it for personal benefit at work (Deshotels and Forsyth 2022; Stone 2018). Dancers can have some flexibility over movement in club space, such as actions on the floor to attract customers when not on stage. Emotional labor can make

strippers feel as if they have power over customers. This is similar to other service workers who rely on tips and experience a sense of power through being calculative in deciding how to treat customers to manage labor and maximize profits (Brewster and Wills 2013). Customers are not all looking for the same experience and strippers negotiate these dynamics in interaction.

Work, meaning, and poling

Scholarly research on poling generally focuses on poling for leisure/fitness/sport (for instance see Holland 2010). Pole dancing for leisure/fitness/sport comes from strip clubs, but some contemporary strippers on social media argue this growth comes at the cost of erasing sex workers, particularly women of color. Electric Girl's (2021) Instagram post says that since "pole dance is a cultural appropriation of the working class who are strippers," participation in these activities should include their acknowledgement. Research that ignores the poling of strippers reinforces their erasure. It stands to question how strippers learn to pole dance, pressures and motivations for doing so, and outcomes at work. Pole dance for leisure has qualities of "flow" experiences, which psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (2008) argues gives meaning to life and work. The physical challenge and achievement people gain through pole dancing can lead to personal growth, resilience, and subjective well-being (Kim et al. 2022). It is unknown if pole dancing in strip clubs has these qualities.

Research on stripping as well as the autobiographies of strippers mention pole work as part of the job, but descriptions are often relatively brief and do not thoroughly explore it within the work context. Descriptions depict how athletic poling can be, although pole work is not required of all strippers (Egan 2006). In her study of stripping in Canada and the US, Roach (2007:location 655) refers to pole work as a "specialty." She, as well as Sanders and Hardy (2014) who look at pole in the UK, explain that many strippers use the pole as a prop to do basic

things like walk and spin, but only some undergo the labor of developing a skillful repertoire. In her multi-year study of stripping in the US, Barton describes some strippers engaged in acrobatic movements on the pole but claims that most performers "lacked the ability, or the desire, to match the beat of the music" and more than meander around the pole (2017:xiii). She acknowledges that some strippers find dancing overall pleasurable and sometimes even spiritual. Roach (2007:location 678) claims that "the dancers who specialize in pole work do so, it seems, for the sheer pleasure of it, for the professional competence of mastering a skill, and for the thrill of flying." Researchers Deshotels and Forsyth (2022) feel that strippers in their study (located in the US) are not that differentiated (to non-dancer observers) and exhibit similar looks, movements, and clothing; however, they find that dancers themselves identify their poling as unique in style. Otalvaro's (2018) dissertation about the strip club scene in San Francisco has a section about pole dancing, including some of the ways that strippers learn how to pole dance (classes, observation, other strippers, self-taught) and how it can be a source of strength, confidence, and enjoyment.

The history of poling itself is murky. The inclusion of poles in strip clubs appears in some locations to be part of a larger shift. According to Ross and Greenwell's (2005:138) article on striptease in Vancouver, Canada, the mid-1970s was a period "heralding radical transitions," being:

> the shift in the stripping business to full nudity; the replacement of live musical accompaniment with tapes and disc jockeys; the relocation of the industry from independent, free-standing nightclubs to an ever-proliferating number of hotel "peeler pubs"; the re-staging of performances to include pole, table, and lap dancing, spreading

> or “split beavers,” and showers on stage; and the cross-national movement of migrant dancers . . . in the 1980s and 1990s.

Ross (2009) depicts two Canadian clubs as being among the first to include equipment for poling on stages in the 1970s. Ross argues that poles originated on fairgrounds, and later incorporated into clubs in Canada and the US to “spice up their menu of goods and services” (2009:176). One previous incarnation of poles used as part of striptease shows was within carnival attractions. As described in *Girl Show*, this could involve a woman dancing naked against a pole that was often the center tent pole (Stencell 1999). A business model for strip clubs in North America and the UK has come to involve workers often paying to work (“house fee”) in addition to potentially other commissions, fines, and tips; a different model was described by strippers as previously more common involving workers being paid to perform on stage or an hourly wage plus tips (Brooks n.d.; Clare 2022; Mount 2018; Ross 2009; Sanders and Hardy 2014; Worley 2020). Sanders and Hardy (2014) consider this as part of deskilling the job, where contemporary strippers are not necessarily expected to be good dancers, much less pole dancers; however, clubs continue to profit despite economic fluctuations.

Many people cite former stripper Fawnia Mondey as the first pole instructor, who began teaching strippers in the 1990s. However, according to *Burlesque West*, in 1984 “[Tom] Longstaff [booking agent] and Jack Cooney, co-owner of the Marr Hotel, opened Image Studio on Alexander Street to train exotic dancers in pole work, floor work, and choreography” (Ross 2009:220). It included male and female dancers. Pole dancing classes for women as a leisure/fitness activity exploded in popularity in the 2000s in various cities worldwide. Professional sport organizations and pole-related industries (e.g. pole manufacturing) developed. Pole dancing was unlinked at times from stripping (Fennell 2020). For instance, competition

organizers who wanted to host pole competitions had trouble getting venues and explained that they were not having participants strip. Poling now takes many forms, including non-erotized forms, and is performed in contexts from college pole teams to pole comedy competitions.

Frameworks

Fundamentally, we are guided by Schneider et al.'s (2022) pragmatic approach to understanding work that emphasizes the importance of examining the use of objects as resources, in this case poles. To break down how and why strippers take on pole work, we utilize social learning theory (Akers 2010). The theory has often been used to understand why people engage in deviant and/or criminal behaviors, but it is a social psychological approach that draws from operant conditioning and symbolic interactionism to understand the production of conforming as well as deviant behaviors. How people act is shaped by their associations with others and what definitions those people espouse (*differential association*); what behaviors they observe (*imitation*); what techniques they can learn and rationalizations of behaviors as good or bad (*definitions*); and what rewards and punishments they anticipate or have experienced (*differential reinforcement*). In the context of work, it has been used to analyze topics such as employees' cyberloafing and the influence of peer-trainers (Floridia 2017; Wu et al. 2022).

To demonstrate how the work context shapes the social learning that takes place, the functions of pole work, and how pole work becomes meaningful, we utilize concepts from the work literature. Sociologists have been concerned with autonomy, diversity of tasks, and learning opportunities, and how these impact well-being (Monteith and Giesbert 2017). Psychologists have studied meaningful work and relationships therein, and how these impact jab satisfaction, social recognition, and well-being. Such factors do not matter in isolation or apply universally but become relevant in particular contexts.

Laaser and Karlsson's (2022) sociological model specifies three pillars of meaningful work: autonomy, dignity, and recognition. We focus on the concept of autonomy in strip clubs. To obviate the structure-agency dichotomy, each pillar has objective and subjective dimensions. The objective dimension of autonomy involves workers' discretion over tasks, such as their ability to decide how to accomplish tasks. Meaningful work is not limited to organizational design and management practices. There are subjective dimensions. From the bottom-up, workers even in oppressive workplaces have created alternative practices, separate from the formal organization, giving them autonomy. We build upon this model to demonstrate how relative autonomy provided by an organization adds value to diversified goals and can lead workers in strip clubs to take on voluntary labor and engage in skill optioning.

Methods

The data are part of a larger ethnographic study. Fennell is a sociologist with a background in studying well-being and began by engaging in participant observation of pole classes and events; she expanded this to observation of events and interviews with people in the pole community, including strippers and pole manufacturers. Hipke has a background in the sociology of the body and criminology. We conducted 81 interviews; 48 interviewees described themselves as stripping at some point or as sex workers.[1] We utilized personal contacts, online networks, and snowball sampling to recruit respondents. The study received IRB approval.[2]

[1] Twenty interviewees were recruited from the same strip club in the southeastern U.S., but the vast majority of those had experience dancing in other clubs. Most interviews took place individually but in a couple instances two dancers were interviewed simultaneously.

[2] The project was approved by the University of Southern Mississippi's IRB #:22-104. As initial interviews were conducted, some strippers did not want to have a record of their participation; therefore, the IRB waived signed documentation of consent. Participants were given a written informed consent form, and they verbally confirmed their willingness to participate when interviewed. At the beginning and end of the interview we discussed what information needed to remain confidential and what (if anything) could be shared using the respondent's real name, online handle, and/or work alias.

We focused primarily on strippers' work in "cis-heterosexual" strip clubs, but contrasted this to alternative venues. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Initial codes were generated through inductive methods and themes from existing literature. More specific categories and subcodes were created using Spradley's (1980) methods of analysis (e.g., domain and taxonomic) which involve examining cultural categories and how they relate to larger themes. Material from online podcasts with strippers was incorporated into the analysis. To seek additional feedback on the intersection of race and gender in strip clubs, we employed Trixie thee Pixie, an educator and stripper, as a consultant for initial analyses. Trixie has been a pole studio owner and philanthropist; she has a master's degree in gender studies. She works in the US, identifies as Black American, and has danced in strip clubs periodically since 2021.

The majority of interviewees resided in the US (39 US, 3 Europe, 3 Canada, 2 Brazil, and 1 Australia), but during their careers dancers described stripping in Asia, Australia, Brazil, Canada, and Europe. We omit names or provide aliases. Podcasts from strippers in other nations were incorporated into the analysis, and we used the names indicated in podcasts. Some interviewees were what the stripping community refers to as "O.G." strippers who have been in the business a long time. For instance, two interviewees began dancing in the 1990s and did so internationally. Other dancers were what the stripping community refers to as "baby strippers," who have stripped for a short period of time. Interviewees generally worked in spaces where they paid a house fee, although a few dancers had worked for a wage. The sample was overwhelming female; four strippers identified as trans, and three identified as men but none of the latter worked at strip clubs with poles. Five interviewees did not identify their race/ethnicity; of those who did, 37% identified as White/Caucasian while the majority identified as another

race/ethnicity or as biracial/multiracial. At the time of the interview: five were 18-19 years old; 23 in their twenties, 17 in their thirties, and three were age 40+.

Findings

Expectations for pole work

According to interviewees, pole dancing was often not a prerequisite for working in strip clubs. In terms of physical design, some clubs did not contain poles while others contained multiple poles (including main stage and private areas). Some clubs contained additional aerial equipment like aerial hoops. Management/club expectations were diverse, which is part of differential reinforcement, involving the punishments/rewards dancers can expect from poling. A number of interviewees described employers hiring them on sight (sans a performance), suggesting they hired largely on looks. According to Twilia, a White stripper and artist in the US who began dancing in 2015, "If you want to learn how to do stuff on the pole, then more power to you. But at the end of the day . . . [working at many clubs] really comes down to your ability to be personable."

In other cases, strippers described feeling encouraged or obligated to perform on the pole. Club management in some locations complimented those good at pole work. Olivia, an African dancer from Canada (dancing in strip clubs since the mid 2000s), argued pole work was an unspoken requirement. "The clubs here, especially management, they're always watching our shows, always. So we're being graded on how we perform on stage. If another girl performs all this high-energy shit . . . then I have to do the same pretty much."

Certain clubs were known for their pole work, or poling was more commonly expected in some geographical locations. Joy (who was White, ran a pole studio and had worked in strip clubs) explained how some clubs had more explicit expectations and sent students to her studio.

> [My studio] is one of the few cities that it is a little bit harder to get a job as a dancer because there's only so many clubs on [our main strip] and they want showmanship and they want girls that can come in and actually really work the pole right on their first day. . . . It's [social media] a huge outlet for pole dancers, so I'm sure people want to see it, or they know what to expect. . . . I think also just because millennials are our main market and they're harder to impress, because they've already been saturated with porn and with nude images.

Sue, an Asian immigrant and former stripper who ran a pole studio said that due to the large number of strip clubs in her city, "people tend to be really creative, so it's not uncommon to see a stripper in tennis shoes and blowing fire." Gary, a stripper in the US who identified as trans and had been dancing a few years, noted there were performance clubs where you did not really do private dances; "you get up on stage and really tear it up and there's thousands of dollars getting tossed on you." (Gary presented as fairly hyper-feminine while working.)

Customers and pole work

Once hired, pole work served as one type of labor in which dancers could engage. How much autonomy strippers had was shaped by a multitude of factors, including government regulations and club services/rules. However, dancers often had choices over how to best balance their time and energy, making clubs different from workplaces with a high degree of division of labor. Choices could involve dancers deciding whether to spend time doing "floor work" or maneuvers on the stage, versus work on the pole. Other choices included whether to learn/engage in pole work versus focus on customer interactions and marketing additional services. Dancers might be expected to perform on stage in a rotation, but sometimes dancers could avoid this by tipping the DJ or paying the club.

Customer expectations also served as a type of differential reinforcement. Interviewees varied on whether they felt pole work was expected and/or appreciated by customers and led to earning money. For example, interviewees in North America who felt that customers expected or desired pole work said that patrons demonstrated this by asking dancers explicitly to perform a trick, complimenting them, or tipping them. A few dancers felt that female customers, relative to men, were more interested in the skill of poling rather than dancers' bodies/movements. Cat, who had been dancing since 2008, said that in Florida she worked where there was a nightclub atmosphere; people hung out with friends, drank, and tipped for pole work. There she had to get skilled in pole work to make money, including performing on stage with a group of skilled polers. "I make all my money on stage. . . . [In terms of job duties] I can do whatever I want. . . .They [management/owners] don't boss us around like that, [if] you're an independent contractor." In some geographical areas, strippers referred to particular clubs as "Black clubs" or "White clubs." Toy (a Black woman who has been a studio owner and who had stripped for less than two years) indicated expectations may vary by race, with Black men more interested in powerful women, and Black dancers known for engaging in multiple pole tricks in succession.

Meanwhile, other strippers claimed that audiences did not expect pole work and/or they could earn more money engaging in different activities—such as floor work where they could be closer to and connect more to the audience, or individual dances. According to Undine: "When I was doing my pole work and stuff, I was like Wow, this is so beautiful. Someone should look at me and be like: Wow, oh my god that someone's doing that. And pay me for it. But it doesn't happen all the time." Sometimes she could do pole work to the best of her ability and only make $5-10, but she continued, "If I get down on my knees and I go up to the people . . . I can make $20."

One caveat was that there was not always a direct correspondence between what customers appreciated and how customers spent their money. Customers might have expected or desired pole dancing but not necessarily tipped for such. For instance, some dancers explained that one difficulty was that tipping in Europe was not as common relative to places like the US. They claimed this was because: tipping is not part of the culture; some nations are conservative and patrons are not as used to this type of entertainment; and small denominations of money in these countries are regularly in the form of a coin. In England, following the strip pub system (Sanders and Hardy 2014), dancers sometimes collected a pound from everyone in the audience in a bucket/glass/jug for stage performances.

Pole work could still indirectly benefit dancers seeking to interest customers in further services because it introduced dancers to audiences. The "hustle" to get money from customers was part of the larger shift in strip clubs to a tip system and more individualized customer attention. According to Serena, a Latina dancer in the US who had been working in clubs for about two years, "Pole dancing definitely draws the crowd to you, and it kind of introduces you. . . . You pique their interests." A few dancers spoke about how their pole work on stage served as a marketing tool, such as showcasing their bodies and abilities.

> If they see a pole trick they're like, "Damn, that's *really* cool; I wish I could do that." They think that we're strong. I guess that makes them want more dances from us because they're like: "she knows how to move her body even in mid-air, of course she can move it on my lap." (Leslie, White Hispanic dancer in the U.S who had been dancing a little over a year)

Poling as skilled physical labor

Poling commonly was voluntary skilled physical labor (Fennell 2020). “Stripping and poling is learning how to hold your own weight in so many more ways than one. . . . It’s nothing but you, your strength, your abs, your biceps . . . It’s what you figured out that you can do for yourself and you being able to show everybody else” (Trixie in 2021 on Yes, A Stripper, 2022 podcast). Any dancer could move around the pole. Some dancers chose to perform elaborate combinations of spins, hangs, splits, and more, utilizing the pole. Although it has been considered unskilled labor (Skipper and McCaghy 1970), strippers who engaged in pole work had to learn and practice.

No interviewees described formal training in pole dancing as institutionalized within clubs. Some clubs reportedly sent dancers to studios; one stripper at a conference discussed how she started a studio and management at a club paid for dancers’ training. However, interviewees described learning through imitation and experimentation. They came to work early, stayed late, and tried new moves on the spot. Some bought home poles.

Although interviewees did not deny that they were competing for the attention of customers, and at times did not want to teach without getting paid, sometimes they went out of their way to help others with pole work. According to Dani, “Honestly, I just kind of got up there [on stage], and I was like ‘Help.’ When I first started, everyone was really helpful.” Other strippers served as examples, teachers, and mentors, linking pole to a more communal form of power. According to Deshotels and Forsyth (2022), feminists who define power as empowerment, conceptualize it as power that enhances others.

Poling came with risks as well as rewards (differential reinforcement), which dancers factored into their decision-making. There were the obvious physical risks of slipping and falling. Honey, a veteran stripper in the US who began in 2003, learned by doing: “I had to bust

my ass a few times." On one occasion Undine did not have enough strength to hold herself up and fell; although she saved herself from falling on her neck, she broke three ribs, continued to perform throughout the night, and later walked to the emergency room for treatment. Gary described an incident where he was wearing ankle boots and did not tuck the laces into the tongue; a tangle ensued and a customer came on stage to help. Although interviewees rarely reported serious injuries, some dancers experienced pain such as muscle pain; bruising was expected where the body touched the pole until the body adjusted. Dani, who had danced for almost two years in the US and who was White, described bruises on various parts of her body, including her legs, stomach, and butt. "I have had bruises on my boobs – swear to God. Like *what*? . . . You should have seen me when I first started. . . . I looked like I was diseased. . . . Yeah, the shit hurts. . . . It's definitely a fucking sport." Kami giggled when a customer noticed that her legs were a little "tough" between the thighs because of a pole move called the superman where the dancer grips the pole between their legs. Upon trying to teach other strippers in the club, Undine found that some prospective students decided it hurt too much. Interviewees did not necessarily take steps to hide bruising. Kami said "just suck it up and be proud" of your work. She joked with customers about the bruises.

Pole tricks required varying degrees of strength and flexibility. One dancer described a move she could perform once a night and was too tired to repeat. Dancers acknowledged and appreciated the physical benefits poling provided them, such as keeping them fit, as well as the positive responses it engendered. Doing pole work required courage. One Hispanic dancer in the United States, Bianca, who had been dancing for less than a year, discussed advice for a prospective stripper: "All of it is very scary when you're on there. . . . You have to have some confidence that you will catch yourself – that you have the strength and the capacity in order to

make sure that you don't hurt yourself." People sometimes dismissed the work that strippers performed as easy and something that they could do themselves, but in her pole studio Toy said it was "very satisfying" to show "vanilla" White women that they were wrong.

The on-the-job learning and lack of standardization sometimes resulted in dancers putting their bodies at additional risk. This was compounded by the way strip clubs were a context where dancers might be expected/encouraged to imbibe alcohol or other substances that affect inhibition and coordination. For instance, physiotherapists recommend that polers perform movements on both sides of the body to reduce muscle imbalances (Neo 2016). Some interviewees reported that they primarily used one side of their body or performed moves in ways that could lead to injury. According to Joy, "I did so much harm to my body from just throwing myself up there. That came back to bite me in the ass. I had terrible back problems by the time I was [in my twenties]. My knees were blown out and my wrists were bad. My shoulders were bad. I did that all in the span of six years or so."

The popularity of pole outside of strip clubs has impacted how some dancers enter strip clubs and their experience of poling. For instance, Mae, who was multiracial and owned a pole studio, said she was originally drawn to the pole dancing in New York clubs. It led her to start dancing in strip clubs around the mid-2000s. At that time, she felt there were no pole role models to look to besides dancers in the clubs. However, now social media contains numerous examples of pole dancing, including tutorials, and there are pole studios where people can learn. Some strippers began by imitating others and experiencing pole dancing outside of clubs. Destiny, a stripper in Canada who was biracial, first learned pole dancing online through Instagram pole challenges, and then bought a pole. Later she went to a pole studio, and eventually was mentored by a retiring stripper. Twilia told me about students who reached out to her or other strippers

saying that they wanted to explore their sexy sides and wondered if working in a strip club would facilitate this. One result of the popularity of pole outside of the strip club has been that more people are involved in studying and discussing the effects of poling on the body and pole safety. A couple dancers described going to pole studios in part to engage in pole more safely. Sienna, an American dancer with European roots, who began stripping in 2010, took what she learned about pole safety back to other strippers. Some dancers online discussed how a stripper taking it upon themselves to tell co-workers they are practicing moves they are not ready for might be taken negatively, though. In contrast, *Selena the Stripper* (2022) argued in an online piece that poling was so damaging to the body it was counterintuitive to practice for fitness.

Dancers also had to be wary of unsafe equipment in strip clubs. Olivia described how a pole came down when she was on it, slicing her hip open. One interviewee in the US was involved with a group who filed complaints with OSHA that included issues with the pole.

More than the bottom line

The relative autonomy that dancers had over pole work helped them diversify the end game, so that for them, working was not just about achieving financial success. Quality of work involves more than income but includes social relationships and psychological well-being (Monteith and Giesbert 2017). Strippers were able to engage skill optioning where they made the most of the skills they had to leverage the gains they wanted.

Since dancers had some autonomy over their dancing, i.e., what pole moves to do and how. Many freestyled on stage. Although strippers utilized some of the same movements, these were put into choreographies where dancers could develop their own styles. Interviewees depicted some dancers as having a slow and sultry style versus a more energetic one, for example. According to an online post by Nia Burks in the US (2019), “One of the things I’ve

always loved so much about stripping and strip clubs in general is the various styles that were present among the dancers working on any given night. The intent was to gain the exact same thing, and it was executed in so many different ways." A number of strippers explained that being successful in the club included leveraging who you were as a unique individual. The result was that pole work could help differentiate strippers from each other, giving them a sense of pride as well as potential variety in customer appeal. Interviewees felt particular clubs and/or areas could develop styles as well, such as dancers in the American south having a unique style.

Considering the overall purpose of their work, certainly economic goals factored into their choices about poling. For example, on one *Yes, a Stripper (2022)* podcast from 2020, Ava Hennessy depicted clubs in the UK where customers paid an entrance fee and felt like they deserved a show, yet the dancers had little incentive to put on much of a performance, especially on the pole, as they received minimal renumeration. On social media, dancers discussed differences in clubs between countries and reiterated how the lack of a tipping culture in some places meant stage shows were not as important as customer networking. Hennessy told some customers who asked to see her on the pole before buying a dance from her that they needed to pay her £20. She described a club in Europe where she was on her feet most of the night, was expected to wear a dress when pole dancing, and received minimal financial benefit from poling on stage; she lost interest in poling, even as a hobby. Lack of return on investment for pole work was particularly salient for dancers in locations with limited tipping. In New Zealand, Vixen Temple argued on a 2021 *Yes, A Stripper* (2022) podcast that people need to be educated more on the strip club system and reminded that it is a service. She said that without much of a tipping culture, dancers in New Zealand sometimes asked for tips and customers found this to be rude. (The ability to make money was affected by available services. Dancers online noted that it could

be hard to make money in some clubs in Spain without providing full sexual services; however, even in countries where being a sex worker was not illegal, some dancers could be paid for their stage performances and not expected to engage in sex.)

Meanwhile, dancers in America discussed how they balanced physical and financial considerations. They talked about waiting to perform more dangerous and/or advanced pole moves when they were more likely to be tipped. Joy's advice to students included, "Don't kill yourself for muggles [people without knowledge of pole]. . . . For the most part, I think the strip club crowd, as long as you're energetic and your tricks are big and flashy, then they're cool with it. It doesn't necessarily have to be hard." Gary said that once he started getting tips, he might do some pole tricks; and if people were making it rain, then he would do a more impressive move than his usual repertoire. "If there's money then yeah, I could probably walk on the ceiling if I wanted to."

When deciding what pole work to engage in within the club, dancers engaged in skill optioning. Strippers considered their personalities, skillset, what they enjoyed doing, as well as emotional labor. Then they used poling to help them when they did not enjoy another part of the job, or where their skillset was weaker. Joy said poling made the job easier for her because she was naturally introverted. Pole work could attract customers to the dancer, reducing the pressure for the stripper to start a conversation. Linda, an Australian native, began pole dancing in her twenties in the 1990s in Japan, and performed in shows and strip tease at various worldwide cities: "I knew I wasn't going to be making a lot of money by hustling because table dancing is sales and I don't have that skill. What I tried to do is to create a show that would draw people's attention to me. . . . [They would perceive me as] artistic and creative. Then that would sell my dances."

As part of skill optioning, pole work could reduce emotional labor and physical abuse. Stripping requires a high level of emotional labor (Egan 2006; Murphy 2003). Gemma Rose (2022) in the UK described how being a successful stripper requires that someone be a salesperson, conversationalist, entertainer, and more. Poling allowed strippers a break from having to directly interact with customers. According to AJ, a White dancer in the US who had been stripping for less than a year:

> You have to be more intimate whenever you're on the floor and then a lot of the times . . . you're like dancing *for* someone. . . . Sometimes they touch you. . . . It's not even like it's a big deal, and it's what I signed up for, but at the same time I don't like it. . . . If I'm on the pole, I don't have to be on the floor - it *is* an escape. No one can touch me when I'm on the pole.

Another dancer at a pole meetup described how after being grabbed all night by men, she liked to go on stage in her own world and dance and love herself; sometimes a customer would even magically give her a few hundred dollars for it. Toy used pole dancing as a physical release and way to process emotions arising outside of the club.

Strip clubs were a space where customers regularly compared strippers to each other and critiqued them. Continuing to have self-esteem in the face of such could be difficult. Poling helped minimize this negative aspect of emotional labor because dancers generally reported being complimented for their pole work, and they enjoyed positive audience responses. "They [the audience] don't know what you're trying to do. . . . There's not a set book of skills or tricks" (Paula, a White dancer in the US who had stripped for less than year). Pole work was also a way for dancers who felt they did not fit stereotypical standards of beauty to attract customer attention. River, a Latina dancer in the US who had stripped for a year and a half, said, "I really

don’t got that much junk in my trunk . . . don’t focus on my no-booty—look at me [on the pole] upside down [laughs].”

The relative autonomy strippers experienced meant they multiplied their end game or goals, so their choices regarding labor and pole work reflected this. They engaged in pole dance even when it was not the most financially lucrative of available tasks. The dancers we interviewed generally enjoyed poling. Some dancers said they would engage in it even after no longer working as a stripper. Interviewees described pole work as providing them with a variety of mental benefits, including allowing them to have fun at their job and giving them confidence (in themselves and their abilities). Pole work was a challenging and engaging form of labor that gave them a sense of control, and where they sometimes expressed the emotions they felt in the moment—criteria that have been delineated as part of flow experiences and which give meaning to people’s lives (Csikszentmihalyi 2008). It helped diversify their tasks, provided new opportunities for learning, and helped build relationships at work—factors identified with quality of work and/or meaningful work (Laaser and Karlsson 2022; Monteith and Gisbert 2017). They used phrasing such as “empowering” and “fun.” Destiny described poling as providing her with a type of “fulfillment” as an “outlet for art.” Linda explained, “I can’t go to work just to bring home money because that’s work. . . . I was discovering myself through pole . . .The more pole that I took on, the more that I created and reinvented myself. . . . [It] empowered me from within in a way that nothing else has: no drugs, no boyfriend, no nothing. It was flying. It was a true expression of my soul.” Mae said what makes the pole special is the “freedom of getting lost . . . that engagement, that excitement. . . . When I perform I kind of feel like I’m giving off these musical notes that are just wrapping people, just drawing them to me. And I feed off of that movement. And that’s what makes it so free, like people are freeing themselves with me.” This

had an added benefit because some interviewees perceived customers as desiring to see dancers enjoy themselves, and that leading to tips. Some dancers argued that it was not the pole tricks that brought them money, but rather smiling and looking happy on stage. At a pole meeting one stripper said, “no one likes sad strippers.”

Although positive reactions from customers could give dancers an added high, strippers in part performed for other dancers (relating to differential association and differential reinforcement). Strippers depicted skilled pole dancers as showstoppers where customers, DJs, and other dancers stopped to observe them perform. Interviewees talked about co-workers they admired or enjoyed watching. Kami said “I feel the pole work is more for us dancers – that achievement. And then when a customer is like ‘Wow, that was really good,’ and then rewards you with the cash, it’s like ‘Yay, cool.’” Dalia, who was White and had been dancing in the US for two and a half years said, “When you first get there, you see all these girls doing stuff, and you kind of want to prove yourself, and I feel like a lot of it has to do with impressing your co-workers rather than showing off for the customers.” She valued what her co-workers said more than male customers because “guys appreciate you just because you are in your underwear.” Toy said that “when the money is slow, we throw money at each other in order to say to each other, ‘Bitch, I see you even though these niggas act like they don’t.’”

Pole work did not eliminate emotional labor. For example, eye contact is a common strategy that strippers utilize (Ronai and Ellis 1989), and some interviewees explained that it was important to connect with audiences such as by making eye contact or balancing time on the pole with coming down to accept a tip. According to Mae, “[Even if it is a spin pole] you have a moment where you will lock eyes with that person while you are doing this trick so now to that

person, they're feeling like 'Wow, she's up there using all her strength. . . . she's still thinking of me.'"[3]

Alternative spaces

Alternative locations for stripping and pole work existed that could give dancers more autonomy and which allowed for greater diversity. Research and political discussions have focused on women performing in "cis-heterosexual clubs." Dancers have not had an equal opportunity of being hired nor were they necessarily treated the same once hired. For example, interviewees noted that some clubs limited hiring Black employees and did not always allow strippers to dance to rap music in order to reduce the amount of Black customers. Alternative spaces were sometimes purposefully designed to improve strippers' autonomy and working conditions. According to Honey, one veteran stripper who started a pop-up strip club in the US, dancers could make $800-900 from stage tips and hustling $20 dances, where in the clubs they were only bringing home $200-300. Clubs responded by illegally firing some of the dancers for participating. Clubs were "afraid that every stripper is going to find out that they can . . . have more control over their experience and the service they give, without feeling the pressure of losing their job or having to pay a fine." Communities in locations from London to Los Angeles have organized strip nights and shows that were LGBTQ-friendly and which incorporated diverse people. For instance, Alejandro's night in Los Angeles is a self-described, trans, queer, Nb and gender expansive strip night. Alex, a stripper who managed one city's gender-expansive night and who used to work in cis-heterosexual clubs before his transition, explained that the vision was a strip club "for everyone, all gender spectrums. . . . We're trying to showcase whoever you are is going to make you money, not necessarily conforming or dolling it up or

[3] Since "flow" experiences involve a lack of self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), pole dancing did not always lead to a complete experience of this kind.

lessening yourself. . . . We're definitely trying to steer away from your stereotypical male chauvinist strip club ideal." During the pandemic, strippers had to find ways to make money outside of physical clubs and created online strip shows, such as Cybertease in the UK, by a sex worker collective. Vera, a White stripper in the US who started dancing in 2017, and was part of a stripper strike, talked positively about online shows, "It's a really empowering thing because we can do whatever we want and it's very liberating and inspiring." Some people have argued that the pandemic period, which included worldwide protests related to respect for Black lives, led to more conversations around allyship with strippers. One positive from the pandemic, according to Nila, a stripper active in public discussions, was "respect for the strip club community. . . . We let you in on our secret that pole dancing is fucking amazing and empowering and it shows you that you can do things that you never thought possible no matter what background you come from, so you're in our land."

Each context must be examined closely for impacts on workers, however. Online shows can come with downsides, such as negative impacts on privacy. For instance, Star, an Arab American woman who stripped for a few years in her 20s, explained that you are at greater risk of people recording you. I spoke to Toy about options for Black dancers in the cities near her. According to her, it was hard for Black dancers to get hired at "White clubs" in the area due to discrimination, and it was also hard for them to get hired at "Black clubs" unless they were light-skinned or had a BBL. Therefore, some dancers performed in after hours clubs, basically unregulated parties where men get together and host a party with a pole and DJ. The audience was more concentrated. It was riskier than working in the brick and mortar club, she said, but dancers had more freedom in how they behaved.

Discussion and conclusions

This article provides insight into strippers' experiences of the complexity and skill of their labor within strip clubs. It adds to the growing literature on meaningful work in non-standard work environments, the extensive literature on stripping which has neglected pole work, as well as research on pole dancing which has hitherto focused on fitness/leisure/sport.

Within strip clubs, dancers confronted a structure that could be restrictive and alienating. Interviewees described the "cis-het" strip club industry as mistreating workers, for instance, through discrimination in hiring, "wage theft," poor equipment, control by management, and weak security practices. A multitude of legal cases have revealed how strip clubs may try to control workers' labor while still arguing workers are more independent than traditional laborers. Research has depicted the emotional labor of interacting with customers as self-alienating for workers (Deshotels and Forsyth 2022).

However, workers had some autonomy or flexibility in their job duties. Strippers regularly made strategic choices over how to perform on stage and if/how/when to interact with customers. Strippers therefore had room to diversify the end game or goals of their work. While money may be the prime motivation for working in a strip club, this was not always the driving motivation for dancers to engage in pole work. They cared about other factors such as the physical and social resources they built through poling, and the enjoyment they gained through their work—in other words, our analysis of their choices about pole work revealed how they sought to make their work more unique and meaningful. This included how pole dancing helped provide them with challenging, self-fulfilling experiences that required control and concentration—i.e., elements associated with "flow" experiences (Csikszentmihalyi 2008).

Interviewees commonly chose (versus were required) to develop their pole skills. Despite being symbolically linked to strip clubs, poling was not required of all strippers by

ownership/management, and clubs did not regularly offer formal training in pole. This is in line with trends in service work where many employers no longer invest in training but rely on more temporary and expendable employees (Williams and Connell 2010). Previous research has at times represented poling as unskilled labor that does not lend uniqueness to dancers. However, we demonstrated how pole dancing is as a form of skilled labor that comes with risks.

Strippers' autonomy furthered their ability to engage in skill optioning, which meant altering which behaviors they engaged in within the club to highlight their strengths and achieve their work goals. For instance, if they wanted to express themselves artistically, they might engage in pole dancing even when not financially advantageous—as poling was associated with the reduction of emotional labor and increase in self-expression. If they wanted to make money, they might consider if pole dancing would help them offset other parts of their skillset that were weak, such as their conversational skills. It even helped women who felt their bodies did not fit stereotypical beauty standards.

Social learning theory (Akers 2010) proved useful in understanding work dynamics. With respect to differential association, the autonomy strippers experienced altered their interactions with co-workers, more specifically those skilled in pole dance. These women became their colleagues, teachers, mentors, and inspiration. As strip clubs generally did not formally train strippers in pole dancing, dancers imitated other dancers and experimented. Strippers were further influenced by the poling of others on social media and within pole studios. Owners/management, customers, and other dancers provided feedback that differentially reinforced workers' poling and provided definitions or ways of framing what they were doing. Since strippers perceived their work as fulfilling multiple goals, the valued rewards for pole

dancing expanded beyond being tipped. For instance, they appreciated how poling made them feel, and the compliments of customers and co-workers.

When assessing political and moralistic debates involving strippers, it is important to consider pole work. Stripping is often cited by scholars as objectifying and requiring a high level of emotional labor. Factors in their backgrounds and economic reasons are used to explain their paths into the job. Ignoring pole work means omitting part of the calculus strippers use when deciding whether to engage in this work. Also, compared to literature on stripping that portrays clubs as competitive and stripping as disempowering, poling at times was a source of meaningful embodied work. The skills they developed there extended beyond strip clubs. Strippers have gone on to share the benefits of poling with a wider audience, including men. Part of the mission of her studio, one owner told me: "[is] to teach and explore femininity and feminine sexual movement . . . [with] as many people as possible . . . [including men like] football players." She was White and had been a stripper in the past. Although tensions have arisen between strippers and pole fitness/sport enthusiasts, interviewees sometimes became strippers after attending a pole studio, and eight interviewees leveraged their experience poling in strip clubs into pole studio ownership. Mae had female customers from the nightlife transition into her classes and come to appreciate the hard work it takes to perform with the pole. This gives new meaning to Toy's argument that "Strippers. They're not selling their body. They selling skills. You came for the body. You stayed for the conversation. . . . You stay for the pole."

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