

“Behind the Curtain”: Strip Clubs and the Management of Competition for Tips

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography
2018, Vol. 47(1) 60–87
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0891241616630608
journals.sagepub.com/home/jce



Liz Mount¹

Abstract

Ethnographers have amassed a large body of literature on exotic dance and strip clubs. However, this literature contains little information about strip club managers and the work they perform “behind the curtain.” This article draws on participant observation in strip clubs and semistructured interviews with managers of strip clubs to explore how managers must work to mitigate the consequences of a payment and staffing structure that exacerbates competition between dancers for tips. Managers are keenly aware of the negative effects of competition between dancers, and they employ motivational tactics to manage the dancers through economic precarity, such as normalizing uncertainty, encouraging self-blame, and using “teamwork” discourses to inculcate a sense of solidarity among dancers and to diffuse the competitive environment in strip clubs. This article reveals how managers strive to normalize and legitimate the precarious work of exotic dancing, contributing to the literatures on exotic dance and tipped employment.

Keywords

exotic dance, precarious work, tipped workers, competition

¹Sociology Department, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:

Liz Mount, Syracuse University, 300 Maxwell Hall, Syracuse, NY 13210, USA.
Email: eamount@maxwell.syr.edu

Introduction

Jonathan,¹ a current strip club manager, looked over at me and sighed. We sat on wooden stools with our backs against a cold brick wall in a small, dimly lit, unheated room in an abandoned warehouse where Jonathan and a group of his friends were filming an amateur horror film. He shook his head, explaining,

People just don't understand the other side of the curtain when it comes to these bars. They go in, they see a certain thing, "oh, look at that hot chick!" And everyone's havin' fun and drinkin,' this and that. They don't realize what goes on, you know, in the alley behind the place, so to say. Because, I mean, behind the curtain, in the dressing rooms, it's such an act, everything is a show. It's just not . . . what people think it is.

Here, Jonathan offers an intriguing perspective about the perception and the reality of strip clubs from the point of view of management, who are important social actors in strip clubs, yet they are neglected in the sociological study of exotic dance.

Research on strip clubs offers detailed analyses that complicate understandings of gender, work, performances of sexuality, and erotic labor. By neglecting the perspectives of managers, who are important actors in strip clubs, the literature presents an incomplete portrayal of workplace dynamics in exotic dance. This article rectifies this oversight by focusing on the managers of strip clubs, who detail the practices they employ to manage dancers through economic uncertainty. Their accounts reveal the contradictions of managing workers within a payment and staffing structure that encourages competition. Managers attempt to minimize this competition while operating under structural conditions that encourage it. To this end, strip club managers normalize the uncertainty of earnings for dancers, individualize the stressors exacerbated by this structure, encourage dancers to blame themselves when their earnings are low, and characterize competition among dancers as largely a result of women's purportedly natural propensity to compete with one another. As salaried employees, managers benefit from this structure, so the work they perform to manage competition also protects their interests.

While managers enforce precarious working conditions in strip clubs, they draw on employment practices that are increasingly common in the neoliberal labor market. The tactics managers use to diffuse and obfuscate competition are part of a range of contemporary practices that normalize precarious employment. The managers in this study justify their practices by citing labor market trends toward precarious working conditions, which simultaneously

reify, and thus discursively reproduce, expectations of precarious employment (see Vallas and Prenner 2012; Purser 2012; Gregory 2012; Kalleberg 2009).

Literature Review

Women's Sexual Labor in Strip Clubs

Since the 1970s, qualitative researchers have produced an abundant literature on strip clubs. In the past twenty-five years, initial contributions by scholars of deviance have been enhanced by feminist scholarship that situates these accounts in contexts of gendered violence and inequality (Lavin 2013, 363). I provide a brief indication of the trajectory for this body of literature below. For a comprehensive account of the strip club literature, please consult Levin (2013, 363–65).

Initially, strip club research focused on exotic dance as a deviant form of work (Skipper 1970; Skipper and McCaghy 1971; McCaghy and Skipper 1972; Carey, Peterson, and Sharpe 1974). These studies sought to document and understand the “motivations, characteristics and opportunities for entry in the strip club world” (Lavin 2013, 363). This literature also explored demographic and individual characteristics associated with exotic dance (Skipper 1970). More recent studies have offered refined analyses of the demographic characteristics shared by members of this diverse group (Sweet and Tewksbury 2000a, 2000b).

Scholars continue to explore how dancing impacts strippers. Several studies detail dancers' socialization into the exotic dance industry (Sweet and Tewksbury 2000a; Weseley 2002 ; Thompson, Harred, and Burks 2003; Dewey 2011; Stone 2014). Research also highlights dancers' experiences of stigma and the strategies they use to manage stigma (Thompson and Harred 1992; Thompson, Harred, and Burks 2003; Barton 2006, 2007; ; Barton and Hardesty 2010; Dewey 2011; Mavin and Grandy 2013). One study examines how dancers emphasize their identities as students to mitigate the stigma of stripping. Scholars also examine how gendered power dynamics operate in strip clubs, including analyses of dancing as both empowering and disempowering for women and how dancing reinforces and/or challenges hegemonic gender roles (Spivey 2005; Price 2008; Dewey 2011; Mavin and Grandy 2013).

The literature increasingly emphasizes patterns of interaction between customers and dancers (Frank 2002; Pasko 2002; Brewster 2003; Trautner 2005; Price 2008). Researchers analyze the role of clients and the meanings that clients make of their time in strip clubs (Frank 2002; Brewster 2003;

Egan 2005). One intriguing study details how dancers frame their interactions with clients in terms of spirituality (Barton and Hardesty 2010). As Weitzer notes, the existing literature on strip clubs is nearing the “saturation point,” since it includes “study after study documenting similar types of worker socialization, stigma management, patterns of interaction between dancers and clients, and power relations at clubs” (2009, 216; see also Frank 2007; Wahab et al. 2011).

This ample body of scholarship on strip clubs overlooks the perspectives of management, a group of people who are important actors in the clubs. Weitzer highlights the dearth of research on managers of “indoor establishments” such as strip clubs, defining a manager as someone “who exercises control over a worker and extracts some or all of the profit” (Weitzer 2009, 228). He suggests the need for a “major shift in the research agenda” on sex work, emphasizing the need to include perspectives from managers (Weitzer 2009, 228). Research acknowledges that “the space of exotic dance clubs is a field of contestation in which the struggles among dancers, managers and owners are played out” (Egan 2004, 316), but the literature currently lacks detailed analyses of how managers interpret and act within these struggles.

The predicament of strip club managers, who supervise exotic dancers as they compete for uncertain earnings, must be interpreted within shifting conditions of work in an increasingly precarious labor market (Williams 2009; Puar et al. 2012; Purser 2012; Kalleberg 2011). With the rise of precarious labor, employment in the United States has generally become less stable, while work characterized as “uncertain, unpredictable and risky from the point of view of the worker” has become more obvious and widespread (Kalleberg 2009). This article examines how strip club managers participate in normalizing precarious employment practices that exist both inside and outside the strip club, while highlighting the specificity of the competition engendered by the payment and staffing structure in strip clubs.

The Payment Structure of a Precarious Occupation

Tip-based occupations. Service workers in at least thirty-three professions earn the majority of their income from tips (Azar 2004, 170; Ayres, Fredrick and Kazariya 2005, 1619). The word “tips” originated from boxes in nineteenth-century London coffeehouses and pubs that read “To Insure Prompt Service”; patrons who placed contributions in the box were served without delay (Paules 1991, 41; Ayres et al. 2005, 1618). By the end of the nineteenth century, U.S. businesses promoted tipping and the practice became increasingly prevalent (Azar 2004, 177). However, there was considerable debate about tipping, with many people viewing the practice as “a marker of

degradation” since “both the giving and the receiving of tips were perceived as an acceptance of the recipient’s inferiority” (Ayres et al. 2005, 1620). At the time, tipping was also understood as a practice that allowed employers to exploit their workers by not paying sufficient wages (Ayres et al. 2005, 1622). As tipping became increasingly common, workers’ wages were reduced to reflect their additional income from tips (Azar 2004, 177).

Workers who earn the majority of their income from tips have limited control over their earnings, and they engage in various tactics to counteract this lack of control (Paules 1991, 23). Among restaurant servers who work during busy (and potentially more profitable) shifts, Paules notes an “acutely competitive environment” that reflects “the aggregate striving of each waitress to maximize her tip income” by serving as many customers as possible (1991, 28). During these shifts, servers “rac[e] to the door and direct customers to their own tables” instead of following the preset rotation system that is designed to seat customers equitably in each section (Paules 1991, 29). The competitive dynamic noted by Paules shares striking similarities with managers’ characterizations of the competition in strip clubs.

Working for tips does not necessarily foster a competitive environment, as there are examples of tip-based occupations where workers do not experience high levels of competition (Sallaz 2002). In a striking contrast to the individualized tipping system, Sallaz notes the “worker solidarity” fostered by the shared tipping system among casino dealers (Sallaz 2002, 399). Since all dealers’ incomes are affected by how well the least experienced worker is tipped, new dealers are taught “tip-making tactics” by their more experienced peers (Sallaz 2002, 399). By contrast, when a new dancer starts working at a strip club, other dancers are reluctant to teach her the kinds of behaviors that earn more tips because, as one dancer explained, “they don’t want you to make their money” (Murphy 2003, 315).

Feminized labor and precarity. The staffing and employment structure in strip clubs are “embedded within and reflective of larger historical labor trends” (Fogel and Quinlan 2011, 51). Like other precarious occupations, stripping is characterized by instability “with no guarantee of permanency or full-time hours,” it often entails an undefined and unregulated relationship between workers and their employers, and “it creates a uniquely individualist and competitive work environment” (Fogel and Quinlan 2011, 53, italics mine). Fogel and Quinlan argue that this kind of atmosphere pervades strip clubs since “strippers are in constant competition with one another for jobs, the most profitable hours, and the attention of male patrons” (2011, 54).

Several scholars note that the strip club industry has changed dramatically in the past twenty-five years. Since the U.S. strip club industry expanded in

the late 1980s, the extent of dancers' control over their work has diminished (Sanchez 1997, 557). Partly because of the accessibility of erotic material online, exotic dance was forced to evolve in order to maintain its client base (Egan 2004, 300). As many "topless" dance clubs switched to "fully nude," the physical distance between dancers and customers decreased (Sanchez 1997; see also Egan 2004 and Dewey 2011). Most clubs now allow touching on certain parts of the body, and the amount of physical and emotional work that dancers are expected to do has increased, yet their monetary compensation has decreased (Sanchez 1997, 557; Dewey 2011, 7). In the Pacific Northwest, dancers went from making a living wage plus tips in the 1980s to making no wage at all—only tips—in the late 1990s² (Sanchez 1997, 557). Many clubs charge dancers a "rent" fee for each night they work at the club and they are expected to share their tips with other club employees, such as DJs, bouncers, and sometimes even managers (Holsopple 1998; Sanchez 1997; Grant 2012), practices that resemble an "informal economy of favors"³ (Bruckert 2002, 43).

The amount of money a dancer can make from tips varies widely, depending on "factors as unpredictable as customer whims and volume, to banal concerns like rain and football" (Grant 2012: 1; see also Price 2000, 24; Fogel and Quinlan 2011, 53). With an industry emphasis on variety and customer choice, management maintains large numbers of dancers on staff to ensure that they are potentially reaching more customers, a goal aided by the high turnover rate among exotic dancers (Dewey 2011, xii). On any given night, there may be more dancers working than there are tipping customers, which means that strippers face dramatic uncertainty about their earnings.

Legislative frameworks governing strip club operations. Dancers' precarious working conditions are exacerbated by the fact that they are hired as "independent contractors" rather than employees (Fischer 1996; Holsopple 1998; Egan 2004; Fogel and Quinlan 2011). Many dancers must sign legal documents indicating their independent contractor status, though they may not understand the legal implications of this designation (Fischer 1996; Holsopple 1998). Independent contractors cannot file claims of discrimination and they are ineligible for unemployment benefits or workers' compensation, enabling club owners to avoid paying taxes on dancers' income (Fogel and Quinlan 2011, 53; Sanchez 1997; Fischer 1996).

Despite legal claims to their independent contractor status, strip club management retains a surprising degree of control over dancers. Managers dictate the number of hours dancers work and may exercise control over their performances, such as choosing the music they perform to and regulating dancers' behavior in the clubs when they are not performing (Fogel and Quinlan 2011,

53; see also Fischer 1996; O'Brien 2012). Despite their contractual designation as "independent," the relationship between dancers and management is more akin to an "employer-employee" relationship (Fischer 1996; see also O'Brien 2012).

While designating strippers as independent contractors prevails in most strip clubs, several court cases have called this practice into question. In a 2012 landmark case, the U.S. District Court ruled that Spearmint Rhino, a large "upscale gentlemen's club," cannot classify dancers as independent contractors, but must consider them as "employees, shareholders, partners, or some kind of owner," in addition to providing benefits to dancers (Grant 2012). From 2013 to 2014, there were court rulings in cities such as New York City, Las Vegas, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta stating that exotic dancers are misclassified as independent contractors, indicating a "shift towards an employment model" for exotic dancers (O'Brien 2012, 2; see also Grant 2012; Kwidzinski 2014; Hanna 2012; Matthews 2014).

The conflict around dancers' employment status exemplifies Murphy's (2003) insights about the incompatibility between the goals of the strip club, enforced by management, and the goals of dancers. Since dancers are paid individually, it makes little difference to them whether the club's revenues increase, which is a central concern for management. Therefore, dancers find few incentives to follow the rules laid out by management that benefit the club, while managers are unconcerned about dancers' earnings since they prioritize overall customer retention (Murphy 2003, 322). Many dancers possess "low or non-existent levels of commitment" to their workplace that are partly a result of the individualized tipping system, which encourages dancers to operate "each in their own interests" (Lewis 2006, 309).

Building upon these insights about dancers' precarious work and stripper/management relations, this article focuses on how the payment and staffing structure in strip clubs encourages and exacerbates competition among dancers, which managers must regulate to ensure a stable working environment and to hide competition from clients. The classification of strippers as "independent contractors" who work exclusively for tips combined with the routine overstaffing of dancers in relation to tipping customers creates and maintains a structure that encourages competition, which managers must attempt to diffuse and obfuscate. This article explores the strategies managers employ in their endeavor to minimize, and obscure the effects of, the competition and tension generated by their own practices. This analysis is relevant for all strip clubs that employ dancers under precarious working conditions, though the competition may be especially pronounced in impoverished areas where dancers are aware of the paucity of patrons who can afford to tip generously.

Context of Research

The Strip Club Scene in Greenville

I conducted this exploratory project in and around the medium-sized city of Greenville⁴ in Upstate New York, once a booming industrial area that has strongly felt the transition to a postindustrial economy. Following the relocation of several large manufacturing plants as a result of deindustrialization, Greenville is now one of the many poverty-stricken communities in Upstate New York whose residents are keenly aware that most work available to them will be undertaken in “poorly paid, demeaning and even exploitative terms” (Dewey 2011, 4). When I conducted this research in 2011, the poverty rate in Greenville was approximately 29.4 percent, more than double the national poverty rate of 13.2 percent, and it has since increased to 34.3 percent (New York State Community Action Association 2010, 2013).

The landscape of Greenville reflects a typically “rust belt” city feel, with abandoned warehouses peppering the downtown area, which city officials often talk of “revitalizing.” The level of residential racial segregation in New York State is astonishing; data from the 2010 census indicate that segregation has intensified in the last several years.. Accordingly, people residing in or near downtown Greenville are likely to be low-income people of color, while the majority of middle-class suburban areas outside of the city are almost entirely comprised of white residents.

Like many urban areas, the majority of strip clubs in Greenville are geographically concentrated in a small section of the city. City officials often garner suburban votes by containing institutions and people associated with “the sex industry” in the “unsafe, abandoned industrial areas” of cities (Dewey 2011, 195; see also Fischer 1996, 527; Frank 2005, 488). There were six strip clubs in Greenville at the time of the research and one additional club located on the outskirts of the city for a total of seven clubs, six of which were locally owned. I was able to speak with at least one manager from each clubs, so my analysis is based on information from managers at all of the strip clubs in Greenville at the time of the research.

State laws stipulate the level of nudity allowed in strip clubs based upon whether the club serves alcohol. The *New York State Liquor Authority Retail Licensees' Handbook* states that in an establishment serving alcohol in New York, “allowing anyone to appear nude, or partially nude” is “prohibited” (New York State Liquor Authority Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control 2013, 19). However, it then states the following stipulation: “you may allow female entertainers to perform ‘topless’ provided that they are on a stage that is at least 6 feet from the nearest patron and at least 18 inches above the floor immediately surrounding the stage” (19). At the time of the research, four of

the clubs served alcohol, so the dancers were not allowed to be “fully nude,” meaning they could strip down only to their g-strings. The other three clubs did not serve alcohol, which allowed them the distinction of being “fully nude.”

To contextualize the varying aspects of stripping that affect dancers’ lives and working conditions, Bradley-Engen and Ulmer (2009) suggest examining the “processual order” of strip clubs. They suggest a rough typology categorizing strip clubs into three groups: hustle clubs, social clubs, and show clubs (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009). Show clubs are large, extravagant clubs (usually located in big cities) with many dancers, an upper-middle-class clientele, and few regular customers (*ibid.*, 38). There are no clubs in Greenville that fit this description, though the only club owned by nonlocal businesspeople presents itself in the show club image and its relatively large, new, fancy interior reflects its reputation as the most “upscale” club in Greenville. Based on Bradley-Engen and Ulmer’s descriptions, I classify four of the clubs in my sample (including the “upscale” club) as hustle clubs and the other three clubs as social clubs.

Hustle clubs are characterized by a high turnover of dancers, large volumes of customers from diverse social classes, and few “regular” customers (*ibid.*, 37). In hustle clubs, management is detached from dancers, managing conflict between dancers only if it becomes a major issue (*ibid.*, 44). Jason, a hustle club manager, said that he purposely cultivates a distant attitude toward the dancers, explaining, “I tell them all the time, ‘I’m the robot that runs the bar. You can’t cry to me, you can’t beg me, you can’t threaten me.’ Nothing that a typical dancer would do to get attention from a guy works on me.” Here, Jason alludes to the gender dynamics between male managers and female dancers, which he navigates by setting firm boundaries and maintaining his distance. The overall tone in hustle clubs indicates that “an exotic dancer is simply a product to be bought and sold” (*ibid.*, 44), echoing a statement Ben, a hustle club manager, made during his interview: “what we serve is women.”

All three of the clubs managed by women in my sample fall into the social club designation. Social clubs have fewer customers, a relatively steady group of dancers, and many “regular” customers, most of whom are middle-age, working-class men (*ibid.*, 38). Management in social clubs have personal contact and negotiations with dancers, and a social club dancer is interpreted as a talkative, friendly “girl next door” (*ibid.*, 39). The managers of social clubs stressed the importance of a “good personality” when hiring, whereas hustle club managers said the most important aspect is appearance. As a manager, Kate explains, “we gotta be careful who we hire” and she is wary of hiring dancers from “one of those other [hustle] clubs” where

dancers are accustomed to a hands-off relationship with management. Whereas the male managers of hustle clubs said dancers learn the specifics of the job while on the job, the female managers of social clubs (who are also former dancers) stressed that a new dancer needs instruction. Kate scoffed at the idea of allowing someone to learn how to be successful on the job, explaining, “you can’t just, you know, throw a girl in here and have her pick it up on her own.” The social club managers said they offer extensive training for new dancers to ensure they get tips, which benefits both the dancer and the club. Curiously, there are no references to managers providing training for new dancers in the literature. However, given the small size of this sample and what is perhaps an overrepresentation of female managers, any conclusions about how gender affects management style would be premature.

When I asked managers how the strip club scene in Greenville compares with other places they worked, Jonathan characterizes the strip club industry as “as high-end as you can imagine and as low-end as you can imagine. I’ve seen both; Greenville is kind of in the middle.” In the strip club industry, Jonathan explains, “there’s something for everyone out there,” and he compares the Greenville strip club scene to two opposing sides of the economic spectrum, saying that Greenville is “not Detroit, but it’s definitely not, you know, Palm Beach.” Jonathan perceives the range of strip clubs as somewhere between Palm Beach, a wealthy Florida resort town and Detroit, an industrial city suffering from severe urban blight. Given the economic context of Greenville, I was surprised that Jonathan placed the Greenville strip scene in the middle of this spectrum, as many people in the area compare Greenville to cities like Detroit. In a city such as Greenville, where there is a lack of industry and employment options, there are more women who need the kind of money they perceive can be earned from stripping (supply) than there is demand for exotic dance from patrons who can afford to tip generously. The competition among dancers is thus enhanced since it is obvious that tip money is limited, making the prospect of earning enough money each working day even more uncertain.

Methods

This exploratory project incorporates data from approximately forty hours of field observation and eight in-depth, semistructured interviews conducted with managers in 2011. With the consent of the manager and dancers at a large club in Greenville, I conducted field observations two to three times a week over six weeks to observe the character of social interactions at the club. During these observations, I usually sat at the bar, where I could watch customers seated around the stage while I casually chatted with the

bartenders, the manager, and the dancers not entertaining customers. To get a sense of the dynamics at the club throughout the night, I arrived around the same time as the dancers and stayed until after midnight. During these observations, I noticed there were many dancers scheduled every night and few patrons. I observed palpable tension among the dancers that was especially apparent when a new woman would arrive for an audition. After deciding to focus on competition among dancers, I conducted observations at five additional clubs as a covert observer. As a white woman in her late twenties, when I walked in the clubs, I received some curious stares. To appear less conspicuous, I sat either in the bar area or toward the back of the stage area, quietly observing interactions among the dancers and between dancers and patrons. During these observations, I noticed that the pattern of overstaffing dancers and the resulting tension among dancers was prevalent in the clubs. My fieldwork observations allowed me to hone in on the dynamic of competition, enabling me to construct a focused interview guide for manager interviews.

To understand managers' perspectives on managing dancers through economic uncertainty and how they attempt to mitigate competition, I conducted eight semistructured interviews at a location of each manager's choosing. I met seven of my participants at their respective clubs while I was performing field observations and one of the managers was introduced to me through a mutual acquaintance. I conducted five of the interviews at the clubs, with four of these occurring in the managers' offices, and one interview occurring while the manager was working the bar on a slow day. Other interviews took place at an un-crowded restaurant, at the participant's university library and one interview took place in an old warehouse where the manager was part of an amateur film crew.

Six of the managers I spoke with currently hold management positions in strip clubs, whereas my other two respondents managed strip clubs in the Greenville area approximately ten years prior to our conversations. Of the former managers, one is now employed in the restaurant business and the other is pursuing an advanced degree; neither of these participants anticipate returning to the strip club industry. Of the six current managers, two are also owners of the clubs where they work, yet our conversations centered around their experiences in their managerial roles at the clubs. I did not perceive a distinction between how owner-managers and non-owner-managers discussed their management strategies; thus, I do not differentiate between owner-managers and non-owner-managers in my analysis, referring to all of my interviewees as managers.

Since all of the clubs in Greenville are relatively small, managers perform additional duties in the clubs. During the afternoon, managers are expected to attend to security issues at all the clubs, though such issues rarely occur

during the day. At four of the clubs, managers worked as bouncers on nights when they expect fewer patrons. Whether managers double as bouncers did not sufficiently impact how they discuss their experience of managing. All managers reported that they also bartend when the bar is understaffed.

All of the managers except one spent at least half their working lives employed in strip clubs. Rashid had managed a strip club for slightly over a year when we spoke. He indicated that this job is a temporary way for him to support his family and “help out a friend” who was in need of dependable management; he did not anticipate managing the strip club for more than another year. All the other managers I spoke with worked in the strip club industry for at least ten years. While two managers worked in strip clubs “on and off” for a total of ten years or more, the other three have been steadily employed in strip clubs for ten to seventeen years. Analyzing accounts from managers who worked in strip clubs at varying times over the last three decades offers an in-depth, longitudinal focus on the experiences of managers in the Greenville area.

At the time of research, three of the managers were in their thirties, four were in their forties, and one was in his fifties. Five of them lived for most of their lives in the Northeast area. Six of the managers are white and American-born, while the other two moved to the United States from Turkey and the Pacific Islands when they were young. Five of the managers are men and all three women managers are former dancers. Because these women are in their late thirties and early forties, they are considered too old to dance, but they all told me they “love the business,” so like many other former dancers, they “carve[d] out a niche” for themselves in the exotic dance industry as they aged by turning to managerial roles in strip clubs (Ronai 1992, 312; see also Dewey 2011).

After obtaining consent from each interviewee, I digitally recorded the interviews. Our conversations loosely conformed to an interview guide, wherein I posed an open-ended question and the interviewee (usually) provided a detailed answer that provoked several follow-up questions. The shortest interview was forty minutes long; this was the interview with Rashid, the length perhaps reflecting the breadth of his experience managing strip clubs. All of the other interviews lasted between an hour and a half and two and a half hours. After finishing each interview and leaving the interview location, I jotted down notes detailing the setting and interesting anecdotes the managers mentioned that were not recorded. I then typed and reviewed my notes to add details and discern emerging themes. After transcribing each interview, I engaged in line-by-line coding, paying special attention to the salient topics that appeared often in the interviews. I compared the transcripts, my notes about the interviews, and the notes from my field observations to

form the key foci of my analysis. This research process invokes the tradition of grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967), in which the data collection and analyses are largely interwoven.

I was extremely surprised by how open the managers I interviewed were during our conversations and how generous they were with their time. Everyone seemed to enjoy talking about their job, particularly the parts of their jobs that are difficult. Since they work in a stigmatized profession, perhaps managers have few spaces to express their feelings of excitement and/or frustration about their jobs; thus, they genuinely enjoyed telling an interested party about their experiences.

Research Findings

Disciplining “Bad Girls” and Cultivating “Good Girls”: Dealing with Dancers’ Attempts to Distinguish Themselves

I probably run a few too many girls most nights . . . but the more girls, the better it is for you and your business. But if the girls get unhappy . . . that’s bad for business. So it’s a double-edged sword.

—Ben

The quote above offers a succinct illustration of Murphy’s (2003) argument that the goals of strip club management and the goals of the dancers do not align, with management being interested in the club’s overall revenue and dancers being concerned about their individual earnings. For managers, who are interested in creating and maintaining a loyal client base, having a large number of dancers on staff each night increases the likelihood that more customers will frequent the club. Management thus benefits from the practice of scheduling many women to dance each night, and they are unconcerned about whether the amount of patrons will be able to support the dancers’ income. Stella stresses the importance of having “a whole big, wide variety” of women for clients to choose from. Her job as manager, she says, is about maintaining a variety of dancers so that “hopefully, we have what they are looking for at this time.” If there are more dancers than there are tipping customers on any given night, it means that dancers are likely to be underpaid, but management still benefits because the few men there are likely to return. However, as Ben’s quote above indicates, the strategy of having many dancers on staff when there are few tipping customers causes discord among the dancers. The fact that dancers work only for tips combined with routine overstaffing means that dancers are compelled to distinguish themselves, which

may entail engaging in illicit sexual acts to garner more tips. While the managers acknowledge that dancers' tactics can be explained at both the structural level and the individual level, they overemphasize individual explanations and recommend individualized solutions to structural challenges.

All of the managers I spoke with mentioned that in strip clubs, dancers often try to sell "more" than they are supposed to in the form of sexual acts or prostitution.⁵ The only rules that regulate actions in strip clubs are laws that attempt to alleviate community and legal tensions surrounding the purported affiliation between strip clubs and prostitution (Dewey 2011, 64; see also Hanna 2012). Managers in Greenville report being most concerned about dancers and customers violating a New York State law forbidding physical contact with the genital area between dancers and patrons in strip clubs. All of the managers stressed that they take every precaution to prohibit prostitution since these transactions are technically illegal. It is possible that managers are concerned that because prostitution is illegal, it must be performed in secret, which does not generate revenue for anyone but the dancer. Managers may also want to present themselves to a researcher as overly concerned with discouraging prostitution and abiding by state laws. If a dancer engaging in prostitution shares her earnings or if managers perceive her actions as benefiting the club, they may ignore or tacitly encourage prostitution, provided she does not get caught.

Most strip clubs employ surveillance techniques (with varying degrees of success) to curb the incidence of selling sex. Jonathan says that in his experience, prostitution is one of the biggest problems for management in strip clubs. He explains, "fifty percent or more of my time is spent actively searching for [dancers soliciting in the club]," primarily through the use of surveillance technology. All the "good" clubs have cameras, he explains, because they keep everyone "in line," including management, and Jonathan claims he would not consider working in a club that operated without cameras. Ben agrees that heavy surveillance is a crucial part of why his club has succeeded. He showed me an application on his phone that allows all managers and bouncers to view live footage from the multiple security cameras in the club, enabling them to "watch at all times." On the contrary, Justin says that in his experience, the camera angles can be switched easily so that the illicit sexual acts being sold are not visible onscreen, practices that Egan (2004) also notes. At the club where Justin worked, management knew some women were selling sex and though they were "disgusted" by this, they looked the other way because they received a portion of the women's earnings, in accordance with the "informal economy of favors" that often operates in strip clubs (Lewis 2006). Brandy frames the presence of surveillance cameras in a different

manner, explaining that cameras protect the women from unwanted sexual advances from customers. She claims that all of the dancers appreciate cameras, especially in the VIP dance rooms, because they feel “safe” knowing that someone is watching. At her club, Brandy says, cameras are used mainly for safety, secondarily to settle any disputes that may arise, and, lastly, to make sure dancers are not doing “extra stuff.” Managers’ attitudes about surveillance concur with Egan’s assertion that “surveillance can operate as a form of protection when customers get out of hand, [but] most often surveillance cameras serve as a strategy of social control for owners and managers over dancers in clubs” (2004, 304).

Because management is aware that surveillance technology cannot catch every indiscretion, managers encourage dancers to monitor each other in an attempt to instill an atmosphere of intolerance for prostitution. Brandy explains, “we love it when the girls kiss and tell. Like, please tell us. If a girl’s doing something she’s not supposed to, please tell us. They all know, like, you have to do that—come tell us right away.” When there are new dancers working, Brandy tells the women who have been working there for awhile, “make sure you watch them and see how they approach customers, make sure they’re not doing extra side stuff or getting extra money.” Here, Brandy frames the selling of sexual acts beyond what is legal in strip clubs as “extra side stuff,” which would enable them to “get extra money.” Earning additional income would give these dancers an advantage over other dancers that all of the other dancers should be concerned about and report to management. Brandy frames this surveillance activity as part of a “team” effort, saying, “it’s a team here and we all work together.” Brandy’s use of a “team” discourse may be an attempt to counteract the “low or non-existent levels of commitment” that dancers display toward their clubs as a result of the tipping system, which encourages them to “engage in their own income-generating activities” (Lewis 2006, 309).

Brandy and Kate argue that the selling of “extra” sexual acts generates competition among dancers. Kate asserts that monitoring dancers’ interactions with customers is beneficial for the dancers who do not wish to sell sex, explaining “if you’ve got one girl in one room doing something and another one’s not willing to do it, it makes it really hard for the one girl who doesn’t want to do it to make the money.” The effect of this sort of scenario, she says, is that the woman “willing to do it” (prostitution) will get all the clients because “if a guy can get more . . . well shoot, why wouldn’t he do that?” Furthermore, the women “not willing to do it” will become upset and competition will “flare up” between dancers. Similarly, Brandy explains that if dancers are making money “the right way,” there is no need to “have to worry about competition,” meaning “girls doing other stuff that they’re not allowed

to do.” Brandy and Kate do not consider another possibility, which is that dancers engage in prostitution as a result of competition for tips and to build a loyal customer base.

Management Tactics: Normalizing Uncertainty, Encouraging Self-Blame, and Individualizing Structural Problems

One of the most salient findings of this research is how managers are tasked with coaching dancers through the ebb and flow of tips. In the face of uncertain earnings, dancers are never guaranteed to make a certain amount of money, which creates tension and feelings of insecurity. To deal with these dilemmas, managers attempt to normalize the uncertainty and instability of income from stripping by characterizing “the business” as an inherently unstable source of income. To manage dancers through this instability, managers employ motivational tactics to inculcate “positive attitudes” among the dancers and reinforce the virtue of patience, while encouraging dancers to individualize their frustration by engaging in self-blame, as opposed to allowing tension and competition to accumulate. By not paying dancers a base wage, normalizing the uncertainty of working for tips, and naturalizing the routine overstaffing of dancers, managers participate in “refram[ing]” the working conditions dancers can expect, actions that “help *reproduce* precarious employment” (Vallas and Prenner 2012, 339).

All of the managers stressed that everyone has “bad days” when they make very little money. Noting that this often happens on slow nights when few customers come, Ben said, “You don’t wanna be around ’em when there’s nobody here! That’s the hardest part of my job is keepin’ the morale up when there’s nobody in here.” Ben told me that slow days are “a rare occasion,” so I was surprised that when I asked how often the club has a slow day, he replied, “you’ll get one bad day a week.” One day out of seven days in a week means that although slow days do not occur on a majority of working days, they are nevertheless quite common.

Managers often compared the money dancers can make to a minimum wage job, which they must presume is the only employment available to these women, claiming that the women definitely make more money stripping. Any time I posed a question about the viability of supporting oneself (and one’s dependents) through tips, managers countered my questions with stories of nights when they observed dancers taking home thousands of dollars. Ben offers one rendition of this tale, explaining,

I’ve seen girls walk out of here with 3,000 dollars a night . . . I’ve seen a guy who won 10 million dollars from a scratch-off ticket. He was in here *every*

night! He spent like 20 grand a week [in the club]! You know, he was giving 500 dollar tips, yeah. . . . You get rich guys, they want to impress.

However, Ben admitted that these kinds of scenarios (like someone winning the lottery) are not common occurrences and that the vast majority of dancers have yet to leave the club with 3,000 dollars in tip money. During my fieldwork and interviews, I heard many such stories about nights where dancers earned thousands of dollars, told by both managers and dancers. It is possible that these shared tales are spread to foster hope that a dancer might make that kind of money (as long as she remains positive and patient) and the re-telling of these stories helps to generate consent and support for this uncertain occupation.

To counter the effects of nights that are decidedly unprofitable, managers encourage the dancers to count their weekly earnings instead of their daily earnings. When Stone (2014) interviewed for dancer positions, this tactic was also communicated to her by managers (734). The women managers I spoke to said that as former dancers, they are sympathetic to strippers who complain about not making enough money. Kate explains, “it doesn’t take long for your self-esteem to go into the toilet when you have a bad day because it’s easy to base your success on how much money you made for that particular day, but that’s just *that day!*” Brandy said that when the dancers come to her with complaints, “I let ’em know, listen, I know today *sucked*, like, you made no money, but let’s just wait, maybe tomorrow’s your day.” While Brandy empathizes with dancers who make less money than they expected, her experience as a dancer taught her that one good day’s earnings can counteract a bad day. Brandy explains,

There’s times that girls will say, ‘yesterday was so bad, I made no money.’ And I’ll always let ’em know it’s like a rollercoaster in this business. It’s never gonna be your night—it’s never gonna be you all the time [making the money], it’s gonna be someone that’s gonna make more than you, but the next day, you know, it all evens out at the end. It does.

Here, Brandy stresses the dramatic uncertainty of a business where workers rely solely on tips by comparing stripping to a “rollercoaster,” implying that there will be sharp increases and decreases in one’s income. The manager’s job, she implies, is to assure the dancers that things will get better if they remain patient. Kate highlights the uncertainty of earning money through stripping by claiming exotic dance is “just like the lottery,” a metaphor that is decidedly different from Brandy’s rollercoaster metaphor since in a lottery system, there is no clear pattern and a person can continue to lose indefinitely.

Like Brandy, Kate encourages the dancers to adjust their own attitudes in the face of competition and uncertain resources. She explains,

There's a natural competitive component to this business. If you've only got five customers coming in in one hour and you've got five girls and if three out of the five like one particular girl on that particular day, there's gonna be hard feelings. No way of gettin' around it, you know what I mean? So we try to keep the girls who are not going to react negatively to that, the ones who remain positive and say, 'ok, well, it's maybe not my hour, but maybe the next hour it will be'...they just have to be tough and say, 'ok, maybe it's not my day.' You know, don't take it personally, move on. Or look at yourself and say, 'well, am I sitting here being lazy?' Well, maybe that's it! So. Or, 'am I in a bad mood and it's obvious?'

Here, Kate stresses the “natural competitive component” of exotic dance and normalizes this aspect of stripping by claiming there is “no way of gettin’ around it.” Thus, the dancers that her club “keep[s]” are the dancers who are able to accept that the business is “natural[ly]” competitive and appear largely unaffected by the competition. When competitive situations arise, Kate implies that a good dancer will individualize the situation by asking herself whether the problem is her actions (“well, am I sitting here being lazy?”) and/or attitude (“am I in a bad mood and it’s obvious?”), as opposed to recognizing the structural components that encourage competition, ensuring that there will be dancers who lose the competition on any given day.

While interviewing Stella, I witnessed an incident that illustrates the presumption of self-blame that managers attempt to instill in dancers. I was sitting on a stool at the dimly lit bar while Stella stood at the other side, leaning over the bar to talk to me and trying to make herself heard over the loud music blaring from the stage area in the next room. This was a slow time when there were few patrons, so Stella would only occasionally stop talking with me to serve a drink. While she was getting a drink for someone, a lone dancer came over to the bar and sat down near us, looking slightly forlorn. Stella came back and, noticing the dancer, reprimanded her, saying, “You’re making bad things happen by your energy. Stop!”

Several of the managers I spoke with opted to describe competition among dancers using an individualized and gendered rhetoric of “jealousy.” When I asked why the dancers argue and fight among themselves, two managers immediately replied:

Jealousy. One girl, or several girls, [are] jealous of one girl that they think is prettier, they think makes more money, that kind of thing. Jealousy. It’s usually, it’s—90% of the time, it’s jealousy.

—Stella

Jealousy. [They'll say,] "Oh you make more money, I don't make as much." "Oh, that's *my* friend, you're taking *my* friend to dance." Each dancer is jealous of the other dancers. [They say,] "She makes more money, I don't make any money." That's jealousy.

—Rashid

Both managers implicitly acknowledge that the dancers' behavior stems from the dramatic uncertainty about their income that dancers face on a daily basis. They quote the dancers saying they are upset because they are not making enough money and in their interviews, both managers acknowledge that on any given day, some dancers make very little money. By characterizing the dancers' behavior as jealousy, the motivation for their behavior is individualized, their emotional maturity is called into question and their actions are interpreted through stereotypes of women as prone to jealousy, which resonate with gendered stereotypes since the competition involves garnering (mostly) male attention. Here, managers attempt to individualize, and thereby dismiss, the causes of competition between dancers.

Competition and the Threat of Violence

If managers are unsuccessful at counteracting the effects of competition among the dancers, violence can ensue. Justin told several stories about dancers hitting each other with hot curling irons, with the sharp heels of their shoes and any heavy objects they could find. Jonathan had to take a dancer to the hospital because another dancer "split her head open" with the high heel of her shoe. Managers can attempt to take proper safety precautions for their employees, Jonathan explains, saying "we gotta walk 'em out to their cars at the end of the night, make sure the other dancers don't beat 'em up." Stella also stressed that managers must keep safety in mind at all times, explaining that her background in law enforcement has served her well as a strip club manager. The skills she gained as an officer enable her to quickly spot and respond effectively to violence so that she is rarely taken by surprise. She explains, "usually I already know what's going on because I freakin' see *everything*—I don't miss *nothin'*! Even right now," she said looking at me intently as she leaned over the bar, "I'm seeing *everything* that's going on. I don't miss *anything*."

The managers often compared their jobs to managing in other sectors of employment, where they expect that workers engage in less violence.

Jonathan points out that strip clubs present specific challenges for managers due to the propensity for arguments to escalate into violence. He explains, “you typically don’t have to worry about your employees at Best Buy beating the hell out of each other because someone made more sales, but in this industry, you know, it gets bad.” However, this analogy is actually ill suited in the case of exotic dance since strippers are deliberately placed in opposition to each other in a competition for uncertain earnings, whereas workers at Best Buy are paid an hourly wage and do not compete with each other for their only source of income. Stella highlights the difficulties involved in managing dancers’ interactions, explaining, “I mean, this is not like a normal place of employment. I’ve had a bunch of shit [violence] happen.” If a manager witnessed these kinds of behaviors in any other workplace, Stella said, “you would just can ’em. But with this job, you kinda have to say, ‘well, OK,’ and kinda, ya know, make peace.” As many of the managers articulated, they want and need to cultivate some semblance of solidarity among the dancers, but they attempt to do so under a set of working conditions that encourage competition since they compel workers to distinguish themselves by undermining each other.

Jonathan succinctly describes the difficulties of managing dancers who work within a structure that exacerbates competition for a scarcity of tipping customers. He explains that strip clubs are organized such that

you figure take ten women, put ’em in a room as small as the one we’re in now or smaller, um, put a bunch of mirrors in it, all of ’em are trying to look good, all of ’em are catty, you know, they wanna—they’re gonna fight everyone. And then on top of that, a lot of them are drunk, a lot of them are on drugs, a lot of them have problems at home, a lot of them have problems with their families. And then you put ten of them in there, you have five customers, and you make them fight over the money that they need to sustain their lives. And that’s what needs to be managed every night! You know, it’s—I always tell people if you can manage a strip club, you can manage absolutely anything.

Here, Jonathan acknowledges that dancers are placed in opposition to each other in a structure that fosters competition. Though he highlights how all of the dancers’ various “problems” are also to blame for the fights between them, he articulates a keen understanding of how dancers are structurally encouraged to compete with each other “over the money that they need to sustain their lives.” He further explains that “your typical manager can’t handle the unique level of craziness that those places create,” suggesting that there are structural reasons that create “unique level[s] of craziness” in strip clubs.

Hiding Competition from Customers: The Production of Fantasy and Escape

Managers work to minimize the effects of competition among dancers because this dynamic must be hidden from customers. The managers often voiced the belief that customers frequent strip clubs in order to “escape from the ‘real’ world” (Frank 1998, 189). The décor, layout, and atmosphere in strip clubs is intended to “susp[en]d the ‘real,’” an objective that “seems to underlie the very existence of a strip club” (Frank 1998, 189; see also Wood 2000; Weseley 2003). During interactions with customers, dancers must perform the identity of a carefree, fun woman for whom “this is indeed a recreational activity . . . while simultaneously conducting what is most assuredly work for her” (Enck and Preston 1988, 372). The production and performance of a “fantasy” person involves suppressing any unpleasant aspects of one’s life, such as difficulties involved with earning enough money through stripping (Wood 2000, 16).

In their interviews, managers referenced the importance of fantasy for customers. Kate said that if she were a customer, “I’d want to be taken away into, like, a fantasy world.” Brandy explained that, “when guys come in, they want it to be fantasy” and Jonathan said, “I always tell [the dancers] you’re here to fulfill the fantasy of the customers.” Since the space of the strip club is perceived as a fantasy space, customers may be deterred from coming if they witnessed the effects of competition among dancers. Though it is unlikely that customers would be completely oblivious to the competition, managers stressed that they try to prevent customers from witnessing fights. When I asked Ben if he observed dancers fighting over customers, he replied,

Oh, always. Constantly. Constantly, you know? Every guy that comes in here is potential money to them. Every girl wants that guy to dance with them. So in that sense, everybody’s gonna try and get that guy. She’s gonna try and be [the] first [that gets] to him, you know?

In order to diffuse competition, and so that customers are not overtly aware of it, Ben created a set of rules that all the dancers are familiar with. He explains,

I have set rules, like when there’s five guys at the stage [watching the dancer onstage], no girls are allowed to go to the stage and grab a guy for a VIP, you know, so we don’t have that problem [when a dancer says,] “Oh, there’s only three guys giving money all night and that guy was finally tipping me and she walked up here and is doing a dance with him now!” So, you know, I make some certain rules to try and stop it from happening. But it’s just a fact that they’re here to make money, and you know, they try to beat everybody to the punch.

Other managers address competition by directly discussing it with the dancers and setting appropriate standards of behavior. Brandy stresses that dancers must not treat customers like “walking wallets.” She tells the dancers, “don’t pressure him, don’t push him into getting a dance right away because then that guy will never come back” because he will think, “I don’t want to go there, they’re really pushy. They just want my money.” Since management works to ensure that all customers continue to spend money at the club, Brandy explains, “we don’t want customers to feel that way.” Jonathan explains that he does not want to hire “sharks that are gonna force people to spend money or guilt them into spending money” since management “want[s] the people to *want* to spend the money” on VIP dances.

Several managers expressed frustration when dancers “claim” customers. When I asked what this expression refers to, Stella sighed, saying, “If one client has a lot of money, they’ll say, ‘He’s *my* customer! He likes *me*! Why are *you* talking to him? You’re trying to take him away!’ You know, that kind of thing.” Brandy says that “we always tell the girls never to make customers feel like they’re properties of certain girls” and that the dancers are not permitted to “make a customer feel like he belongs to you.” Kate expresses annoyance when dancers claim customers, telling the dancers,

It’s not *your* customer! Work together! You’re like female lions going after the same kill! You’re all going to get to share in the profits, *eventually*. You work together and help each other . . . rather than competing against each other, which is a problem that women have had since the beginning. They are just too competitive [among] themselves.

Here, Kate endorses an ethic of solidarity among the dancers that is contradictory to the structure they work within. Her notion that the dancers should simply “work together” draws on a team or “family” imagery, perhaps in the hope of stressing a collective, instead of an individual, orientation. Kate implies that if the dancers proceed with such an orientation, they will all “get to share in the profits, *eventually*” as though dancers can expect a leveling of their earnings at some point in the future. Kate’s statement that competition “is a problem that women have had since the beginning” implies that competition is an inherent aspect of womanhood instead of an effect of the structure in which strippers work. Without an understanding of how the payment and staffing structure of strip clubs exacerbates and encourages competition among dancers, managers characterize competition as a “natural” behavior for women, a position that aligns with gendered stereotypes.

Conclusion

This analysis of the dilemmas that managers must navigate “behind the curtain” offers a nuanced understanding of managers’ actions in strip clubs and contributes to scholarly understandings of how employers reproduce precarious labor. I argue that strip club managers enforce a payment and staffing structure that encourages and sustains competition among exotic dancers. In this highly competitive environment, managers must regulate workers’ problematic behaviors that are partly an effect of their own organizational practices. In their attempts to diffuse and obfuscate competition, managers employ tactics that individualize and normalize dancers’ distress over the precarity engendered by the payment and staffing structure. Such tactics include attempting to inculcate “positive attitudes,” reiterating the virtue of patience when earnings are low, and encouraging dancers to engage in self-blame. Implying that uncertainty is an inherent part of “the business,” managers also suggest that uncertainty is now part of any job, thus reproducing precarious employment as an unquestioned fact instead of a thoroughly constructed practice in which they are active participants (Vallas and Prenner 2012, 339; see also Purser 2012). Citing labor market trends toward precarious working conditions, managers attempt to justify their own practices while simultaneously reifying, and thus discursively reproducing, expectations of precarious employment (see Vallas and Prenner 2012; Purser 2012; Gregory 2012; Kalleberg 2009).

As wage-earning employees, managers benefit from the current payment and staffing structure in strip clubs, although the competition it produces makes their jobs difficult. A key concern is that dancers are encouraged to distinguish themselves, offering financial incentives for engaging in prostitution. To counteract the incentives dancers may gain from participating in “their own income-generating activities” (Lewis 2006, 309), managers employ surveillance technology and encourage dancers to monitor each other. They position prostitution as productive of competition between dancers, instead of as an effect of the competition in strip clubs. The threat of violence is also an important concern for managers, who strive to maintain a safe working environment and ensure that customers do not witness competition among dancers in their promotion of the strip club as a “fantasy” space.

While the data used to construct this analysis is limited in scope, the analysis offers important insights into how managers sustain and act within the structures that produce competition in strip clubs. An important topic that falls outside the scope of this research is dancers’ perspectives on the competitive environment in strip clubs and the precarious working conditions of exotic dance. Lewis finds that workers in strip clubs report enhanced

autonomy and the ability to “operate as private entrepreneurs” as a result of the tipping system (2006, 298). Does the language of “private entrepreneur[ship]” employed by the dancers in Lewis’s study suggest that dancers increasingly conceptualize their work in response to “the demands of the neoliberal market for personal adaptation to normalized conditions of insecurity” (Gregory 2012, 266)? Similarly, how do the “politically and culturally rooted shifts in work expectations” for exotic dancers contain “the potential to recast the way workers think about and experience the employment relationship” (Vallas and Prenner 2012, 338)? An exploration of dancers’ perspectives could also reveal the degree to which dancers forge (perhaps a nuanced form of) solidarity with one another (Price 2000, 27), despite (or even as a result of) working under conditions that encourage competition. Further research into how workplace dynamics are affected by precarious conditions in other occupations will offer a broader understanding of the relationship between precarious work and the social dynamics of competition among workers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. To protect confidentiality, all names used are pseudonyms.
2. While the bulk of the strip club literature argues that conditions for exotic dancers have changed since the late 1980s, some dancers report precarious working conditions even during the 1980s (Ronai and Ellis 1989; Ronai and Cross 1998).
3. It is unclear whether this practice is new, since some dancers working in the 1980s report paying “rent” through drink sales (Ronai and Cross 1998).
4. To protect the people who generously volunteered their time and energy, I employ a pseudonym for the city.
5. Accurate definitions of sexual acts in the world of sexual commerce are difficult to come by. Strippers in particular occupy a liminal space since they are expected to perform overtly sexual acts, yet are typically prohibited from engaging in activities that lead to sexual release. Within the space constraints of this article, it is difficult to articulate the regulations imposed on strippers’ work without resorting to the arcane and stigmatizing language of “prostitution.” The less value-laden language of “sex work” confuses things further since strippers are

sex workers who are prohibited from selling the kind of sexual acts referred to as prostitution. Thus, I feel compelled to use the term prostitution, but I ask the reader to note that I do so with trepidation.

References

- Azar, Ofer H. 2004. "Optimal Monitoring with External Incentives: The Case of Tipping." *Southern Economic Journal* 71 (1): 170–81.
- Ayres, Ian, Fredrick E. Vars and Nasser Kazariya. 2005. "To Insure Prejudice: Racial Disparities in Taxicab Tipping." *The Yale Law Journal* 114 (7): 1613–74.
- Barton, Bernadette. 2006. *Stripped: Inside the Lives of Exotic Dancers*. New York: New York University Press.
- Barton, Bernadette. 2007. "Managing the Toll of Stripping: Boundary Setting among Exotic Dancers." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36:571–96.
- Barton, Bernadette and Constance L. Hardesty. 2010. "Spirituality and Stripping: Exotic Dancers Narrate the Body Ekstasis." *Symbolic Interaction* 33 (2): 280–96.
- Bradley-Engen, Mindy S., and Jeffrey T. Ulmer. 2009. "Social Worlds of Stripping: The Processual Orders of Exotic Dance." *Sociological Quarterly* 50:29–60.
- Brewster, Zachary W. 2003. "Behavioral and Interactional Patterns of Strip Club Patrons: Tipping Techniques and Club Attendance." *Deviant Behavior* 24: 221–43.
- Bruckert, Chris. 2002. *Taking It Off, Putting It On: Women in the Strip Trade*. London: Women's Press.
- Carey, Sandra Harley, Robert A. Peterson, and Louis K. Sharpe. 1974. "A Study of Recruitment and Socialization into Deviant Female Occupations." *Sociological Symposium* 11:11–24.
- Dewey, Susan. 2011. *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Egan, R. Danielle. 2004. "Eyeing the Scene: The Uses and (Re)uses of Surveillance Cameras in an Exotic Dance Club." *Critical Sociology* 30:299–319.
- Egan, R. Danielle. 2005. "Emotional Consumption: Mapping Love and Masochism in an Exotic Dance Club." *Body and Society* 11:87–108.
- Enck, Graves E., and James D. Preston. 1988. "Counterfeit Intimacy: A Dramaturgical Analysis of an Erotic Performance." *Deviant Behavior* 9: 369–81.
- Fischer, Carrie Benson. 1996. "Employee Rights in Sex Work: The Struggle for Dancers' Rights as Employees." *Law and Inequality* 14:521.
- Fogel, Curtis A., and Andrea Quinlan. 2011. "Dancing Naked: Precarious Labor in the Contemporary Female Strip Trade." *Canadian Social Science* 7 (2): 51–56.
- Frank, Katherine. 1998. "The Production of Identity and the Negotiation of Intimacy in a 'Gentleman's Club.'" *Sexualities* 1 (2): 175–201.
- Frank, Katherine. 2002. *G-strings and Sympathy: Strip Club Regulars and Male Desire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Frank, Katherine. 2005. "Exploring the Motivation and Fantasies of Strip Club Customers in Relation to Legal Regulations." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 34 (5): 487–504.

- Frank, Katherine. 2007. "Thinking Critically about Strip Club Research." *Sexualities* 10 (4): 501–17.
- Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transactions.
- Grant, Melissa Gira. 2012. "Organized Labor's Newest Heroes: Strippers." *The Atlantic*, November 19. <http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2012/11/organized-labors-newest-heroes-strippers/265376/> (accessed February 16, 2015).
- Gregory, Karen. 2012. "Negotiating Precarity: Tarot as Spiritual Entrepreneurialism." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 40 (3/4): 264–80.
- Hanna, Judith Lynne. 2012. *Naked Truth: Strip Clubs, Democracy and a Christian Right*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Holsopple, Kelly. 1998. "Strip Clubs According to Strippers: Exposing Workplace Sexual Violence." Kelly Holsopple faculty webpage, University of Rhode Island. <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/stripc1.htm> (accessed November 29, 2010).
- Kalleberg, Arnie L. 2009. "Precarious Work, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition." *American Sociological Review* 74 (1): 1–22.
- Kalleberg, Arnie L. 2011. *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s to 2000s*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Kwidzinski, Anna. 2014. "More Exotic Dancers' Misclassification Suits Dispute Clubs' Business Model, Lawyers Say." *Bloomberg BNA*, August 11. <http://www.bna.com/exotic-dancers-misclassification-n17179893648/> (accessed February 16, 2015).
- Lavin, Melissa F. 2013. "Rule Making and Rule Breaking: Strip Club Social Control Regarding Alcohol and Other Drugs." *Deviant Behavior* 24 (5): 361–83.
- Lewis, Jacqueline. 2006. "'I'll Scratch Your Back if You'll Scratch Mine': The Role of Reciprocity, Power and Autonomy in the Strip Club." *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 43 (3): 297–311.
- Matthews, Christopher. 2014. "Strippers Are Winning the Fight for a Minimum Wage." January 15. <http://business.time.com/2014/01/15/strippers-are-winning-the-fight-for-a-minimum-wage/> (accessed February 18, 2015).
- Mavin, Sharon, and Gina Grandy. 2013. "Doing Gender Well and Differently in Dirty Work: The Case of Exotic Dancing." *Gender, Work and Organization* 20 (3): 232–51.
- McCaghy, C. H., and J. K. Skipper Jr. 1972. "Stripping: Anatomy of a Deviant Lifestyle." In *Life Styles: Diversity in American Society*, edited by S. D. Feldman and G. W. Thielbar, 362–73. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Murphy, Alexandra. 2003. "The Dialectical Gaze: Exploring the Subject-Object Tension in the Performances of Women Who Strip." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 32 (3): 305–35.
- New York State Community Action Association. 2010. "2010 Poverty Report." http://www.nyscommunityaction.org/poverty_reports.cfm?location=nystate§ion=2010 (accessed December 14, 2010).

- New York State Community Action Association. 2013. "2013 Poverty Report." http://ams.nyscommunityaction.org/Resources/Documents/News/NYSCAAs_2013_Poverty_Report.pdf (accessed February 19, 2015).
- New York State Liquor Authority Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control. 2013. New York State Liquor Authority Retail Licensees' Handbook. <https://www.sla.ny.gov/system/files/StateLiquorAuthority-RetailLicenseesHandbook.pdf> (accessed October 1, 2015).
- O'Brien, Rebecca Davis. 2012. "Are Exotic Dancers Employees or Independent Contractors?: Case Asks if Dancers Are Entitled to a Minimum Wage and Benefits." *The Wall Street Journal*. December 2. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/are-exotic-dancers-employees-or-independent-contractors-1417570961> (accessed February 16, 2015).
- Pasko, Lisa. 2002. "Naked Power: Stripping as a Confidence Game." *Sexualities* 5 (1): 49–66.
- Paules, Greta F. 1991. *Dishing It Out: Power and Resistance among Waitresses in a New Jersey Restaurant*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Price, Kim. 2000. "Stripping Women: Workers' Control in Strip Clubs." *Unusual Occupations* 11:3–33.
- Price, Kim. 2008. "Keeping the Dancers in Check: The Gendered Organization of Stripping Work in The Lion's Den." *Gender & Society* 22 (3): 367–89.
- Puar, Jasbir, Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejic, and Isabell Lorey. 2012. "Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable." *The Drama Review* 56 (4): 163–77.
- Purser, Gretchen. 2012. "The Labor of Liminality." *Labour, Capital and Society* 41 (1): 10–36.
- Ronai, Carol Rambo. 1992. "Managing Aging in Young Adulthood: The 'Aging' Table Dancer." *Journal of Aging Studies* 6 (4): 307–17.
- Ronai, Carol Rambo, and Rebecca Cross. 1998. "Dancing with Identity: Narrative Resistance Strategies of Male and Female Stripteasers." *Deviant Behavior* 19:99–119.
- Ronai, Carol Rambo, and Carolyn Ellis. 1989. "Turn-Ons for Money: Interactional Strategies of the Table Dancer." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 18 (3): 271–98.
- Sallaz, Jeffrey J. 2002. "The House Rules: Autonomy and Interests among Service Workers in the Contemporary Casino Industry." *Work and Occupations* 29 (4): 394–427.
- Sanchez, Lisa E. 1997. "Boundaries of Legitimacy: Sex, Violence, Citizenship, and Community in a Local Sexual Economy." *Law and Social Inquiry* 22 (3): 543–80.
- Skipper, James K., Jr. 1970. "Stripteasers: The Anatomy and Career Contingencies of a Deviant Occupation." *Social Problems* 17:391–405.
- Skipper, James K., Jr., and Charles H. McCaghy. 1971. "Stripteasing: A Sex Oriented Occupation." In *Studies in the Sociology of Sex*, edited by J. M. Henslin, 275–96. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

- Spivey, Sue E. 2005. "Distancing and Solidarity as Resistance to Sexual Objectification in a Nude Bar." *Deviant Behavior* 26 (5): 417–37.
- Stone, Maggie McCandless. 2014. "'This Could Be a Good Avenue for You': Influential Strategies in the Hiring of Exotic Dancers." *Deviant Behavior* 35:727–41.
- Sweet, N., and R. Tewksbury. 2000a. "'What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?' Pathways to a Career in Stripping." *Sociological Spectrum* 20:325–43.
- Sweet, N., and R. Tewksbury. 2000b. "Entry, Maintenance and Departure for a Career in the Sex Industry: Strippers' Experiences of the Occupational Costs and Rewards." *Humanity and Society* 24:136–61.
- Thompson, William, Jackie L. Harred, and Barbara E. Burks. 2003. "Managing the Stigma of Topless Dancing: A Decade Later." *Deviant Behavior* 24 (6): 551–70.
- Thompson, William E., and Harred Jackie L. 1992. "Topless Dancers: Managing Stigma in a Deviant Occupation." *Deviant Behavior* 13 (3): 291–311.
- Trautner, Mary Nell. 2005. "Doing Gender, Doing Class: The Performance of Sexuality in Exotic Dance Clubs." *Gender & Society* 19 (6): 771–88.
- Vallas, Steven, and Christopher Prenner. 2012. "Dualism, Job Polarization and the Social Construction of Precarious Work." *Work and Occupations* 39 (4): 331–53.
- Wahab, Stephanie, Lynda M. Baker, Julie M. Smith, Kristy Cooper, and Kari Lerum. 2011. "Exotic Dance Research: A Review of the Literature from 1970 to 2008." *Sexuality & Culture* 15:56–79.
- Weitzer, Ronald. 2009. "Sociology of Sex Work." *Annual Review of Sociology* 35:213–34.
- Weseley, Jennifer. 2002. "Growing up Sexualized: Issues of Power and Violence in the Childhood and Adult Lives of Female Exotic Dancers." *Violence Against Women* 8:1186–1211.
- Weseley, Jennifer. 2003. "Exotic Dancing and the Negotiation of Identity: The Multiple Uses of Body Technologies." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 32 (6): 643–69.
- Williams, Damian T. 2009. "Grounding the Regime of Precarious Employment: Homeless Day Laborers' Negotiation of the Job Queue." *Work and Occupations* 36 (3): 209–46.
- Wood, Elizabeth Anne. 2000. "Working in the Fantasy Factory: The Attention Hypothesis and the Enactment of Masculine Power in Strip Clubs." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 29 (1): 5–31.

Author Biography

Liz Mount is a PhD candidate in sociology at Syracuse University. Her research interests include gender, sexualities, organizations, social movements and global sociology.