Dancing on shaky ground: the power-laden interactions between exotic dancers and their customers

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Dancing on shaky ground: The power-laden interactions between exotic dancers and their customers

by

Jensiné Martha Anahita

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Sociology

Major Professors: Cynthia D. Anderson and Jacquelyn Litt

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2000
This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of

Jensiné Martha Anahita

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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CHAPTER ONE

GIVING THEM SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT: INTRODUCTION

When I first contemplated graduate school, I thought that I would study prostitutes. I was fascinated with how sex-for-hire and feminism might mesh or might come into conflict with each other. Having been schooled over two decades by the radical feminist analysis of the evils of the patriarchal social system and the victimization of women who work within the sex industry, I believed that talking with prostitutes might illuminate my politics. I wanted to document my belief that prostitutes possessed personal power, in contrast to the radical feminist party line that emphasized their status as victims. However, difficulty in locating the underground world of prostitutes in the sparsely populated and staunchly conservative Midwestern state where I entered school forced me to look elsewhere for a topic.

As I scrounged around for a new and more accessible population to study, exotic dancers seemed suddenly to burst into focus. Dancers had become the site for local, state, and even federal legislation and court challenges in the middle 1990s, and the Midwestern state where I was located was a central part of the debates. As a population, exotic dancers possessed all of the criteria that I had set for my thesis topic: they were considered to be sex workers, and many, perhaps nearly all, were female; there was little written specifically about exotic dancers in the sociological literature, and little that was positive about them in the feminist literature, so I would be able to plug existing holes; exotic dancers were even in the
upper Midwest, I discovered to my delight, and they provided me with the highly visible population that I was seeking. Thus, I began my exploration of the world of the exotic dancer with purely feminist and sociological intentions. Over the course of my work, however, my feminist credentials, as well as my sociological credentials, would be called into question. As I shall illustrate, the rhetoric that my associates used when challenging my research topic was echoed by the mainstream media, local politicians, neighborhood activists, and business owners.

Rhetoric About Exotic Dancing in Iowa in the Late 1990s

I first became interested in studying Midwestern exotic dancers when Big Earl Hamilton, owner of the strip club Big Earl's Goldmine, was gunned down in the parking lot of his Des Moines business in 1996 (Hoffman 1998). Three years later, his murder is still unsolved, despite the offer of a $21,000 reward for information on his killer (Alex 1998). The local police have bandied around several theories, and local newspapers have written dozens of articles on the murder and its famous victim. These newspaper accounts are disturbing to me in several ways.

First, the articles often seem to be nearly mocking in their descriptions of Hamilton, his business, and the employees who worked for him. They contain double entendres in vain attempts to be humorous. The articles also are factually confusing. For example, one article equates streetworking prostitutes with exotic dancers, although the two occupations are markedly different in terms of participants, job structure, legality, visibility, and other characteristics. The articles are also burdened with moral overtones, often with quotations not from friends and family members of the murdered businessman, but with quotations from
ministers and other business owners who decry the location of Hamilton’s strip club near schools, other businesses, and churches. Words such as “pervert” and “immoral” are commonplace in articles about Hamilton’s murder. Some of the articles seem to imply that Hamilton, as the owner of a strip club, got what he deserved.

Meanwhile, all over Iowa in the 1990s, rhetoric about exotic dancing fueled attempts to shut down clubs and to put dancers out of business. Police, mayors, elected council members, and other city officials and neighborhood activists vowed to eliminate exotic dancing from Iowa, and freely used rhetoric about dancers in order to achieve their goals. In an extraordinary move in Ames, for example, the chief of police requested that the city enact an ordinance outlawing physical contact between dancers and customers in strip clubs, claiming that three strip clubs in one town are three too many (“Ames Police Chief: Outlaw Lap Dancing” 1996). When for a brief period in 1998 all three clubs had been closed as a result of heavy-handed police tactics (including entrapment of the owner of one club) and the loss of business and resulting decline of revenue, a Des Moines Register headline declared “Story County Free of Strip Clubs” (October 18, 1998). The use of the word “free” seems odd when one realizes that three businesses had been shut down, one owner imprisoned due to police entrapment, and who knows how many dancers, bartenders, bouncers, and other employees had lost their jobs.

The state legislators in Iowa were also not immune to inflammatory rhetoric. Rhetoric fueling local fears about immorality, public indecency, illicit sexual activity, molested school children, increased availability of drugs, underage drinking, and contamination of neighborhoods was used by anti-exotic dancing activists who pressured state legislators in
1997 to pass a state law that prohibited nudity in clubs that served alcohol. The intent of this law was to exert economic pressure on clubs by eliminating their main source of revenue: alcohol.

City officials across Iowa also began to implement strategic zoning ordinances in their attempts to close down clubs featuring exotic dancers. Some of these ordinances were later found to be illegal by some courts, but not before another strip club was forced to shut down in Ames. Again, the rhetoric in the newspapers about the pressure on the strip clubs seems curious in the light of the fact that legitimate business owners were being forced out of business, often at the request of local police officers and self-righteous zealots, and that employees were being put out of work. Reporters seemed to be making fun of the clubs, and of the dancers. For example, in a recent article about a church’s attempts to close down an existing club by manipulating zoning regulations, the first sentence reads: "[a] controversy erupted...between a church and a gentlemen’s club over who’s in the right and who’s in the buff" (Pierre 1999).

Strip clubs quickly learned to use rhetoric in order to stay in business. Throughout Iowa, business owners cleverly circumvented laws that were designed to put them out of business, or at the very least, to restrict their income and to impose strictures on the dancers’ ability to receive tips. In Scott County, for example, the owner of a strip club inserted the word "theatre" into the name of his business, which invoked constitutional protections to the right of personal expression (Alex 1998), in this case, public nudity.

Meanwhile, my partner was offered a permanent position at a university in northern Wisconsin and she moved to the area in fall, 1998. When I was visiting her one weekend,
there was a news item about strip clubs in her small harbor town. An ad hoc coalition of religious conservatives was picketing, insisting that the city ban strip clubs in the area. Their rhetoric matched the kinds of rhetoric that I had heard in Iowa: concerns about immorality, public indecency, proximity to school children, etc.

All of this media attention caught my eye when day after day some new development occurred on the exotic dancing front. When it came time to commit to a topic for my thesis, I chose exotic dancers. My journey into rhetoric, however, was only beginning.

Feminist Anxieties and Personal Conflicts

Over lunch at a local café, a casual friend exhorted me to reconsider my decision to study exotic dancers. She had just finished reading Andrea Dworkin's *Intercourse* (1987) and had become convinced through her reading that the presence of exotic dancing heightened the risk of rape and incest for all women. She feared that my drawing attention to dancers would valorize their occupation, and that the women trapped within would never escape their tortured world of sexual abuse. Knowing that we both were feminists, she wondered what my motives were in studying exotic dancers. "How can you be a feminist, and still do this?" she asked. This single lunchtime conversation was a distillation of the feminist anti-pornography viewpoint about exotic dancers and sex workers in general, as well as a prelude to the tensions between feminists about sex work. I shall discuss these tensions in some detail in the next chapter.

Later that week I was having dinner with members of a lesbian and gay academic organization. I overheard three gay men, none of whom I knew well, talking about my research. One man, a humanities professor, scoffed at the idea of studying female exotic
dancers, saying that there was nothing academic about it. He was surprised that my sociology
department would find it an appropriate topic. One of his companions noted that I probably
had only prurient interests in mind when I chose to study exotic dancers.

Within several weeks, I began to wonder myself about what my motives were in
choosing exotic dancers as my thesis topic. I was having dinner in a restaurant that handily
overlooked the parking lot of Blondies, which in early 1998 was the sole surviving strip club
in Ames. I began to realize the huge "ick" factor involved in my research when I watched a
man who had just come out of the club. He stopped to unlock the trunk of his car and took
out a roll of paper towels. My dinner companion and I wondered why he was doing this. He
got into the driver's seat, and ten minutes he emerged again to place the roll of paper towels
back into his truck. We surmised that he had been masturbating in the parking lot. In the
months to come I would interview the head of the city's vice department who confirmed that
parking lot masturbation was common. According to an online e-zine for exotic dancers,
dancers in a Canadian city even had a nickname for such men: parking lot jockeys.

The specters of male public masturbation, questions about my feminist and
sociologist credentials, and accusations of prurience nearly deterred me from studying exotic
dancers. It was at this point, when I was experiencing serious crises about my topic, that I re-
discovered the voices of feminist sex workers. Wendy Chapkis' *Live Sex Acts* (1997), Jill
Nagle's *Whores and Other Feminists* (1997), and the online e-zine *Exotic Dancers Alliance,*
were instrumental in my realization that exotic dancers had personal agency and were not
necessarily languishing as passive victims of the heteropatriarchal system where much
radical anti-pornography feminist politics located them. Discussions with Jackie Litt, one of
the chairs of my thesis committee, helped to focus my interest towards discovering how this personal agency is manifested.

In the course of conducting the review of the literature on exotic dancers, I discovered Carol Rambo Ronai. Ronai, a sociology professor and former exotic dancer, wrote about her experiences in a number of works, including her dissertation. I gingerly e-mailed her, asking if she had done further work on exotic dancers and was gratified when she sent me citations for several articles and a book chapter that she had written on the subject. "What is your interest in dancers?" she wrote. "Are you, by chance, a dancer yourself?" (Ronai, e-mail, 1998.) Again, my motives were being questioned; this time, however, the question seemed friendly.

I was still wondering whether I could study dancers and continue to be viewed as a feminist when I chanced to meet Julia Harms Cannon, another sociology professor, at the 1998 Midwest Sociological Society meeting. Cannon studied amateur strippers, and had an article or two out for review. After her session, I chatted with her about my work, pointedly asking her if I could be a feminist and still study exotic dancers. She was enthusiastically supportive and emphatically declared that this work could be feminist, was worthwhile, and was clearly of sociological interest. Giving me her card, she invited me to e-mail her.

Through my conversations with Cannon, Ronai, and a later lunchtime talk with co-chair of my committee Cynthia D. Anderson, I solidified my conviction that I could be a staunch feminist, and still study exotic dancers. Jackie Litt, co-chair of my committee, and Leslie Bloom, author of *Under the Sign of Hope*, introduced me to the burgeoning field of
feminist methodology. The relief of these feminist assurances was enormous. Yet I still had to find a specific sociological focus for my thesis project.

A class taken with Cynthia Anderson on the sociology of work provided me with part of the focus I needed. I would study exotic dancers as workers, particularly workers who possessed personal agency, yet were subject to the same kinds of structural pressures and constraints as were other, more mundane workers. At Anderson's suggestion, I read Robin Leidner's *Fast Food, Fast Talk* (1993). Here I discovered that service workers, especially those who interact intimately with their customers, utilize a variety of strategies, often implemented by the corporation for which they work, in order to exert some measure of control over their customers. I wondered if exotic dancers could be classified as service workers, and if they also utilized interactional strategies. A brief section of an early article by Ronai and Ellis (1989) maintained that dancers did employ interactional strategies. These researches provided me with more stones for the foundation of my exploration.

Ronai also provided me with ideas when, in an email, she exhorted me to examine the dancers utilizing Symbolic Interactionism. It was not enough, I soon discovered, to scrutinize the outward manifestations of interactions between dancer and customer without also scrutinizing their symbolic value. Symbolic Interactionism, as a framework for examining the relationships between dancers and customers, allowed me to realize how dancers utilized symbols in order to manipulate customers. In addition, this approach helped me to see how customers willingly fit themselves into dancer routines. I began to see that the customers understood the symbols created by the dancers, and that they shared common interpretations of the meanings.
At last I felt that I was ready to begin the work of observing dancers, interviewing them, and talking with customers. I believed that, finally, my motives for studying this population and occupation seemed purely sociological, and probably feminist as well. I was ready to give my lunchtime feminist friend, the three gay professors, and the other naysayers about my research something to talk about.

**Nagging Question**

The main question that I wanted to answer by doing this work was this: who holds the power in the interactions between exotic dancers and their customers? From what I had read, I assumed that dancers held the power. So I proposed to ask them.

I interviewed twelve exotic dancers in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Along the way I also interviewed three men in Iowa who were regular customers in strip clubs, and the head of the vice department of a small Iowa town that commonly had between one and three strip bars at a time. “Who holds the power?” I asked all of these individuals.

The answer to this question lies within these pages. But I would like to give you a sample of what dancers told me about who holds the power in their interactions with customers. Sparkle, who you will hear more from in Chapter Four, answered my question, “who holds the power?”, like this:

*Me! [laughs] I don’t really understand why women have so much power over men. I really don’t understand why that is. But it is true. Men will just do whatever a dancer tells them to do.*

Is it really as simple as that? I wondered. Do dancers have the power just because they are women? Do women really have that much power over men? Another dancer, Lexus, said this about power:
We always have the power. Because of the simple fact that if a guy comes in and he knows what he’s here to do then you have a situation where we can do whatever we want. You should never let the customer feel like he’s overpowering you. Like I said, they will always try to get over on you. You know. You always got to stand on your own two feet, keep on your toes.

Lexus’ discussion about power made me think that dancers have to work at maintaining power, that power does not just manifest itself based on gender, as Sparkle’s comment had implied. I asked another dancer, Mich’e, who she thought controlled the relationship between dancers and customers:

We control them. I don’t know how to put it...Like...we know how to tease them. So we have the control, you know? If we really want that money, we can go for it. We can get it. So I feel like we have the control. They might have control over their money, but we have the control over their mind.

This last dancer, who by the way had four years experience dancing, was clear that not only do dancers have to work at maintaining the power in the relationship, but that there are certain strategies that can be utilized to do so. I set out to discover what kinds of strategies dancers utilize to maintain the control that Mich’e insisted dancers held. I hope to illustrate in this paper that the strategies dancers use, which I will call interactional strategies (Leidner 1993), not only give dancers the power over customers and therefore control of the dancer-customer relationship, but they also create and maintain the personal agency of the dancers.

At this point you may be wondering what kinds of things dancers do to maintain their power over customers. Maybe you have never been in a strip club and have only cultural stereotypes to draw upon. In this next section I will describe the strip club setting, and detail some of the activities that take place within it.
Strip Club Environment

Unless you have been in a strip club, you probably have little idea about what activities really take place. I know that I was unprepared before I undertook this research, and that I had based my assumptions about strip clubs and exotic dancers on what I had seen in movies and read in the newspapers. Although in later chapters I will describe in some detail the research sites and the activities that I witnessed, I think that it is important for you, from the outset, to get a sense of what happens in strip clubs. In this section, I will answer three questions as a way to introduce you to the strip club environment and the people who populate it: what clubs look like on the inside; what dancers do; and, what customers do.

For this research, I visited four strip clubs and made observations in a parking lot outside of a fifth club that closed soon after I began my work. Two of the clubs are in an industrial/harbor town in northern Wisconsin; one is in a mid-size city in northern Minnesota; one is in a university town in Iowa, as was the one that closed while I was conducting preliminary research. Most of the clubs are located in similar neighborhoods, in the decaying part of downtown areas, near other bars. One Wisconsin club is located in the seediest part of town, in a warehouse district that is populated at night only by bar patrons. Its parking lot is littered with cigarette butts, crushed beer cans, empty liquor bottles, used condoms, and occasionally, empty syringes. Across the street from this club is another strip club, older than the first club, and more run-down in appearance. Both of these Wisconsin clubs are facing new legal pressure to remove their bright neon pink lights that advertise their dancers due to a new zoning regulation that is designed to tone down what community members call their sleazy appearance. The new law makes it illegal to have the words “girl”,
“nude”, “topless”, or “live”, or even “dancer” on their signs, and also outlaws the use of bright pink colors on outdoor signs.

The Iowa club that still remains open is also in a somewhat decaying area of downtown. Next to this club is another bar, and behind it is a funeral home; other businesses on the block are closed when the bar is doing its best business: 7:00 PM to 2:00 AM. Flashing neon lights are not legal in the town where this club is located, and the sign that does advertise the bar is discreet; one would have to know where to look for this bar, as it does not immediately proclaim itself as a strip club.

The handful of strip clubs that I went to as part of this research are similar in appearance on the inside, as well as on the outside. Most of the clubs have an anteroom where bouncers scrutinize patrons as they enter, asking for IDs when appropriate. The Iowa club has a metal detector at the door that patrons walk through. There had been a stabbing at this club in the week I first approached it as a research site. The owner’s father was Big Earl Hamilton, who had been murdered two years before. Security is tight at this club, tighter than the other clubs, where apparently neither stabbings nor shootings had occurred in recent history. Still, there are bouncers employed at all but one club that I researched. All of the bouncers are hefty, imposing men, who capitalize on their size and deliberately court an intimidating impression, as I will discuss further in later chapters.

The clubs I studied are rather dark places inside. Neon beer signs adorn the walls, black lights are positioned above the stage, and dim track lighting illuminates the doorways. Mirrors provide a backdrop behind the bar and often embellish the walls as well. These mirrors not only make the clubs feel bigger, they also provide bouncers and managers tools
to discreetly observe activities in the club. This constant scrutiny serves important purposes. It keeps illegal behaviors to a minimum, reminds customers and dancers alike about the limits of the law, and makes the dancers feel safer. The mirrors also proved useful to me as a researcher, as it allowed me to make observations without always having to be obvious while doing so.

Also adorning the walls of the strip clubs are promotional pictures of touring exotic dancers. The big names in the business are featured nude or nearly nude in provocative poses. My favorite photo was of a dancer who is advertised as having HH-size breasts. She is lying in an enormous martini glass with a huge green olive between her spread legs. Many times the photos are signed by the famous dancer, indicating that she had at one point been featured on the stage of that particular club.

The strip clubs I studied featured raised stages where the dancers perform. In one club there is a narrow railing that separates dancers from their customers. This acts as a cue to customers that they are not allowed to touch the dancers. There are always a row of chairs and tables situated close to the stage. Customers who sit at these tables are given the most attention by exotic dancers. According to the dancers I interviewed, customers who sit at these tables come to the club to interact with dancers, and thus are there to tip.

Although the laws governing dancer behavior differ slightly from state to state, and even differ by municipality, the four clubs that I studied enforced similar rules. Dancers usually arrive on stage in skimpy costumes which they remove as they perform. In the clubs where I observed, dancers keep on at least a G-string. In Iowa, state law mandates that
nipples have to be covered; dancers put iridescent or glitter nail polish on their nipples in order to comply with this law.

Customers are encouraged to tip the dancers. In fact, the clubs I studied are typical of other strip clubs in that they do not pay their dancers a wage. Instead, dancers must rely on tips as their sole source of income. In addition, two of the clubs I studied require dancers to pay the club a nightly fee for the privilege of dancing; in the newer, more upscale club in Wisconsin, dancers must pay fifteen dollars a night to perform. At the Iowa club, dancers have to either talk customers into buying five special “dancer drinks” (explained in detail below) or pay a percentage of their total tips to the club. In addition, they are expected to tip the bouncers. Since the dancers I studied rely only on tips for their income, generating tips is their primary focus.

Customers typically stuff dollar bills into dancers’ G-strings as a tipping method. Some dancers will also perform “tricks” to accept tips, as I will talk about in detail in Chapter Four. One of the biggest income generating techniques for dancers is performing a private dance. A private dance, also known as a table dance or couch dance in strip club parlance, is a dance performed for a customer or small group of customers at their table or in a more secluded area, often outfitted with couches, for a pre-negotiated tip. Private dances range in cost from a minimum of ten to twenty dollars; customers are encouraged to tip more than this, and dancers often quote higher prices, as you will learn later. Private dances often entail the dancer simply stripping while dancing just inches from her customer(s). In Iowa and Wisconsin, where some degree of dancer-initiated touching is legally allowed, dancers also
might rub their buttocks or breasts on customers. In all clubs I visited, customers are strictly
forbidden by law from touching dancers.

Almost all of the customers in the strip clubs I visited were male. Occasionally a
woman would come in with a male date. Middle-aged men tend to come alone, while
younger, college-aged men tend to come in pairs or in small groups. While in the clubs,
customers engage in a range of activities. Roughly one third of customers tend to sit next to
the stage, actively interacting with dancers. These customers talk with the dancers, intently
watch them perform, and usually tip them. Other customers sit at the bar and drink, or watch
sports on TV. The strip clubs have pool tables and one has video games where customers
also play either alone or in groups.

Alcohol is served at all of the clubs that I studied. But clubs also served juice, coffee,
and pop, which became my mainstay when I visited. Drinks range in price from two dollars
for a beer or pop to nearly five dollars for mixed drinks. Customers also are encouraged to
purchase drinks for dancers at five dollars each. Dancer drinks are either non-alcoholic or
contain only a hint of alcohol, although most customers did not seem to know this when they
plopped down their bill for a dancer drink. Depending on the club, dancers might be required
to talk customers into purchasing a certain number of these drinks. The club in Iowa, for
example, requires that dancers sell at least five of these drinks a night. If a dancer does not
sell the minimum required number, she then has to pay the club out of her tip income.

Overuse of alcohol by customers, and sometimes by dancers, became a common sight
over the course of my research. There were numerous times when I witnessed a drunken
customer acting in what would be considered inappropriate ways because of the amount of
alcohol that he had consumed. In the clubs where there were bouncers, these customers were quickly escorted out, although usually with a friendly pat on the back and an invitation to come back another night.

As you will see in Chapters Four and Five, dancers employ a wide range of strategies to control their customers’ behavior, including managing their drunkenness. I maintain throughout that the strategies that dancers utilize work to solidify their power over their customers, and help them to create and to maintain their personal agency. In this next section, I will give you a brief roadmap\(^1\) to the thesis to guide you on your journey through this thesis.

**Roadmap to the Thesis**

The thesis consists of six chapters and references. Chapter Two, the literature review, will begin the discussion about exotic dancers with a history of how they have been scrutinized from a variety of sociological and feminist perspectives. This chapter will demonstrate that although there is some overlap between perspectives, they roughly follow a chronological order. The first sociological perspective to study exotic dancers was the deviance perspective, popular during the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. The deviance perspective searched for causes of exotic dancers’ deviance, how dancers become labeled as deviant, and how they managed the stigma of their deviant occupation. The second sociological perspective to study exotic dancers was the feminist anti-porn perspective; the heyday of this perspective began in the late 1970s to early-1980s, and continues today,

\(^1\) Thanks to Cynthia D. Anderson for suggesting this term.
though its influence seems to be waning. These activists examined exotic dancers along with other sex workers, and labeled them powerless, victimized pawns of the patriarchal social system. Beginning in the late 1980s and escalating rapidly are the voices of feminist sex workers and their advocates who maintain that dancers are active agents, and that any oppression that they suffer is due to the stigma placed on their occupation, and to their status as service workers.

Chapter Three, a discussion of the methodology utilized for this study, lays out the goals of the research. In this chapter I introduce the concept of the interactional power that simmers between dancers and customers. I rationalize my choice of using an ethnographic field study as my approach to the research and detail some of the personal crises that I experienced during the first few research forays into the strip club environment. I detail how I began my work with naturalistic observation, and then moved to participant observation, and finally, to interviews. In Chapter Three I also talk about the research sites themselves, including choosing the sites, and the multiple ways that I tried to “get in” before finally, breathlessly, achieving successful entry. I talk about how I collected data, and invest a modest amount of words in describing some of the limitations and difficulties of my chosen methods. Finally, Chapter Three lays out my approach for analyzing the mountain of data that I gathered over the course of my research.

Chapter Four is where you will finally get to know the twelve dancers I interviewed. I will also describe a variety of the interactional strategies that dancers use, and begin to catalogue them. Here I argue that exotic dancers utilize particular interactional strategies in their dealings with customers in order to manipulate customers into tipping and purchasing
private dances. These strategies include targeting their stage performances to customers, engaging in regular conversations with them, using visual communication with customers, and co-creating fantasies with them. Dancers also capitalize on emotional labor and gender expectations to manipulate customers, as you will discover. You will see that dancers are creative and energetic in their exploitation of these interactional strategies. You might even be surprised at how well the strategies work for the women interviewed.

Chapter Five sojourns deeper into the heart of my work. In this chapter I show that even though dancers are creative and energetic in their use of interactional strategies to get customers to tip them and to pay for private dances, many times customers resist. In this chapter, you will find out about the many types of strategies dancers use to manage these resisting, non-compliant customers. There is a wide range of different interactional strategies available to dancers, and they escalate their reactions and use of particular strategies to match the offensiveness of customers’ non-compliant behavior. You will discover, for example, that dancers talk to customers first, including yelling at them. The second line of defense is relying on symbolism, and reminding customers of other powers, including the power of bouncers. Teasing and embarrassing customers, physically controlling them, and withdrawing attention from offenders round out the next stage of interactional strategies. When and if those strategies fail, dancers call upon the assistance of others, hit their customers, and finally, have them ejected from the club.

Chapter Six is the concluding chapter. This chapter pulls together my findings and asks this hard question: did I really demonstrate that dancers have control over their customers? Is illustrating how dancers may control the interactions between themselves and
their customers enough to demonstrate that dancers have personal power? I bring in the voices of the three customers and two bouncers that I interviewed to help bolster my claim that dancers do, indeed, possess power in the strip club. But I also offer more sinister locations of power. I call upon the words of two classical theorists in my examination of the nature of power: Weber and Marx. I also call upon a contemporary theorist, Jacquelyn Zita, who locates power within hegemonic heteromasculinity. And finally, Robin Leidner, who contends that it is really corporations who hold the power. In this concluding chapter, I also offer some of my reflections on my research. There are significant limitations to my work, and I discuss these in this chapter, as well. A modest analysis of the contributions that my research on exotic dancers might make to the field of sociological theory and methodology, and to feminist theory and praxis are other topics that I address in this last chapter. I conclude with a series of suggestions for future research, including research that I would be interested in pursuing.
CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL PATTERNS:
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Exotic dancers have been under scrutiny by sociologists since at least the mid-1960s when the first handful of articles and papers on strippers and topless dancers appeared in the sociological record. Even though exotic dancing in one form or another has been a staple of Western entertainment in urban areas and in traveling carnivals since the 1830s (Price 1996), prior to the mid-1960s, little was written about the field or the women who occupied it. In this chapter, I will describe the various perspectives that the analysis of exotic dancing has taken.

The first section of this chapter will provide an overview of how the deviance perspective has shaped the discourse about exotic dancers. Here I will discuss how the occupation of stripping has been constructed as deviant, and how this discourse has resulted in strippers being studied as social deviants. The discussion of deviance will be followed by notes on the contributions that feminism has made to the study of exotic dancers, beginning with feminist challenges to the deviancy perspective, and then moving to how the late 1970s and 1980s Second Wave feminist movement has viewed exotic dancing and sex work in general. Concluding the discussion of feminist contributions to the study of exotic dancing will be highlights from the voices of feminist sex workers and their allies, who are participants in the Third Wave of feminism. A primary point that feminist sex workers, and indeed, most Third Wave feminists, make about women who are exotic dancers is that they should be treated as if they have personal agency. The final section of this chapter will
further explore exotic dancers as owners of personal agency through an examination of their status as workers. Here I will detail some of the literature on work, specifically focusing on service workers. In this section, I discuss the characteristics of exotic dancing as an occupation that fits the criteria for service work. Most importantly, in this final section I introduce Leidner’s concept of interactive service work, a concept that I will use extensively in Chapters Four and Five. The literature on service workers is especially important to my later discussions about exotic dancers because of its emphasis on workers as active agents who utilize specific interactional strategies in order to create and to maintain a sense of personal agency in the face of many challenges to that agency.

**Discourse of Deviance**

Most early researchers of exotic dancers take various aspects of deviance as their approach (Ronai 1993). Typical of the deviance perspective is a search for the types of people who are labeled deviant and an examination of the process by which they become deviant (Cohen 1966). The studies of exotic dancers, usually known as strippers or topless dancers in 1960s parlance, were nearly all couched in terms of deviance (Skipper and McCaghy 1969; Skipper and McCaghy 1970; Boles and Garbin 1974; Carey, Peterson and Sharpe 1974); as a result, the analysis pathologizes dancers and their occupation (Ronai 1993). Still, although the deviance perspective has been roundly criticized by feminists and others, it represents the classic approach to the study of exotic dancers.

In this section, I will first discuss some of the general theories of deviance and point out how these perspectives have been applied to the study of strippers. Following will be a discussion of specific applications of the deviance perspective, including how the deviance
perspective has sought to demonstrate that women who strip for a living are inherently different from so-called normal women by accrediting women’s decisions to become strippers to causal factors. In addition, I will discuss some of the ways that strippers and topless dancers manage the stigma of their deviant occupation. These topics are derived from four major deviance studies from the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as two more recent studies from the 1990s. In the 1990s research, the language of deviance was revived as an analytical perspective by which to study exotic dancers, even though such terminology had fallen out of favor in the 1980s.

Theories of deviance

Is stripping a deviant occupation? According to Ritzer (1977), it is. He cited three criteria that determine whether an occupation is deviant: the occupation is illegal, is considered to be immoral, and/or is considered to be improper. Certainly stripping is considered, at the least, improper. Many people would say that stripping is also immoral. Hundreds of municipalities and almost all state governments strictly regulate stripping, with the result that some stripping activities are illegal. Thus stripping as an occupation can rightly be considered to be a deviant occupation, yet women still become strippers, and customers still patronize the bars where stripping is offered as entertainment. Why?

Here I will discuss three major theories about why people become deviant. These causal factors of deviance include: anomie, or strain theory; labeling theory; and cultural transmission theory. As we shall see, all three theories of deviance have been applied to the study of strippers from classic studies to studies conducted in the early 1990s.
Strain theory

Anomie, or strain theory as elaborated by Merton (DeMelo 1997a; Perry and Perry 1979: 153-4), refers to the strain that an individual will feel between culturally approved goals, such as making money, and the socially disapproved means by which some must obtain such goals. Culturally-approved goals are supposedly available for anyone in society to achieve, but in reality, these goals are not achievable for many. Individuals thus deprived, turn to other methods in order to achieve the goals deemed necessary (DeMelo 1997a).

Merton came up with a typology of modes of adaptation that people utilize in order to deal with their frustration at not being able to achieve culturally-accepted goals in a culturally-accepted manner. One of these modes is innovation. Individuals who utilize this mode of dealing with the strain of their anomie accept the cultural goals, but not the culturally approved means of obtaining them. Their innovation is to violate norms. In the case of exotic dancing, the norm that is violated is the norm that female bodies must be covered and must not be publicly displayed in ways that are designed to sexually titillate men. According to this perspective, becoming a stripper is therefore an innovation that some women utilize in order to achieve the culturally approved goal of making money. Many studies of strippers illustrate that often women enter the occupation of stripping because they are unable to obtain money in any other way (Skipper and McCaghy 1970; Boles and Garbin 1974; Thompson and Harred 1992).

Labeling theory

Another theory of deviance that is useful to examine in reference to strippers is labeling theory. This theory looks at the process by which some individuals are labeled as
deviant and how their behavior then matches social expectations of their deviancy. Becker (DeMelo 1997c; Perry and Perry 1979), who was an important figure in the development of labeling theory, illustrates that once a person is labeled as deviant, even if the labeling was a result of only one norm-violating act, that person continues to be defined as deviant. In addition, the person so labeled is considered to be more likely than others to engage in other types of norm-violation. This last aspect of labeling theory is illustrated most starkly by Skipper and McCaghy’s (1969) study which will be discussed in more detail below. Here the researchers noted a higher than average incidence of lesbian behavior among their sample and attributed it to their respondents’ choice of occupation.

Another aspect of labeling theory is that individuals labeled as deviant come to accept their label and change their behaviors so as to match social expectations of their deviancy (Perry and Perry 1979: 157). According to labeling theory, deviant individuals are stigmatized by non-deviant members of society and resort to association with others who share their deviant status. Deviant behavior is thus solidified and reinforced through such association. Much work on strippers takes this perspective and seeks to examine how the dancers manage their stigma (Thompson and Harred 1992), and to what degree they identify with their role as a deviant (Reid, Epstein, and Benson 1994). These aspects of the deviance perspective will also be discussed further in a later section.

Cultural transmission theory

A third theory of deviance is cultural transmission theory (Perry and Perry 1979: 157-159). This theory, promulgated by Sutherland, (DeMelo 1997b) holds that individuals learn deviant behavior just like they learn all behavior, which is through interactions with others
who engage in deviant behavior. According to this theory, small, close groups such as family and peers, play a major role in the transmission of deviancy. According to the cultural transmission theory of deviance, then, strippers learn to be strippers through close interaction with other strippers (Hurd and Preston 1980; Lewis 1998; Liepe-Levinson 1998; Ronai and Ellis 1989; Snowden 1993). In addition, strippers and others who engage in deviant behavior learn techniques of rationalization of their deviance through interactions with others in their deviant subculture (Carey, Peterson and Sharpe 1974). As we shall see in later chapters, this socialization process not only transmits the deviant behavior and rationalizations for it, but also transmits valuable information about successful techniques that strippers can use in order to maximize their income (Ronai and Ellis 1989; Snowden 1993) and to exert interactional power over their customers (Ronai and Ellis 1989; Snowden 1993; Liepe-Levinson 1998).

Causal factors

Some studies of strippers have as their purpose a search for the cause of why an individual woman chooses to enter the deviant career of a stripper. The search for the cause of deviance is a classic approach to the study of deviants and their subcultures. Here I shall describe some of the searches for why women enter the deviant occupation of stripping.

Attachments

Carey, Peterson and Sharpe (1974), in their study of strippers and go-go dancers, searched for the causes of women becoming strippers and focused on the types of attachments that a woman may or may not have. They discovered three factors related to
attachments. These three causal factors are: a close personal attachment with members of the subculture; lack of outside attachments, or neutralization of attachments outside the subculture; and intense interaction with the subculture of stripping.

The respondents in the study by Carey et al. revealed that they often had close personal friends who were strippers, and that this was a reason why they chose to become strippers themselves. In addition, the respondents felt that they lacked personal attachments outside their work environment, and that their co-workers and others within the strip club environment helped to neutralize the salience of those outside attachments. Finally, their respondents said that they were intensely involved with the subculture of stripping. This can be seen in the cases of women hanging out at their place of employment even when they are not on duty. All of these causal factors are familiar elements in the study of deviance, as discussed earlier, and could be applied to most any individual who is considered to be deviant.

**Defining moments**

Other studies from the deviance perspective focus on a particular defining moment that made a woman choose to become a stripper. Very often a major financial crisis represents that defining moment when a woman chooses to enter the occupation of stripping (Skipper and McCaghy 1970; Boles and Garbin 1974). Once a woman looks seriously at a career as a stripper she often realizes that, in stripping, money can be made relatively easily compared with other low-skill female occupations that do not require education (Boles and Garbin 1974). Of course, many exotic dancers and others who work within the sex industry
would say that their jobs require high levels of skill and training. This will be discussed later in the paper.

Among the defining moments for strippers is the time that they first stripped on stage. Language about the first time is couched in terms of deviance. According to Thompson and Harred (1992), for example, most strippers were intoxicated the first time that they stripped. Often women stripped for the first time as a result of a dare or a challenge by friends or boyfriend. Once they stripped on a dare, usually intoxicated, women discovered how easy and how lucrative stripping can be. From this study, it can be inferred that drinking with friends in a strip bar is likely to lead a woman to become a stripper.

Role of big cities

Most strippers are from big cities (Boles and Garbin 1974; Skipper and McCaghy 1970), and this is another factor that is said to lead women to become strippers. Among Boles and Garbin’s respondents, 90% were from cities with populations numbering above 100,000 (1974). Skipper and McCaghy’s sample revealed that 88% were from urban areas. One of the reasons why being from an urban area might lead a woman to become a stripper is that there are usually a number of strip clubs in urban areas, which provides employment opportunities for women that are not present in most rural areas (Skipper and McCaghy 1970). These two studies were conducted in the 1970s, when cultural anxiety about young women living alone in big cities was perhaps at its height.

Many of the studies about what causes women to become strippers, to enter the deviant career of stripping, also focus on the inherent differences between strippers and other women. It is to this topic that I now turn.
Strippers are different from “normal” women

Much of the early works on strippers and topless dancers focuses on the social, psychological, and physical characteristics of strippers that set them apart from “normal” [sic] women. The search for essential differences, as we shall see, often looked in what seem to be bizarre places by contemporary standards. Of course, the search for essential differences between a deviant population and a “normal” one was a common research agenda in earlier decades of the deviance perspective. Even though the studies described below may seem odd to us today, they were certainly not considered to be out of the ordinary during the late 1960s and early 1970s when they were conducted.

Demographic differences

Skipper and McCaghy were among the leading scholars searching for the essential differences between strippers and “normal” women. In 1970, these researchers conducted a field study of 35 strippers. Questions focused on respondents’ birth order, age at first heterosexual intercourse, and age of leaving home to become independent adults. They discovered that the strippers in their sample left home earlier than “normal” women, often as early as 15 or 16, to establish independent, adult lives. They also found that strippers tended to engage in intercourse 2 or 3 years earlier than other women of their generation. The strippers that they interviewed also tended to be first-born children; in fact, 89% of the sample were first-born children in their families. Skipper and McCaghy agonize over how birth order might be significant, but are unable to produce any concrete answers.
Skipper and McCaghy’s study additionally reported that sixty percent of the research sample came from “broken homes”. The authors utilize the statistics on incidences of “broken homes”, coupled with early sexual maturity, to conclude that the women in this study began to display their bodies as a means by which to get attention that was not available to them at home. The researchers conclude that women become strippers in order to get the attention that they need.

**Physical differences**

Amazingly, Skipper and McCaghy also looked for physical characteristics of strippers to discover how they might be different from other women. They discovered, for example, that the women in their sample began menstruating two to three years earlier than the statistical average for women during this era. This aspect of the study also included asking the women questions about their anatomical measurements. The authors then compared the measurements of the strippers with the anatomical measurements of average women in the population, as well as with the measurements of Playboy Playmates. Their discovery? Strippers tend to be heavier, taller, and to have larger breasts than other women in the population.

By today’s standards, using Playboy Playmates as a control population seems sexist, narrow-minded, and totally bizarre. This is especially true when we recall that, during the late 60s and early 70s when these studies were conducted, nearly all Playmates were white women of European heritage. There were hardly any African American, American Indian, Hispanic, or Asian women who were Playmates. Thus the narrow racial composition of Playmates might seem to skew Skipper and McCaghy’s control group. However, most
strippers in the 1960s and 1970s were also white and of European heritage (McCaghy and Skipper 1969; Skipper and McCaghy 1970; Thompson and Harred 1992). In fact, fewer than 1% of strippers were non-white in the early studies cited above. By the time that Reid et al. conducted their study of strippers in 1994, fully 12% of dancers were of some other racial/ethnic heritage than European white (Reid, Epstein, Benson 1994). Today, the trend seems to be that an increasing number of dancers are recent immigrants, particularly from developing Asian and Eastern European countries (Chidley 1995).

**Psychological differences**

Deviance studies also explored psychological aspects of strippers, especially their tendency towards exhibitionism. Skipper and McCaghy (1969, 1970) found marked tendencies towards exhibitionism in their sample of 35 strippers. It is interesting how this tendency towards exhibitionism is framed in the deviance studies. One respondent in Thompson and Harred’s study told the researchers that she followed the model of her parents, and was “casual about nudity” (1992: 300); the authors conclude that this indicated an early tendency towards exhibitionism, and thus made it more likely that she would wind up stripping for a living.

Psychologists have also searched for the psychological components of women who become strippers, seeking to discover aspects that make them different from other women. As late as 1993, Young and Wagner conducted a study of strippers and models and gave them Rorschach tests to test their tendency towards exhibitionism. Not surprisingly, given the tone of the deviance approach, 40 out of their sample of 43 strippers and models scored high for exhibitionism. The deviance perspective utilizes psychological elements such as this
tendency towards exhibitionism in order to demonstrate that individuals with characteristics that set them apart from other members of the population are more likely to engage in a deviant career such as stripping. As will be demonstrated in the next section, proponents of the deviance perspective also believe that engaging in one type of deviant behavior increases the risk of involvement in other kinds of deviancy.

**Stripping causes other deviant behavior**

As mentioned earlier, Becker and other proponents of labeling theory, believe that a person who has violated one norm is likely to violate other norms (Perry and Perry 1979: 156). Researchers who have examined strippers and topless dancers tend to follow this view. Being a stripper is thus seen to be a risk factor for women to also be prostitutes (McCaghy and Skipper 1970), drug or alcohol dependent (Thomson and Harred 1992), and lesbian (McCaghy and Skipper 1969). Of these types of deviance, the increased risk for strippers to engage in lesbian behavior appears to be the most studied.

**Stripping causes lesbian behavior**

Among Skipper and McCaghy’s sample of 35 strippers, 26% currently engaged in lesbian sexual activity (1969). Since their respondents volunteered this personal information without being asked, the researchers believe that the number of strippers who engage in lesbian sex is probably much higher than this. Respondents were asked what their estimate would be of the number of strippers who had engaged in lesbian sexual behavior. Most estimated that between 50% and 75% of strippers had engaged in homosexual activity. The researchers delineated three occupational conditions unique to the business of stripping that
Would make it more likely that a woman would engage in lesbian sexual behavior: isolation from affective social conditions, unsatisfactory experiences with men, and an opportunity structure that allows a wide range of sexual behavior (McCaghy and Skipper 1969: 266).

The respondents in McCaghy and Skipper’s study were strippers who toured several cities on a formal circuit. They were on the road seven days weekly, for up to 40 weeks a year. Strippers for this company typically worked in one club for three or four days before taking the train to the next club where they would be working. Because their work was so transient in nature, the respondents in this study complained of chronic loneliness, or isolation from affective social conditions.

The respondents in this study also complained about unsatisfactory relationships with men. According to the researchers, the strippers tended to harbor hostility towards men that came as a result of the typical interactions they had with men in the strip clubs. Objectionable male behaviors included men openly masturbating in front of the strippers, and men pressuring them for sexual activity. This negative view of men was echoed by the respondents in Lewis’ study (1998). For example, one respondent noted, “A lot of guys that date dancers are ass-holes. So why deal with the hassle? Why not just date a girl?” (Lewis 1998: 73). In addition, strippers who had love relationships with men typically were in conflict with them over their occupation; many men insisted that the women stop stripping as a prerequisite for the relationship to continue. The result was that many strippers in the study had very negative and unsatisfactory relationships with men.

McCaghy and Skipper (1969) also detail the opportunity structure of the occupation of stripping as a factor that leads to the increased incidence of lesbian sexual behavior.
Because strip clubs operate within the urban subculture of deviant sexuality, strippers tend to know the location of gay bars and often hang out there when off duty. Gay bars are attractive to strippers, according to the respondents in the study, because they do not feel sexual pressure from gay men and because lesbians tend to be open and accepting of them in spite of their deviant occupation.

Another factor in the opportunity structure for lesbian sexual behavior is that the strippers in this study tended to travel with their co-workers, who were overwhelmingly female. Thus traveling with other women, combined with the fact that most of the men that the strippers met were exploitative “pimps, leeches or weirdos” (267), and the fact that they were unable to maintain friendships or relationships because of their constant traveling led to the increased incidence of lesbian sexual behavior among the sample.

Although few women in Skipper and McCaghy’s sample admitted to being “career lesbians”, or to have a stable lesbian identity, lesbian relationships were seen by their sample as representing a respite from men. But the authors’ perspective is judgmental in spite of their seemingly objective analysis of why strippers might choose to engage in lesbian sexual activity. Terming an invitation to a lesbian relationship a “lesbian ploy” (268), Skipper and McCaghy belie their objective stance. In addition, the researchers accept an unsubstantiated rumor as fact. Although they found no hard evidence for a rumor that older, more established strippers often pressured young women who were new to the profession into lesbianism, they included this as an undocumented element explaining why there was so much lesbian behavior reported by their respondents. Finally, they use anecdotal evidence from women who are in prison to substantiate their suspicions that lesbian behavior is higher among
strippers than among “normal” women in the general population. Today’s community of scholars would not allow such generalizations from an uninformed and unrelated population to be included as evidence.

Succeeding studies about strippers do not substantiate the findings of increased lesbian behavior among strippers. The few that inquired about lesbianism discovered that 2% (Carey, Peterson and Sharpe 1974) or less (Boles and Garbin 1974) of the strippers studied admit to engaging in lesbian sexual behavior. Lewis’ study documented a tendency towards bisexuality (1998). The important fact about the original study, however, is that Skipper and McCaghy believe that engaging in the occupation of stripper actually causes women to become lesbians; the women who engaged in lesbian sexual activity were not lesbian before becoming strippers. This view that being deviant in one arena will likely lead to deviance in other areas is one of the prime tenets of classical deviance theory. And of course, being deviant in any area results in being stigmatized. How strippers manage the stigma of their deviant occupation is the topic that will next be examined.

Strategies to manage stigma

In their 1970 study, Skipper and McCaghy surveyed 75 college students on their view about the types of women who are strippers or topless dancers. The students overwhelmingly labeled strippers as being “uneducated,” “lower class,” “oversexed,” “promiscuous,” and “dumb.” These harshly negative stereotypes about strippers are well-known by the women so labeled (Thompson and Harred 1992; Reid, Epstein and Benson 1994). As a result, strippers and topless dancers must create particular strategies for coping with the stigma of their
occupation. Studying the management of stigma is another classic approach to the study of deviance.

_Dividing the social world_

One of the coping strategies that strippers and others use to manage the stigma of their occupation is to divide their social world into those who can be trusted with the truth about their occupation and those who cannot (Thompson and Harred 1992). They accomplish this by controlling who knows about their occupation, often lying to parents, neighbors, their children’s teachers, leasing agents, and even husbands and boyfriends. Instead of being truthful to most people, strippers will attempt to “pass” as a member of a non-stigmatized occupation, such as being a waitress.

_Rationalizing their participation_

Another strategy that strippers employ in order to manage the stigma of their occupation is to rationalize their participation in a deviant occupation. One way that this is accomplished is through an appeal to higher loyalties (Thompson and Harred 1992). Thus a stripper who maintains that she engages in this work in order to feed her children or to put herself through college (Reid, Epstein, and Benson 1994) would be managing stigma in this way. According to this view, strippers also manage stigma by utilizing neutralizing techniques, such as denial that stripping is harmful to anyone. A respondent in Thompson and Harred’s study summarized the neutralization technique when she maintained that her stripping was not hurting anyone, was fun to watch, and was good exercise.
Refusal to identify with the role of stripper

Another way that strippers manage the stigma of their occupation is simply to not identify with the role of stripper (Reid, Epstein, and Benson 1994). In their study of 41 strippers through a non-random survey, Reid et al. tested the relationship of time spent as a stripper with whether strippers identified with the role of a stripper. Their respondents indicated that few strippers believed that the role of stripper was an authentic representation of who they actually were, and that few of them anticipated staying in the occupation for long. The value of this study appears to be that most strippers have other identities besides being a stripper that are more salient and more authentic.

Section summary

The deviance perspective was the primary sociological perspective applied to strippers and topless dancers from the mid-1960s to the late-1970s. Proponents of this perspective sought to explain why women would become strippers even though the occupation is considered to be deviant. They searched for proof that strippers were inherently different than so-called normal women. Deviance theorists also examined how strippers, by engaging in a deviant occupation, were more likely to engage in other deviant behaviors, such as lesbianism or prostitution. The discourse of deviance during this period reveals the underlying cultural anxieties that were beginning to be felt as the Second Wave of feminism swept through the West. By the dawn of the 1980s, feminism was making itself felt in sociological theory. Feminism, and its sociological practitioners, contributed to the fall of deviance as a perspective by which to examine strippers, as shall be discussed in the next section. Although there were a few sporadic attempts to revitalize the deviance perspective
(Thompson and Harred 1992; Young and Wagner 1993), by and large the attempts fell short of having much explanatory power. More salient in recent years have been attempts by feminists to explain the world of exotic dancing and to reveal details about the women who inhabit it.

**Feminist Perspectives**

Feminism has had profound effects on our society, and this is certainly evident in sociological research on women. Feminist sociology in the late 1970s and early 1980s first began with critiques of established, mainstream sociology, including critiques of the deviance perspective, before moving on to create its own new theories. In this section, I will begin by discussing feminist critiques of the deviance perspective, particularly as that perspective has been applied to strippers, topless dancers, and other erotic performers. A discussion of the contributions made by the feminist anti-pornography movement to our understanding of exotic dancers and other sex workers will follow. Next will be a run-down of some of the rebuttals that feminist sex workers, their advocates, and other so-called pro-sex feminists have proffered. As I will demonstrate, the issue of sex work and its relation to feminism is sticky, complex, and inflamed with passions on both sides. An intriguing paradox of the feminist perspectives on sex workers is the contrast between those who study and theorize about sex workers, and those who have actually worked within the industry. I think that you will see that the two perspectives offer diametrically different views of the degree of personal agency exotic dancers possess. I conclude this section by attempting to find a middle ground between the anti-pornography feminists and sex radical feminists.
Gender bias in the deviance perspective

Beginning in the early 1970s, just after the publication of Skipper and McCaghy’s landmark 1969 and 1970 studies, feminist sociologists began to question the validity of the deviance perspective. Among other critiques, feminists realized that the deviance perspective tended to pathologize certain deviant populations, and to valorize others. Here I shall discuss some of the critiques of the deviance perspective, beginning with a critique of how the deviance perspective has affected sociological examination of exotic dancers.

Deviance perspective pathologizes dancers

Use of the deviance perspective to examine exotic dancers has been criticized on several fronts. Ronai (1993), for example, notes that the way the deviance perspective has framed exotic dancers has pathologized the women who dance, as well as pathologizing the occupation itself. The language of pathology, of disease, becomes apparent through the authors’ choice of terminology when discussing strippers. For example, throughout Skipper and McCaghy’s studies on strippers, their respondents were compared to “normal” women. It seems clear from their use of the term, “normal”, that they consider their respondents somehow abnormal. Another term that appears repeatedly in the deviance literature on exotic dancers and which pathologizes dancers is “tendency towards exhibitionism” (Skipper and McCaghy 1970; Boles and Garbin 1974; Young and Wagner 1993). This phrase seems to be straight out of the 1960’s version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual with its lists of psychological disorders. Again, the choice of terminology

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1 Exotic dancers were known as strippers or topless dancers during the 1960s and 1970s; I primarily use the term exotic dancers in the rest of this paper, as that seems to be the preferred term for them in the 1990s and early 2000. The importance of the issue of naming will appear again later.
that researchers use when discussing strippers reveals the tendency of the deviance perspective to pathologize exotic dancers.

The search for the physical, psychological, and social differences between “normal” women and stripper-respondents also is couched in terms of pathology, as these searches actually entail looking for what sets strippers apart from all other (normal) women. Thus Skipper and McCaghy’s agonizing analysis of why strippers are predominantly first-born children (1970) or why they often engage in lesbian sexual behavior (1969) takes on the air of a search for an essential pathology.

Skipper and McCaghy are not alone among the proponents of the deviance perspective to be fascinated with the search for what causes women to become strippers. Most all of the studies from the deviance perspective discuss some of the factors that might cause women to choose to become strippers. Causal factors from the deviance perspective include being intoxicated while partying with friends in a strip club, living in a big city, having friends who are strippers, exhibiting a tendency towards exhibitionism, starting menstruation early, and coming from a “broken home” (Skipper and McCaghy 1969, 1970; Carey, Peterson and Sharpe 1974; Boles and Garbin 1974; Young and Wagner 1993). Even when studies note that strippers enter the occupation because of financial opportunities (Skipper and McCaghy 1970; Boles and Garbin 1974), which is certainly a rational reason to try their hands at the occupation, their experience is still pathologized. Boles and Garbin (1974), for example, characterized their respondents’ decision to enter the occupation as a decision based on a major financial crisis, and Thompson and Harred (1992) termed their respondents as “desperate for work” (299).
Ronai (1993) compares how studies of female strippers are remarkably different from the way studies of male strippers are framed in the sociological literature. Studies of female strippers, she notes, focus on the aspects of deviance, even when the articles appear after the 1960s and 1970s heyday of the deviance perspective. In contrast, studies about male strippers tend to focus on work aspects. She illustrates this idea by pointing out that studies about female strippers appear in journals such as *Social Problems, Sociology of Sex*, and *Deviant Behavior*. In contrast, articles about male strippers appear in journals such as *Work and Occupations, Sociological Focus*, and *Urban Life* (Ronai 1993).

Ronai also notes that studies about female strippers tend to focus on the causal factors that landed them in such a deviant occupation as stripping. Research on male strippers, in contrast, does not ask respondents questions that are designed to determine what caused them to enter stripping as an occupation. These differences in approach to the study of female and male strippers, she insists, are rooted in gender bias.

The deviance perspective’s classical stress on the inherent pathology of exotic dancers essentially robs them of personal agency. Discussion of the factors that “cause” women to become strippers results in a sense that the dancers have no personal agency in their career choice. Instead of viewing women as creatively engaging in a rational career choice, even if making those decisions within economic and other constraints, the deviance perspective focuses only on the pathological elements of exotic dancing.
Gender bias permeates the discourse of deviance

Millman (1975), in an early feminist critique of deviance theories, accuses the specialty area of gender bias. She argues that bias based on gender actually shapes the discourse of deviance. She states that there is a readily recognizable pattern to the studies of deviance that presents male deviants in a positive light, while it frames female deviants as pathological. For example, while female criminals in Glueck’s 1954 study are stereotyped as pathologically feeble-minded, male musicians who smoke marijuana are seen as engaging in creative rebellion against a restrictive mainstream society in Becker’s 1963 work (Millman 1975). The differences in the way that male and female deviance is portrayed are emphasized in the differences between studies of men and women strippers. When women are examined from the deviance perspective, they tend to be presented as different from “normal” women, as immoral, undesirable, sick and disturbed (Ronai 1993). Men who engage in deviant behavior are creative, likeable, intelligent, and resourceful (Millman 1975). In addition, men who are labeled deviant are seen as actors who actively construct their own reality; this is in marked contrast to female deviants who appear as passive non-actors with little personal agency.

Women are invisible in sociology

Of course, women in general have been largely invisible in the sociological record, and this further emphasizes the lack of female personal agency. Women tend to be lost in the false generic of masculine pronouns because, until recently, male sociologists under-investigate women, and stereotype them when they do investigate them (Millman 1974). A prime example of this is McCaghy and Skipper’s 1969 study of how many strippers become
lesbian as an adaptation to their deviant occupation of stripping. Amazingly, the researchers ask women who are in prison what their opinion is about the rate of lesbianism among strippers, and then use the prison inmates’ high estimates as “proof” that lesbianism is rampant among strippers. Clearly, the researchers are not only under-investigating their research population, but are presenting rumor and stereotypes about lesbians as fact in their study.

As Millman (1974) points out, there are no women in the classic studies of any sociological perspective, including deviance. Chancer (1998) also describes the problem of few sociological studies about women in her discussion about how little attention has been paid to prostitutes and other sex workers except for cursory mention in criminology studies. Although women have engaged in at least as many interesting adaptations to their social situations as men have, sociological attention has been heaped on men, and little notice is paid to women’s activities, as she notes. In contrast, feminism and the new feminist sociological perspectives place women at the center of analysis. In the next section, one of the most important contemporary perspectives on exotic dancers and others who work within the sex industry will be examined.

**Perspectives from the feminist anti-pornography movement**

The feminist anti-pornography movement that began in the late 1970s and which continues today, has had great effects on social policy, municipal and federal law, and the lives of individual sex workers (Gutmann 1993). This perspective presents a much different view of the women who work within the sex industry than what the deviance perspective offers. No longer portrayed as having essential differences from “normal” women, exotic
dancers are, instead, portrayed in terms of their universal similarities to all women (Sullivan 1995). Even more striking, and important to this discussion, is that the feminist anti-pornography movement, echoing the politics of its 19th century sisters (Abraham 1997) labels women who are sex workers victims (Guttmann 1993; Rajan 1999; Bell and Strickling 1998; Jeffreys 1996; Dworkin 1993, 1994). In a sense, the rhetoric of sex workers’ victimhood replaced the earlier rhetoric of their status as pathological deviants. Both the deviance perspective and the feminist anti-pornography perspective have tended to downplay women’s agency, as shall be discussed. In this section, I will review some of the arguments that the feminist anti-pornography movement has presented in its call for the elimination of prostitution, pornography, exotic dancing, and all other forms of sex work. First, I will start with a brief discussion of the problems of labeling the activists and theorists who work against the sex industry.

Problems with labels

The language that we have to discuss the politics of various feminist positions on sex work is fraught with problems. We simply have no satisfactory words to describe what we mean. For example, using “radical feminist” to define anti-pornography activism such as the definitive work conducted by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin is not adequate, particularly since other self-identified radical feminists like Kate Millett have scrambled to distance themselves from what they define as anti-sex feminism (Gutmann 1993). The term “anti-pornography” activism is problematic because those activists are also involved in other vital issues such as preventing rape, sexual harassment, and eliminating strip clubs (ibid).
Similar problems exist with the names of those feminists who refute the anti-pornography movement’s rhetoric. This side of the feminist movement that is concerned with portraying the sex industry in a largely positive light is alternately called the “sex radical” or “pro-sex” position. Lynn Chancer (1998), in her recent book that analyzes the feminist sex wars and tries to theorize a middle ground between the warring camps, suggests the terms “sex feminism” to refer to the pro-sex stance, and “sexism feminism” to refer to the anti-pornography side.

For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to the perspective that advocates against sex work as the anti-pornography perspective. This is to give credit for what I consider to be their most important accomplishments. Although their rhetoric, as shall be demonstrated, sometimes comes across as being anti-sex, I think that their analysis is far more complex than use of this term indicates. By the same token, I will refer to the other side as the sex radical position. Again, although the terms that we use are highly problematic, at the moment there seem to be no better alternatives.

**Key players in the anti-pornography movement**

There are a number of key players who are active in the battle against pornography and sex work. Perhaps Catharine MacKinnon, a legal scholar and an attorney, is the most well-known outside of academic and legal circles. She was instrumental in the conception and language of federal and state anti-discrimination and sexual harassment legislation that began with her work on a Minneapolis anti-pornography statute (Gutmann 1993). MacKinnon’s efforts have received national and international recognition. Andrea Dworkin, MacKinnon’s collaborator in the Minneapolis statute, is another key player in the anti-
pornography movement. A writer and self-proclaimed survivor of sexual abuse, incest, and battering (Dworkin 1981), Dworkin has been an outspoken and often maligned critic of the patriarchal system which she accuses of continuing to oppress women (Dworkin 1993, 1994). Together these two women make a formidable team and have been leaders in the cultural wars against pornography, sexual harassment, rape, and sex work (Abraham and McNaught, 1997).

Dworkin and MacKinnon’s chief analysis is that all forms of sex work reinforce the subordination of women (Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin 1988; Dworkin 1993; Fox-Genovese 1994; Rosen 1998). Indeed, according to Dworkin, MacKinnon, and their followers, all manifestations of heterosexual sex reinforce the subordination of women and male supremacy (Dworkin 1987; Rosen 1998; Guttmann 1993). Even consensual heterosexual sex is under suspicion, because under patriarchy, no woman is considered really able to actively choose to engage in sex (ibid). As MacKinnon put it, heterosexual sexuality is the “lynchpin of gender inequality” (Rosen 1998).

Thus the MacKinnon and Dworkin analysis, derisively dubbed “MacDworkinism” by critics (Sableman 1995), of sex workers is that they are manifestations of the continuing oppression of women. Furthermore, exotic dancers and other sex workers are victimized by their occupation, and by the men who are consumers of the fruits of their labor, as well as being victimized by the patriarchal social system itself (Rosen 1998; Gutmann 1993; Berlant 1995; Fox-Genovese 1994).
Exotic dancing oppresses individual dancers

According to anti-pornography activists, exotic dancing, just like all sex work, oppresses the individual dancers who dance for a living. Such women are agency-less victims, and are suffering from false consciousness if they maintain that their work is not harmful to themselves (Sableman 1995; Sloan, Bell and Strickling 1998) and to other women. What about the women who seem to voluntarily choose to become exotic dancers, prostitutes, or porn actresses? In the anti-pornography, MacDworkinist model, women’s seeming consent to be in pornography, or to be a sexual performer, is suspect and probably impossible in a culture where women are not equal to men (Gutmann 1993).

The MacDworkin model examines men’s purposes for frequenting strip clubs and discovers nothing but prurient, exploitative, and controlling motives. For example, Liepe-Levinson (1998), states that men patronize strip clubs for the “erotic pleasure of controlling women” (3). By gazing at nude women in the spectator role while they themselves are fully dressed, and by tipping certain dancers in exchange for the types of sexual gratification offered in strip clubs, men act in ways that symbolize the cultural objectification and commodification of women (Prewit 1989). Thus, individual exotic dancers are robbed of their agency, and are victimized, objectified, and commodified—in short, exploited by male customers.

Exotic dancing oppresses all women

Some of the most powerful arguments that the anti-pornography feminist movement make is their analysis of how what happens in individual exchanges in strip clubs, or other aspects of sex work, affects all women. One of their arguments concerns the results of
simulated violence on stage. Exotic dancers often incorporate simulated violence or simulated acts of extreme subordination as part of their performance (Prewitt 1989). This simulated violence or subordination is thought to encourage actual acts of violence against women that are committed by viewers inured to the scene (Prewitt 1989). The sexuality portrayed on stage as part of the dancer's routine, for example, acts of surrender, or service, will encourage and exacerbate the social enslavement of women outside of the strip club (Liepe-Levinson 1998). Thus, the performance of such acts of simulated violence, extreme acts of service, or performed acts of surrender, legitimizes and even encourages acts of violence against all women (Reeves and Wingfield 1996).

The extreme anti-pornography viewpoint insists that women as a group are disempowered by the *mere existence* of exotic dancing. This is thought to occur because men who attend strip shows only notice the performer's body, not paying attention to the minds, personalities, or other aspects of the women who inhabit the stripper's body (Guidroz 1996). In addition, because it is the men who are viewing the performance who are the ones who actually control the interactions between dancer and customer, according to this perspective, in the minds of these men, all women become dehumanized. In fact, Debra Rosenthal (1994) believes that men attend strip shows as an attempt to defuse the growing power that women exert in the corporate and personal world. Because men who attend strip shows can symbolically control performers, they return home and to work feeling better and more secure about their masculinity. One might argue from this perspective that men who attend strip shows are trying to symbolically suppress what they might see as women's increasing sense of personal agency. Of course, according to this view, all of this promotes the
dehumanization of all women (Prewitt 1989). In addition, the sexuality presented on stage is an unhealthy representation of female sexuality (Liepe-Levinson 1998), and this further contributes to the dehumanization of women and an exploitation of their sexuality.

The feminist anti-pornography movement makes some powerful and provocative arguments. After watching women perform live sex acts to be broadcast over the internet, even a self-proclaimed feminist with an “open mind” (Dummett 1998: 2) admits that she began reducing the on-screen women to their fragmented body parts. If even a staunch, self-proclaimed pro-sex feminist falls into the trap of seeing strippers engaged in sexual performance reduced to their body parts, so the argument goes, male viewers are doing even worse things to the women they are viewing.

**Perspectives from feminist sex radicals**

Sex radical feminists see sex work, including strippers, in a different light. The most extreme among them argue that exotic dancing is actually empowering for dancers (Liepe-Levinson 1997; Dallis 1995; Horwitz 1992). Far from constructing exotic dancers as pathological deviants, or as agency-less victims, sex radicals see dancers as powerful agents of their own destiny.

**Revisioning sources of oppression**

The arguments of sex radical feminists are persuasive as they criticize the viewpoints of the anti-pornography movement. Sloan, Bell, and Strickling (1998), for example, argue that most proclamations about sex work being inherently exploitative of women have not been based on empirical research, but have been made by women who have no experience in
sex work. Feminists who are sex workers, these authors proclaim, argue that their exploitation is not due to the nature of their work, and does not originate from their male customers; instead, it comes from the stigma and illegality placed on many aspects of their occupations which open them up to exploitation by unscrupulous customers, police officers, and others. Furthermore, from their study, Sloan et al. (1998) note that not one of their respondents claimed that dancers were exploited from topless dancing; instead, the women claimed that either dancers solely exploited customers, or that customers and dancers exploited each other to an equal degree.

Others within the sex radical feminist camp argue that what women encounter in strip clubs is not all that different from what women encounter in their ordinary, daily life. For example, some of the dangers that are associated with sex work—contracting STDs, psychological problems associated with being humiliated, emotional pain, and physical abuse—are not necessarily essential elements of sex work (Sullivan 1995). In fact, women are often exposed to these dangers in seemingly benign places like their homes and places of employment. There is little evidence that exotic dancers are subject to these kinds of dangers at rates that are higher than what “ordinary” women might face.

This view is echoed by Vicky Funari (1997), who compares the sexual harassment that she experienced as a secretary and waitress to what she has experienced as a peepshow dancer. Beyond mere sexual harassment, Funari also describes how she felt powerless as a nameless cog in a corporation, working for low wages as a secretary. She contrasts how, as a peepshow dancer, she was able to create her own unique stage identity including choosing a name, constructing a personality to accompany it, and pasting together her own unique style
of dress and performance. The contrasts between being a nameless cog in the corporate machine and being a performer that customers would seek out by name was marked in her description of her work. Again, the voices of feminist sex workers demonstrate how they are able to assert their autonomy, even in environments that may on the face seem oppressive to those who do not work within.

*Deliberate empowerment*

Some dancers maintain that dancing, and other sex work, can be an empowering experience for women in many ways. For example, Tawnya Dudash, a self-identified feminist and peepshow dancer, researched the strip club environment of The Lusty Lady, a club in San Francisco (1997). In her interviews with fifteen of her co-workers over a two year period, she discovered that the women almost invariably felt empowered by the structure of the club and their working conditions. Indeed, according to Dudash, because the club was managed by women who had previously worked as exotic dancers or peepshow dancers themselves, the environment was deliberately structured to be empowering for the employees. The stage, for example, allowed dancers to move about freely, which enabled them to ignore any undesirable customers. In addition, because there were typically four to six dancers on the stage at any one time, the dancers were able to create a sense of solidarity and camaraderie with each other; this is in marked contrast to the lonely, isolated and victimized sex worker that populates the discourse of the anti-pornography feminists. Finally, because the club paid workers an hourly wage, the dancers did not have to rely on tips from customers for their income. As Dudash documents, this had the result of eliminating competition between dancers, and allowed them to freely form friendships with each other.
The sense of camaraderie, friendship, and solidarity that the workers were able to construct for themselves resulted in one of the first instances of unionization of peepshow dancers (ibid.; “The Naked Truth” 1997).

Nina Hartley, who has worked as both a stripper and porn actress, documents how she has felt liberated sexually since “coming out” as a sex worker (Hartley 1997: 57). A staunch feminist, she feels a total sense of empowerment that was unavailable to her before becoming a sex worker. Her strong sense of self, discovered only through being a sex worker, belies the views of the anti-pornography feminists who would insist that her sense of self would be robbed by her work.

*Resistance and subversion*

Missing from the anti-pornography feminist viewpoint, and celebrated by feminist sex workers cum researchers such as Dudash, are the myriad ways that exotic dancers and other sex workers resist attempts to oppress them. Dudash (1997), in her interviews with peepshow workers, for example, notes that one of her respondents painted her name on her belly when she felt that customers were staring only at her genitals. The message that she sought to get across was one of resistance to being objectified by customers. But Dudash’s respondents move beyond resistance and enter the realm of active subversion. One respondent, for example, would place her butt against the glass separating her from her customers if a customer was rude to her. His paid time ticking by, she would ignore his pleas to move away so that he could see the other dancers. These techniques of asserting dancer autonomy, usually with the tacit approval of the club’s management, contrast sharply with
the image of the pitiful agency-less victim as described by anti-pornography feminist activists such as Dworkin and MacKinnon.

_Queasy alliances_

Abraham and McNaught (1997) point out that much of the Dworkin-MacKinnon polemics about sex workers bear an eerie similarity to right-wing rhetoric (1997). Dworkin, for example, even uses the word “sin” in her polemic against prostitutes and women in the pornography industry (Dworkin 1981). She and MacKinnon both call for expanded powers of state censorship (Sableman 1995; Gutmann 1993) to protect women from the evils of pornography and the easy availability of the services of prostitutes. Calls for state censorship, and labeling activities that occur between sex worker and customer as “sin”, both smack of right wing rhetoric and make many moderate feminists queasy. Phyllis Schafly, infamous right-wing anti-feminist activist, even cited Dworkin recently in some of her promotional material. As Abraham and McNaught point out, this association between feminist anti-pornography activists and anti-feminist anti-pornography activists makes many middle-of-the-road feminists uneasy, and has estranged many in the radical sex feminist camp.

_Stigmatizes sex workers_

Others argue that the feminist anti-pornography tendency to emphasize the “badness” of sex work and its inhabitants continues to stigmatize sex workers and destroys any possibility of alliances between the feminist movement and workers in the sex trades (Sullivan 1995). Jill Nagle (1997), in her introduction to _Whores and Other Feminists_, argues that the feminist anti-pornography movement actually “reproduces oppression of sex workers
This is a powerful indictment of feminist anti-pornography activism that seeks as its goal liberation for women.

As for the arguments that sex work is just "too patriarchal to be tolerated" (Abraham and McNaught 1997), Chapkis notes that many of our most cherished institutions began as blatantly patriarchal, and were downright subordinating to women, but have been reformed. She gives as an example modern marriage. What started out as an oppressive institution for women, has been largely reformed, she notes, by both First and Second Wave feminist activists. What if marriage had been abolished because of its inherent oppressive elements, she asks rhetorically. She calls for a similar reform of the sex industry, starting with decriminalization (Chapkis 1997).

**Perspectives from the middle-of-the-road feminism**

Questions of power and control, power and powerlessness, are of immense concern to feminist activists who are active in the anti-pornography movement, as well as in the feminist sex radical movement. Debate between the two camps, dubbed the feminist sex wars, has been furious and divisive (Rajan 1999; Chancer 1998; Abraham and McNaught 1997). Indeed, as Abraham and McNaught state, “[f]ew things have divided feminists as much as the sex industry” (1997: 1). On one side there are calls for censorship of performance, and the shutting down of strip clubs by the anti-pornography camp; on the other side dancers, prostitutes, and other sex workers are sometimes glorified and their work valorized as representing the ultimate in bold liberation for women (ibid).

In recent years, there have been attempts to reconcile the two camps. For example, a plenary embedded within the 1998 NWSA conference was devoted to trying to bring
together the two camps for constructive dialogue. In the same vein, a recent work by Lynn S. Chancer (1998) also seeks to reunite the women’s movement by constructing a third position through a deconstruction of the original divide. Chancer maintains that by dividing into two opposite camps on the issue of sex work, feminists are reifying the ancient (patriarchal) tactic of breaking the world into dichotomies. She compares the way that feminists have stigmatized sex workers with the way that lesbians were stigmatized in the heady days of the Second Wave of feminism and finds marked similarities and directions for improvement. Chancer and other feminists concerned about the split within the feminist movement actively seek to construct a middle ground.

**Finding the middle ground**

Somewhere between the “rad-fem and sex-radical poles” (Abraham and McNaught, 1997: 2) lies what I term the middle ground. Lynn Chancer (1998) is an exemplar of this position. In her book, *Reconcilable Differences: Confronting Beauty, Pornography, and the Future of Feminism*, Chancer theorizes a middle place between the two poles. She notes that throughout the 1980s and 1990s, feminism has been on the defensive against attacks by conservatives who have mounted an impressive backlash. She locates the feminist sex wars as being part of this defensive position and argues that we must find a way out of this reactive posture. She diagnoses the cause of the defensiveness of feminism as being twofold. First, many feminists have tried to unite women through a false sense of commonality as women. This is a well-known Second Wave feminist problem that has been documented by sex workers, lesbians, Third World women, US women of color, working class and poor women, and other women marginalized by white, middle-class feminism. Second, as a
reaction to the problems with visualizing all women as similar, feminists tried to emphasize their differences, focusing on how women are different from each other. This has resulted in a series of split sub-movements, according to Chancer. The result has been that feminism has been especially vulnerable to attacks by conservatives, and thus has been placed in a defensive, reactive posture for nearly two decades. Her solution seems simplistic and yet compelling: we must find a way both to recognize our differences as feminists AND to recognize our commonalities. As she puts it, feminism needs to think in terms of both a single “feminism” and multiple “feminisms” that are at the same time autonomous and connected (273). And sex workers, Chancer insists, must be a vital part of this.

Chapkis is another feminist theoretician who represents the feminist middle ground view of exotic dancers and other sex workers. According to her, sex work is not “the ultimate in women’s liberation (Abraham and McNaught 1997: 2), but neither is it the ultimate victimizing force for women. Through this argument, she is pointing out that the middle ground lies somewhere between these two binary opposites, just as Chancer (1998) and presenters at the 1998 NWSA plenary suggest. To find the middle ground, Chapkis argues, we should examine sex work in terms of its working conditions. What sex workers need, she says, “is not a bunch of goody-goodies looking down on them, but decent working conditions (ibid). Thus Chapkis locates the feminist middle-of-the-road perspective midway between the poles of sex workers as helpless victims and as free and liberated agents who freely choose their occupations and working conditions. She also makes the extremely important point that examining exotic dancers and other sex workers in terms of their working conditions is fruitful for shifting our focus to the individual women who work as sex workers and away
from some universal concept of sex workers as helpless victims of the patriarchal social system.

Chapkis conducted participant observation research among various sex workers in the Netherlands, England, Finland, and the US. Among her respondents were prostitutes, peep show workers, nude dancers, and erotic massage workers. Many of them were self-proclaimed feminists, which destabilizes the arguments of the anti-pornography movement that one cannot be a feminist and be a sex worker.

**Framing sex work**

Some of Chapkis’ research sites were in countries where sex work was largely legal, and which experienced various degrees of institutional control. Other countries made most sex work strictly illegal. Her research illustrated that the degree of institutional control and the illegality of sex work is what determined workers’ experience within the sex industry. According to Chapkis, then, it is not the men who view exotic dancers that make them powerless or victims; instead, it is how exotic dancing is framed in terms of legal institutions that determines how exotic dancers are treated. Her work moves the focus away from the individual women who are exotic dancers and towards the broader economic and social institutions that shape their experiences.

Chapkis observes that we must examine sex work as work. She insists that we must examine such classic elements of work as hours, pay and benefits, working conditions, safety, and other elements if we are truly going to understand the world of the exotic dancer and other inhabitants of the sex industry. As we shall see, framing exotic dancers as workers,
and not as pathological social deviants or helpless victims, reveals their creativity, resiliency, and their potential for exerting power over their working lives.

Section summary

Feminist perspectives on exotic dancers and other sex workers have produced important insights. The early critics of deviance theory as applied to exotic dancers point out that the perspective tends to pathologize dancers. The feminist anti-pornography movement constructed dancers as victims of the patriarchal social system, and pointed out how stripping dehumanizes, objectifies, commodifies, and exploits women. In response, the sex radical position argues that nude dancing can be empowering for women, and that the tirades by the so-called anti-sex feminists are a throwback to Victorian rhetoric. Middle-of-the-road feminists, such as Chancer, call our attention back to the original purposes of feminism and rally for a renewed emphasis on women uniting across the divide created by the feminist sex wars of the 1980s and 1990s. Chapkis, another middle-of-the-road feminist, seeks to shift the focus away from the sexual aspects of exotic dancing and other sex work and to relocate women's experiences in terms of the work issues that they encounter.

Chapkis' call for inquiry into the lives of exotic dancers in terms of their work experiences is an important one to heed. In the next section, I will review the literature that does just that. As shall be demonstrated, viewing exotic dancers as workers who actively seek to manage their work life de-emphasizes the sexual aspect of their work. In addition, it reduces the potential of dancers being labeled deviant and pathological, or as helpless victims of the patriarchal social order. As a result, examining exotic dancers as employees who are
subject to the same kinds of stresses and rewards common to most other occupations returns a vital sense of agency to exotic dancers.

**Dancers as Workers**

Much of the recent literature about exotic dancers focuses on them as *workers*. It is fruitful to examine dancers as workers because they face many of the challenges and job stresses that other, more mundane workers face. But not only do dancers face problems that seem universal to other workers, they also are able to tap into particular strategies to manage their work problems, just like other workers are able to do. The literature on exotic dancers as *workers* is based in large measure upon the experiences of the researchers as participants in the sex industry (Chapkis 1997; Dallis 1995; Dudash 1997; Funari 1997; Guidroz 1996; Hartley 1997, 1998; Ronai 1992a, 1992b 1993, 1998; Ronai and Ellis 1989; Snowden 1993). Some of these researchers are professional sex workers who are also professional sociologists; examples include Ronai and Dudash. Others are professional sex workers who contributed to the discussion of their occupation while still working within the sex industry, such as Funari, Guidroz, and Hartley. Still others, like Chapkis, Snowden, and Dallis, are professional social scientists who participated in sex work as part of their research. These lived experiences are more salient, all the more exciting, and more relevant than any of the other perspectives presented so far.

This section will begin with an examination of several different approaches to the study of exotic dancers as workers. As I will discuss, there are many different ways to look at the work world of exotic dancers. Following will be a general discussion of service workers. Robin Leidner’s work features prominently here, especially her work on interactive service
work, and how these service workers and the corporations that they work for develop routinized strategies for managing customer relationships. Also included in this part is a discussion of the emotional labor that service workers do as part of their jobs. Finishing up this section will be a discussion of how exotic dancers fit the category of service workers, especially Leidner’s definition of interactive service workers. As shall be demonstrated, exotic dancers utilize interactional strategies to manage customer behavior in ways that are markedly similar to those used by other service workers.

**Dancers are like other employees**

No matter what kind of occupational category a worker fits within, there are aspects of work and employment that are common, and perhaps even universal, across the categories. These common aspects of work include material working conditions, how the law constrains or protects an occupation, and how workplaces and employees have been experiencing structural changes in recent years. Another universal workplace issue is how work sites within the same occupation may differ from each other according to the class, race, and ethnicity of the employees who work there and the customers who frequent them. How workers manage their identities as a certain type of employee is yet another workplace issue that is perhaps nearly universal among workers. Coping with aging in the workplace is a common concern, as is managing customer behavior.

When researchers who are interested in exotic dancers turn their attention to the dancers status as *workers*, we should not be surprised, then, to discover that they examine aspects of work that would be common arenas of inquiry in the more conventional female occupations such as flight attendant, fast-food worker, nurse, or secretary. Thus, some of
these recent studies on dancers as workers examine such aspects of work as their material working conditions (Chapkis 1997; Funari 1997; Liepe-Levinson 1998; Simeone 1998), which can vary widely. How the law affects the work and working conditions of exotic dancers is another topic of consideration by recent scholars (Fotheringham 1994; Gartner 1997; Hanna 1998). In some locations, the law has been shifting recently as a result of local and state pressures (Alex 1996; Hoffman 1998; Pierre 1999), which is another area of exploration of the work environment of exotic dancers. Coping with other changes in the workplace, such as competitive pressures from new clubs that offer more sexually explicit services, is a related topic of consideration by recent research (Simeone 1998).

Clubs that feature various types of exotic dancing not only differ regionally, often in response to different legal classifications and market demands, but they also differ within the same region by such aspects as the class of regular patrons (Hong and Duff 1997; Simeone 1998). The race and ethnicity of both regular patrons and dancers also varies by club (Hong and Duff 1997). These aspects naturally affect the work experience of exotic dancers, and have thus been the subject of recent scrutiny by researchers working in this field.

Other recent studies on exotic dancers that focus on them as workers describe how dancers manage the stigma attached to employment in a stigmatized occupation (Funari 1997; Ronai 1993; Thompson and Harred 1992), and how they cope with issues of identity (Hartley 1997; Ronai 1993; Reid, Epstein and Benson 1994; Thompson and Harred 1992). How dancers learn how to be exotic dancers, including how to solicit tips, how to keep customer behavior in line with regulations, how to best utilize the omnipresent brass pole, and how to dance in four inch heels, is still another focus of researchers (Lewis 1998; Hunter
1996; Ronai and Ellis 1989; Ronai 1993 and 1998). In a similar vein, at least one study has been conducted recently that analyzes how dancers cope with aging and how they develop new strategies of extracting tips, keeping regular customers interested in them over the years, and hiding the effects of aging in an occupation that places a premium on youthful attractiveness (Ronai 1992a).

Some of the work-related research that is most salient for my study concerns how exotic dancers manage their interactions with customers. Management of customer-worker interactions has been a fruitful topic of investigation by much recent sociological inquiry into the burgeoning service industry. This final section of the review of the literature will delve into some of the most pertinent information from the sociology of service work, particularly as a strategy by which to examine the relationships between exotic dancers and their customers.

Service work: serving (and servicing) others

Robin Leidner is a sociologist who participated as an actual worker and fellow employee with her co-worker/respondents. Even though she worked in a McDonald’s store and with life insurance salesmen as they made cold sales calls (Leidner 1993), and not as an exotic dancer or other sex worker, her work is surprisingly relevant to the study of exotic dancers. This section will begin with a general discussion of service workers, and what makes this group of workers different from other workers. Next I will describe the literature that defines exotic dancers as service workers, specifically interactive service workers, in the same way that Leidner’s fast food counter salespeople and life insurance salesmen fit this definition.
Different types of service workers

A service worker is an employee who performs personal services for relative strangers (Hodson and Sullivan 1990) by interacting directly with them as clients or customers (Leidner 1993). There are different categories of service workers, and there is a bit of controversy concerning to which category exotic dancers belong (Ronai 1992a; Chapkis 1997). As we shall see, the different categories of service work overlap and weave together, making the task of locating exotic dancers within only one particular category difficult.

Professional and personal service workers

One category of service work is professional service work. Workers such as doctors, attorneys, and teachers, who provide professional services to many people (Hodson and Sullivan 1990), fit into this category. Professional, in this case, means that workers have specialized training that prepares them for their occupation.

Personal service workers are workers who provide services to an individual person. These workers fit into a distinct category of service work. Typically this category includes what is considered low-skill jobs such as personal care assistant and child care worker. Most personal service jobs are considered to be marginal, and as such, tend to exploit jobholders in terms of wages, status, and other job conditions (Hodson and Sullivan 1990).

Locating dancers as personal or professional service workers

When looking at what exotic dancers do as employees, it becomes apparent that part of their job is to perform particular acts for an individual in exchange for tips, or at some clubs, for an hourly wage. Depending on locale, type of club, local regulations, and other
constraints, some of these particular acts may include kissing customers on the face, neck, or lips (Chidley 1995; Ronai 1993). Other clubs, particularly on the American west coast, offer customers the chance to dance with women as conventional dance partners while both customer and dancer are fully clothed (Hong and Duff 1997). Dancing in front of customers while nearly nude is another act that many exotic dancers perform as part of their job (Chidley 1995; Dallis 1995; Funari 1997; Guidroz 1996; Horwitz 1992; Liepe-Levinson 1998; Ronai, 1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1998; Simeone 1998). Fondling customers' genitals with hands, knees, or other body parts is part of some dancers' jobs, though this is strictly regulated and even outlawed in certain areas. Stripping, dancing, simulating sex acts, or conducting other performances onstage, often behind a glass window, for individual customers is yet another act that exotic dancers do as part of their job (Dudash 1997; Funari 1997; Lewis 1998; Prewitt 1989; Ronai 1998). Because exotic dancers perform these acts for particular customers, they seem to fit Hodson and Sullivan's definitional criteria for personal service workers.

According to some observers, exotic dancers experience job stress, including a sense of powerlessness, because of their status as personal service workers (Sullivan 1995). Personal service work is largely a low-paying segment, and as such, is largely populated by women, ethnic and racial minorities, and other low-status individuals. Because the discourse, tasks, and interactions that women in the personal service industry are made to participate in

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2 Although fondling customers may be outlawed or against club management in many areas, the literature suggests that these acts are often performed in violation of rules.
by management makes them powerless, according to this negative view of women in these types of service jobs, there is little chance for personal agency (Wendt 1995).

There seems to be confirmation of this negative view. Some literature points to how exotic dancers are exploited by management in terms of pay, hours, and lack of unionization in most cities (Dudash 1997; Prewitt 1998). Police target dancers for arrest if they step over often obscure and shifting legal lines. In many cities, there is an oversupply of dancers because of the lack of decent job opportunities for women with few job skills that pay as well as dancing. This leads to intense competition for jobs, which drives wages down (Prewitt 1998).

On the other hand, other researchers note that personal service workers can exert tremendous amounts of personal agency on the job. Paules, for example, in her research on waitresses, notes that although customers may accept their “role as master” (Paules 1996: 265), waitresses do not necessarily internalize their corresponding role as servant. In fact, the waitresses in her study actively resisted the attempts of customers and management to relegate them an identity as a servant. According to Paules, waitresses and other service workers, by refusing to internalize others’ constructions of identity, are able to maintain their own sense of self.

In a similar way, exotic dancers themselves often see themselves not as personal service workers, with the attendant negative connotations detailed above, but as professional service workers (Chapkis 1997; Dallis 1995; Dudash 1997; Funari 1997). Chapkis' respondents, for example, who work as prostitutes, peep show actresses, exotic dancers, and phone sex workers, view themselves as professional service workers because of what they
consider to be their high level job skills and industry-based knowledge. Dancers point to the
difficulty of learning how to dance in four-inch heels (Ronai 1993; Hunter 1996) while
balancing on a narrow, ledge-like stage (Liepe-Levinson 1998), all the while conducting
complex interactions with often drunk patrons in a way that both extracts tips from them and
keeps their behavior within legal bounds (Funari 1997; Dudash 1997; Ronai 1992a, 1993;
Simeone 1998). These dancers proclaim that their work is too complex to be considered low-
skill, as most personal service jobs are considered to be.

In addition, some exotic dancers say they really enjoy their jobs because of the
professional aspects of their work (Dudash 1997; Funari 1997). Perhaps some of the reasons
why these dancers like the professional aspects of their jobs are because they work within
unionized workplaces or other sites where dancers are relatively empowered. Additionally,
the Lusty Lady in San Francisco is one club cited as an empowering workplace; Dudash and
Funari, who were at one time both employed there, say that the fact that the club is owned by
women who were, themselves, exotic dancers means that the owners take special care to
ensure the professional treatment of employees. These dancers say that there are few other
jobs where they could make so much money, especially without a formal education.

At this point, perhaps it is not necessary to settle the debate between those who insist
that exotic dancers are personal service workers, with the attendant low pay, poor working
conditions, and low status, as opposed to professional service workers, who tend to have
higher status and higher income. It seems apparent that there is much overlap between the
two categories of service workers, and also that dancers’ jobs weave a little of both together.
Perhaps a more important way to examine dancers as service workers is to look at how they
manage their interactions with their customers by examining exotic dancing through an interactional service worker lens.

**Interactive service workers**

Another way that Leidner (1993) categorizes service work is by measuring how much workers interact with their customers. She defines workers who interact *directly* with customers or clients as interactive service workers. Leidner includes in this category workers such as fast food counter personnel, insurance salespeople, therapists, manicurists, and telemarketers (Leidner 1999). Each of these occupations require that employees talk with customers, ask them questions, and provide them with food, therapy, insurance, and other services.

Dancers also talk with their customers, ask questions, and provide them with services. It thus seems reasonable to consider dancers to be interactive service workers. For example, although strip clubs commonly have exotic dancers performing for the entire club in a central performance area such as a stage (Dallis 1997; Ronai 1992a), some contemporary clubs also market dancers who perform privately for groups of patrons, or for one customer at a time in personalized performances (Dallis 1997; Ronai 1992a; Hong and Duff 1997). Some clubs feature dancers who perform on a stage encased in glass; patrons enter small, private booths that face the dancer and pay by the minute in order to view the dancer, often masturbating as they do so (Chapkis 1997; Funari 1997; Dudash 1997; Hartley 1997). In all of these cases, dancers must interact with their customers by taking their requests for dancing positions (Chapkis 1997; Dudash 1997; Funari 1997), engaging in sex talk with customers (Dallis 1995; Dudash 1997; Funari 1997; Ronai 1993); and often directly responding to their
mastubatory needs (Dudash 1997; Funari 1997). These interactions between customer and dancer are often performed on a private, one-on-one basis, even if the privacy is simulated or illusory. Thus Leidner’s category of interactive service work seems to include exotic dancers.

**Emotional labor in service work**

In recent years, sociologists studying workplaces and workers have begun to focus on the study of emotions and emotional labor. The emotional aspect of service jobs is especially salient to my examination of exotic dancers, as emotional labor in strip clubs is highly stratified by gender, as you shall see in later chapters. As Pierce (1995) notes, though emotional labor is now a growing field, many previous studies about service jobs have neglected to mention this most important aspect.

Arlie Hochschild is generally credited with inventing the term “emotional labor” in her study of airline attendants (1983). But perhaps the groundwork for the study of the gendered nature of emotional labor can be credited to Nancy Chodorow. The social-psychoanalytical ideas she put forth in her canonical work, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) are among the first to explore how men and women’s emotional labors are strikingly different from each other. In this work, she theorizes that women are more “relational” than men. Thus, according to Chodorow, women are more likely than men to feel that they have an emotional and empathetic bond with other people. Women’s relationality is evident in their workplaces, according to this theory, and thus women are more likely to experience emotional bonds with their co-workers, customers, clients, and employers. Of course, Hochschild (1983) and Leidner (1993, 1999) expanded Chodorow’s thesis to examine how corporations capitalize on women’s relationality and manipulate women’s emotional labor.
Some of the emotional roles that women in service jobs perform include reassuring customers, clients, co-workers, and even bosses; maintaining the psychological and emotional well-being of bosses and clients through deference and care-taking behaviors; and reaffirming men’s status in the hierarchy (Pierce 1995).

Contemporary law firms, studied extensively by Jennifer Pierce (1995), comprise a segment of the service industry that is a good example of how emotional labor is strikingly gendered and where power inequalities are evident. As Pierce notes, in law firms, the sex segregated structure of the occupation requires that men and women play different emotional roles. Men, who are usually attorneys, are allowed to rage and fume, or to otherwise express their emotions to clients, juries, judges, and to paralegals, legal secretaries, and other attorneys in their offices. In contrast, women, primarily paralegals and legal secretaries, must be nurturing and nearly motherly; they must act as caretakers both to clients and to attorneys, and remain deferential and calm with attorneys who bluster and rage. Even when men and women hold the same job within a law firm, the role expectations for their emotional expression are different. For example, male paralegals are allowed a wider range of emotional expression than female paralegals are, and female attorneys are allowed a smaller range of emotional expression than male attorneys. Pierce’s thesis is that these gendered emotional roles reproduce women’s subordination and solidify men’s power in law firms.

Kanter (1977), though writing well before Hochschild’s (1983) invention of the concept of emotional labor, also discusses how the nature of sex-segregated occupations reproduces gender inequality through emotional labor. In her study on men and women in a large corporation, she notes women and men tend to play out their assigned gender roles
much like what would occur in a marriage relationship. Thus to be successful in the
corporation, a woman must take on the emotional role of a supportive wife and to be
mothering in her support of her boss, who in Kanter’s study was nearly always male. Though
Kanter did not examine emotional labor in service jobs per se, her analysis about how the
sex-segregation of occupations and the emotional role that mimics wifely duties that women
are expected to play with their male co-workers, seems pertinent to this study.

Leidner (1993; 1999) and Hochschild (1983) both studied how the emotional labor
performed by employees is manipulated by corporations. Hochschild’s flight attendants, for
example, were expected to be deferential and motherly to passengers even when they became
angry, hostile, or otherwise expressing negative emotions. Leidner took Hochschild’s
analysis further and noted that corporations actually standardize the expression of
employee’s emotional labor for the benefit of the corporation. Thus employees’ emotions are
standardized to be predictable for customers and employers alike. There are many more
aspects to the standardization of service employees, as I shall talk about next.

**Routinization of interactive service work**

A characteristic of interactive service jobs that Leidner (1993) discusses that is
extremely important to my study is routinization and standardization of employees and their
jobs. Here, I will first highlight Leidner’s general discussion about routinization and
standardization, and next turn to how exotic dancers may be routinized and standardized in
much the same way that Leidner’s fast food worker and insurance salesmen were.
Routinization of jobs

Routinization is the splitting of jobs into minute, fragmented, components so that each employee is concentrating on doing only one task over and over (Braverman 1974). Routinization at some jobs, including the fast food workers and the insurance salesmen that Leidner studied, include standardized speech, or scripts, as well as standardized gestures and manner of speaking. In a later work, Leidner calls upon Hochschild’s work on emotional labor and maintains that routinization in some jobs includes the routinization and management of employees’ actual emotions, and not just the outward manifestation of the employee’s emotional state (1999).

Purpose of routinization

According to Leidner, routinization serves certain purposes. It makes interactions between customer and worker predictable and standardized. This benefits the customer, in that s/he can rely on an interchange that is reliably predictable. It also benefits the worker, in that s/he is provided with a standard routine to use when dealing with a difficult customer. An important point about routinization is that it works not only on the worker, but also on the customer. The customer fits herself or himself into the routine in order to receive the desired service. According to Leidner, this is illustrated by how customers neatly and quietly line up at McDonald’s, read the menu to themselves, proceed to the counter to place their order, and then travel to the next place on the counter to pick up their order. By following the script, aided by environmental cues such as ropes delineating how the queue should move, customers are fitting themselves into the store’s routines. This brings up what may be
Leidner's most important point about who actually benefits from routinization. Leidner maintains that routinization of jobs in order to make interactions predictable benefits corporations more than it does anyone else. By managing employees' actions, speech, and even their emotions, corporations are assured that workers will act in ways that are corporation-approved, even if there is no immediate supervisor monitoring the customer-worker interaction (Leidner 1993). As shall become apparent later, the employers of exotic dancers benefit from this management of behavior.

**Worker response to routinization**

Contrary to the dire predictions of widespread emotional inauthenticity and alienation that was initially assumed to be the natural result of the routinization of jobs, Leidner's respondents appreciated certain aspects of the routinization of their work (1993; 1999). The interactional strategies that they were taught to use with customers helped them to deal with difficult customers, and made their own work feel more standard and predictable. As shall be discussed below, exotic dancers also appreciate this aspect of the routinization of their jobs.

For many of Leidner's respondents, the standardized ways of acting and speaking allowed them to invest their energies into activities outside of their job, instead of having to expend much energy at work. They spoke positively about having structure to their job, and about having a sense of personal agency. The insurance salesmen, in particular, spoke about how using interactional strategies gave them control over their clients. One technique designed to manipulate a client into certain behaviors was to point with a pen to a certain written passage, and then to bring the pen back up to the salesman's eyes so that the customer was directed first to the desired passage, and then back to the salesman's face. Interactional
strategies such as these gave the salesmen the ability to “outmaneuver” (Leidner 1999: 91) recalcitrant clients. As we shall next explore, exotic dancers also use standardized interactional strategies, and for the same reasons that other, more mundane workers do.

Constructing dancers as routinized workers

As Leidner documents, interactive service workers utilize scripts, or routine speech and gestures, in repetitive ways for a variety of purposes, including controlling customer behavior. Here I will first describe how exotic dancers can be said to be routinized employees. Next will be a discussion of the purposes and benefits of the routinization of their jobs to dancers, their customers, and to their employers. Following that I will describe what the literature says that exotic dancers, as workers, have to say about the routinization of their jobs.

How dancers are routinized

According to Leidner (1997) and Braverman (1974), people whose job tasks are split into minute components that are performed in the same way repeatedly, are routinized. An additional aspect of Leidner’s definition of routinized workers who are also defined as interactive service workers is that they employ standardized language, gestures, behavior, appearance, and even emotions when interacting with customers. Following these definitions, exotic dancers can be said to be routinized workers.

First, dancers can be considered to be routinized because they utilize pre-determined scripts (Funari 1997; Liepe-Levinson 1998; Prewitt 1998; Ronai 1993). For example, a dancer may utilize nearly identical dance steps, techniques of clothing removal, and fondling
techniques for every customer (Liepe-Levinson 1998; Ronai 1993). She will also do this same routine night after night. The scripts that dancers utilize may be determined by the dancers themselves (Ronai 1993), or by club management. Many times customers demand that dancers perform particular scripts (Dudash 1997; Funari 1997); the willing dancer who does as required is constructing herself as routinized.

Second, dancers typically come to adopt a particular appearance, dancing style, and method of interacting with customers that becomes her trademark (Dudash 1997; Ronai 1992a). This highlights another way that an exotic dancer is routinized, in that the trademark appearance and demeanor is nearly identical across different workshifts and for different customers.

There are other hallmarks that distinguish routinized occupations that also characterize exotic dancing. Dancers’ tasks are fragmented (Braverman 1974), which is an important characteristic of routinized jobs. For example, dancers will perform on stage, step off the stage (where allowed) to interact with customers as part of their performance, interact with customers while not performing, fondle their customers, talk with them, etc. Even the division of labor in the strip club itself is a distinguishing feature. In the strip club, jobs are split into tasks: management, bartending, dancing, bouncing, and clean-up. All of these features are characteristics of jobs that are routinized.

**Purposes of routinization**

There are many purposes of routinization. Some of the purposes of routinization and standardization primarily benefit exotic dancers themselves. Other purposes are designed to benefit customers, who willingly fit themselves into the routines to receive the services that
they desire. Less obvious, however, may be the purposes that are designed to primarily benefit the employers of exotic dancers.

For dancers, the use of standardized speech, mannerisms, dance techniques, and other aspects of routinization are calculated to have desired effects on customers (Dudash 1997; Ronai 1993). One of the most important desired effects concerns customer tipping (Dallis 1995; Hurd and Preston 1980; Ronai 1993; Ronai and Ellis 1989). Tipping is a central feature of many dancers’ work lives. In fact, many clubs do not pay their employees; dancers count on tips to make money (Dudash 1997).

Exotic dancers utilize particular interactional strategies to manipulate customers into giving tips in a number of ways. Some of these techniques include staring intensely at customers (Snowden 1993), bargaining with them (Hurd and Preston 1980), and teasing them (Enck and Preston 1988). Dancers who work in clubs that feature lap dancing or table dancing often focus their attention on manipulating customers into purchasing these particular services, as they can be quite lucrative for exotic dancers (Thompson and Harred 1992).

According to Ronai (1992a), who worked her way through graduate school as an exotic dancer (1992b), dancers also use standardized scripts in order to transform casual customers into repeat customers. The use of scripts that facilitate quick customer masturbation-induced orgasms through standardized sex talk (Dudash 1997; Funari 1997; Ronai 1993) or fondling (Ronai 1993) is another reason why dancers utilize scripts. Like Leidner’s respondents, dancers also count on having pre-determined scripts in order to handle difficult clients (Liepe-Levinson 1998; Ronai 1993; 1998). All of the routinized,
standardized interactions must be performed carefully and creatively, because if a customer suspects that he is being manipulated by an exotic dancer, he often withholds his tip, berates her, or otherwise negatively affects a dancer’s work experience (Snowden 1993).

Another way that dancers utilize standardized behaviors is through the conscious manipulation of cultural symbols. For example, some may choose a particular costume in order to attract certain customers (Ronai and Ellis 1989). In a similar vein, dancers who are able to choose the music that will play while they perform choose music for its symbolic appeal to certain men who are likely to tip (Snowden 1993). The strip club where the dancer performs also manipulates certain symbols in order to attract and keep customers. Nearly every strip club sports a brass pole as part of the stage set-up; the symbolic phallicism of the pole is then manipulated by the dancers as a prop to interest customers and to drive them to tip (Ronai 1993; Hunter 1996).

Exploiting customers’ expectations about strip clubs is another interactional strategy that dancers utilize in order to manage their interactions with customers (Simeone 1998; Ronai and Ellis 1989). Customers are aware of what normally goes on in strip clubs through anticipatory socialization (Lewis 1998), environmental cues (Liepe-Levinson 1998), and through actual instruction by the dancers, often as part of their routine (Liepe-Levinson 1998). Exotic dancers also capitalize on the cultural ideas that customers bring to the strip club. Customer ideas about appropriate gender roles and identity is one of the primary cultural ideas that dancers exploit (Dallis 1995; Liepe-Levinson 1998; Ronai 1998).

Customers also benefit from their routinized interactions with exotic dancers. For customers, the scripts provide them with standardized and predictable encounters with
dancers (Ronai 1993; Simeone 1998). The standardized and predictable events and interactions with exotic dancers are similar across the US (Simeone 1998), making it easy for a customer to be able to interact in a comfortable way wherever he may be. Like a McDonald’s customer comes to expect a particular kind of food and type of service no matter where the particular store is located, so, too, does the customer of an exotic dancer expect such standardization.

A key component of Leidner’s analysis of the routinization of workplaces and employees is that the primary beneficiaries are corporations (1997). According to her, workplaces are routinized in order to maximize employers' control over employees, in order to extract the largest amount of profit from the standardized interactions. But in the world of exotic dancing, there may be other, less sinister-sounding capitalistic benefits of the routinization of employees. Clubs that feature exotic dancing are under continuous scrutiny by police, liquor regulation officials, and others seeking to strictly regulate, and even to close down, the work sites should violations occur (Alex 1996; Hoffman 1998; Pierre 1999). If exotic dancers follow the letter of the law through the enactment of their scripts, their employers know that they can rely on workers to react in manners considered appropriate; employers thus stay in business, and dancers thus stay employed.

Dancer response to routinization

What do exotic dancers think about being routinized and being expected to behave in standardized, predictable ways? Some theorists suggest that routinization makes employees unhappy. Braverman (1974), for example, thought that routinization robbed jobs of the skill that had been necessary in the days before tasks were split into fragmented components.
Fragmentation, for Braverman, meant that workers were no longer able to be creative on the job; since creativity is seen as essential to workers feeling that they have personal agency, the routinization of their workplace means that workers feel as if they have no agency or control over their work environment.

Others disagree with this gloomy construction of routinized workers. Hodson (1995), for example, argues that workers still possess personal agency in spite of their routinization. He notes that agency can be expressed through small group processes. This tendency towards the expression of personal agency in small groups has been especially exploited by corporations in Europe and Japan in order to increase worker morale while at the same time increasing quality and productivity.

Leidner’s respondents also were not gloomy about being routinized (1993). Her respondents found many benefits to being routinized, such as having standardized scripts to fall back on when a customer is being difficult. Exotic dancers also say they appreciate their standardized scripts (Dudash, 1997; Funari 1997; Hurd and Preston 1980; Ronai 1993; Simeone 1998). Just like employees at McDonalds who encounter customers who are hard to get along with, exotic dancers must interact with similar customers, often after the customers have been drinking heavily (Ronai 1993). Having standardized scripts to fall back on provides dancers who encounter difficult customers with a comfortable routine that they can immediately recall. Paules (1996), in her study of waitresses, noted that these workers often use routinized interactions to co-opt unruly, rude, or demanding customers in order to bolster their own sense of autonomy. Using particular interactional strategies to exert personal power
further works to assist the service worker in resisting the disempowering identity of a servant and from being controlled by others (ibid).

Dudash (1997), a peepshow dancer cum researcher, especially liked having predetermined scripts because it allowed her to quickly talk customers into having masturbatory-induced orgasms. She had a complete set of scripted routines that she would use depending on who her customer was. For example, teenage boys, who often patronized her workplace in pairs, would quickly respond to one particular script, while a middle-aged man who was a frequent, and often jaded, customer would respond to a much different script. Moving customers quickly through their masturbatory processes meant that she could sell more dances, and thus make more money.

Another benefit of pre-determined scripts that dancers accrue are the scripts’ influence on dancers’ identifying with the role of exotic dancer. If a dancer is able to use pre-determined scripts, she is able to divorce her real self from her exotic dancer self (Ronai 1993; Thompson and Harred 1992). Thus the routinized components of her job aid in her management of the stigma of being an exotic dancer. In a similar vein, Funari (1997), who is a peepshow worker and social researcher, liked the pre-determined scripts because she was able to construct them herself. This gave her a vital sense of control over her work environment. She felt that she was able to construct her own identity as an exotic dancer, and yet maintain an alternate, more authentic identity when she was not working.

*Learning interactional strategies*

Exotic dancers learn the various interactional strategies and mechanisms to control customer behavior through a variety of methods. A primary way that dancers learn the tricks
of their trade is through observation of a friend or co-worker (Lewis 1998; Ronai 1993; Ronai and Ellis 1989; Snowden 1998). Dancers also learn techniques through instruction by more experienced dancers (Lewis 1998). Recently, several strip clubs and professional performers have offered intensive workshops to teach potential dancers the tricks of the trade (Hunter 1996; Liepe-Levinson 1998). Although this type of formalized training is relatively rare across most of the country, such offerings are beginning to be quite common in large cities such as New York. In cities such as San Francisco, exotic dancers have begun to publish newsletters that typically give tips of the trade, advice to new dancers, and inside information about employment conditions at particular clubs. News of the various attempts to unionize exotic dancers is also common in the newsletters (e.g. “Exotic Dancers Alliance). Printed copies of newsletters are distributed behind the scenes in dressing rooms within clubs. Some of the newsletters are also published on the internet, proving once again that exotic dancers are resourceful, creative, and actively creating their own reality as workers.

Section summary

The interactional strategies that exotic dancers use are designed so they can exert power and control over their customers. The purpose of manipulating customers through the use of interactional strategies is to drive customers to tip, and to tip often. In addition, the interactional strategies give dancers a set routine that they can follow in order to deal with difficult, non-compliant customers and other work contingencies. Dancers are not the only ones to benefit from the routines employed by dancers; customers may also benefit. For many customers, the predictability of knowing what to expect in strip clubs makes their visits more enjoyable (Leidner 1993) and possibly safer. Customers also benefit from the
emotional labor that dancers employ. However, dancers must use their routinized interactional techniques carefully so as not to antagonize and alienate customers who expect more personalized service.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have described three major theoretical approaches that sociologists have utilized to examine exotic dancers. The earliest approaches to the study of exotic dancers constructed them as deviants and looked for the original source of their deviance and how their deviance spilled over into other aspects of their lives. Feminist perspectives, which were the next major set of theoretical approaches to the study of exotic dancers, tended to construct dancers in one of two polarized ways: either dancers and other sex workers represented the epitome of liberated women, or they were helpless, victimized pawns of the patriarchal social order. Although Chapkis and other feminist theorists have been attempting to locate a middle ground between these two polar opposites, the rhetoric about exotic dancers being either passive victims or liberated role models continues. I believe it is the third perspective that I discuss, exotic dancers as workers, that is the most fruitful.

Looking at exotic dancers from their standpoint as workers is, I believe, beneficial for several reasons. First, looking at dancers as workers removes some of the stigma that is attached to exotic dancers and other sex workers. By reframing dancers as workers, attention is shifted away from their construction as social deviants and towards their status as workers who are active agents. In addition, by looking at dancers as workers, their work problems become more evident. As researchers have noted, women who work in the sex industry have work issues that are parallel to most other women workers; sex discrimination, sexual
harassment, poor pay, long hours, environmentally dangerous working conditions, work-related injuries, and other job-related problems are endemic to the world of exotic dancing, just as they are in other female-dominated occupations. And dancers, just like other, more mundane workers, create strategies specifically designed to address these kinds of work problems, as I shall demonstrate in a later chapter.

Finally, looking at exotic dancers as workers underscores the fact that exotic dancers possess personal agency. Through an examination of the interactional strategies that they employ, it becomes evident that dancers exert a great deal of control over their work environment. Over the course of my research on exotic dancers, this point became more salient. In the end, the question of personal agency became so interesting to me that I devoted my research to the study of the ways that exotic dancers exerted power over their customers. In the next chapter, I will describe the methodological issues of the study, before I turn to what I discovered.
CHAPTER THREE

WHAT'S A NICE GIRL LIKE ME DOING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS?
RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

I struggled to project an air of casualness as my female friend and I strolled into the strip club on my first evening of observation. I paid our five-dollar cover charges to a huge, hulking man who I later discovered was one of the bouncers. I hoped that he did not notice that my hands were shaking ever so slightly from nervousness. Behind him a slim Asian woman with jet-black hair down to her knees scrutinized me with what I perceived to be hostility. Because we were two women daring to enter a largely male preserve? Did she read us as prostitutes? Lesbians? Or worse yet—did she surmise that I was a researcher? An hour later I would be watching her hang from her ankles from a brass pole while clad only in her stunning thigh-high black boots and a tiny G-string. With as much nonchalance as I could muster, I strolled with my friend to the back of the club towards the stage and encountered my first research subject¹. A nearly naked woman was gyrating on the raised platform, humping a brass pole. A dozen men clustered around the stage, signaling for her attention with dollar bills while she performed. I was grateful for the loudness of the music, as I realized that my heart was thumping loudly. I briefly considered fainting. I spun around and retreated to what I assumed would be safety in the women’s restroom, only to encounter a similarly dressed (or undressed) woman touching

¹ The use of the term “research subject” here is deliberate, as shall be discussed in this chapter.
up her make-up. Thus began my foray into the underbelly of a harbor town and the world of the exotic dancer.

In this chapter, I will lay out the research methodology that I used for this study. I will talk about the goals of my research, and the types of questions for which I sought answers. I will explain why I chose to conduct an ethnographic field study of strip clubs and to interview exotic dancers, bouncers, and customers of strip clubs. Some of the ethical issues involved in doing ethnography will be described, and the steps that I took to address these concerns. The ethical and moral concerns that were raised over the course of the research led me to discover and delight in feminist methodology. How feminist methodology addresses some of the problems in conducting traditional ethnographic research will be described, including how analyzing my research approach in terms of feminism resulted in personal, as well as paradigmatic, shifts in consciousness. This chapter will also include a run-down of some of the nuts and bolts of the data and their collection process, such as how I chose the particular sites to research, how I conducted the observations and interviews, and how I recorded the data. My approach to analyzing the collected data collected will be discussed near the end of this chapter. I conclude with a vignette of an experience in the field that occurred near the end of conducting my observations. As you will note, the concluding vignette contrasts sharply with my initial field experience and reflects my growing understanding of the normative strip club environment, and of the people who populate this world. More importantly, however, the concluding vignette illustrates the transformative possibilities of feminist methodological approaches.
Goals of the Research

The goals of this research started out simply enough: I wanted to demonstrate that exotic dancers exerted power over their customers and thus were less likely to be neither victimized pawns of the patriarchal social order nor exemplars of egalitarian feminist praxis (Chapkis 1997). In order to examine the power relationships, I chose to study the interactions, both spoken and non-verbal, that occurred between dancers and customers, through naturalistic observation and interviews with exotic dancers. I wanted to test the saliency of the arguments that dancers control the interactions between themselves and their customers through the use of specific interactional strategies (Ronai and Ellis 1989), with tipping as a central feature (Paules 1991). Through this inquiry, I hoped to demonstrate that exotic dancers possess personal agency that is manifested in the exchanges with their customers.

In order to discover the power that is revealed through the exchanges between dancers and customers, I sought to answer the following questions:

• how are dancers’ interactions with customers power-laden?
• are the interactional strategies that dancers use evident?
• do the strategies succeed in locating the power within the dancers?
• what factors might influence the power relationship?

Originally, I had planned to only interview exotic dancers and inquire about their relationships with customers. As I made observations of dancers interacting with male customers, however, I realized that the power relationship between dancers and
customers flowed two ways, and that I also needed to talk to customers. I therefore interviewed men who were regular customers at strip clubs. I was seeking to find out their views on who holds power in the dancer-customer relationship and how they thought power was manifested. Some of the questions that I needed to answer about male customers' power included:

- how does the power of male customers manifest itself in strip clubs?
- how do men respond to the interactional strategies employed by dancers?
- do customers utilize interactional strategies as well?

Because I had never been in a strip club before entering on the night to do my first observation, I had no idea of the powerful role that bouncers play within the strip club environment. After observing them in action, however, and after hearing dancers talk about the role bouncers play, their power became evident. Jackie Litt, one of the co-chairs of my committee, also became intrigued with the role of bouncers, and urged me to include them in my study as well. Some of the questions I needed to ask about bouncers included:

- what is the role of the bouncer in the power structure of the strip club environment?
- on what side of the power equation do they fit?
- how do bouncers manifest their personal power within the strip club?

Thus the goals of my research expanded from being merely a description of the evident power that dancers exerted over customers, to being an explanation of how the power that is manifested by three different constituencies within the strip club affects
dancer power. I was naïve at the start of my research, as I shall discuss later in this chapter, and I assumed that I would play no role in the power play in the strip club. I was soon to discover, however, that I had several different roles to play in order to realize the goals of my research.

In the next section, I will discuss why I chose an ethnographic approach to achieve my research goals. As will be demonstrated, using multiple approaches to gathering data allowed me to expand the original goals of the research and to address many of the ethical, moral, and political concerns that arose.

**Choice of Method: Ethnographic Field Study**

Although researchers of exotic dancers have in the past utilized surveys (e.g. McCaghy and Skipper 1972) and the resultant number crunching to describe strippers, these types of studies are definitely in the minority. More common are ethnographic field studies that utilize interview techniques and/or naturalistic observation in strip clubs. I decided to follow in the footsteps of this tradition and to conduct an ethnographic field study. In this section, I will first describe the various components of the field study, and explain how I utilized the strengths of these components. I will also discuss some of the ethical, moral, and political issues connected with the field study, and talk about how I struggled to address these issues.

**Naturalistic observation**

The first component of my ethnographic field study was naturalistic observation (Adler and Adler 1998). Like my anthropological forebears, I traced the path of Alice
Fletcher’s 1881 journey into the field seeking to experience the strip club environment for myself (Reinharz 1992), just as Franz Boas was to do in the beginning of the 20th century (VanMaanen 1988). I accomplished this by frequenting strip clubs and immersing myself into the site (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995), gathering impressions through several senses: eyes, ears, and nose (Adler and Adler 1998). Thus I noted the sight of the dancers gyrating on stage and interacting with customers; the smell of cigarette smoke, beer, and dancers’ perfumes; the sound of dancers exhorting customers to tip them; and the feel of throbbing drums and pounding guitars in my body. When a researcher employs all of her senses in a research setting, according to Adler and Adler (1998), she is able to tap multiple sources to gather data from the site.

One of the prime characteristics of naturalistic observation is that the observer is careful not to interrupt the natural flow of events (Adler and Adler 1998). Thus a naturalistic observer cannot manipulate those being researched by asking interview questions, injecting experimental elements into the site, or otherwise intervening in the natural setting in any manner. For my purposes, I chose to adopt a “peripheral membership role” (ibid.: 85), participating just enough in the strip club environment so that I assumed enough of an insider’s identity to allow me to make observations, but not enough so that I took an active role in the “core activities” (ibid.) required of full members.
Much of the time that I engaged in naturalistic observation I was in the field covertly, masquerading as just another customer in the strip club\(^2\). Therefore, I sat close to the stage and purchased Diet Cokes, tipped the waitresses and bartenders, and, when prompted, tipped the dancers. I was, as Adler and Adler so aptly describe it, a “disguised voyeur (1998: 85). I chose to act in this manner because I was concerned that revealing my presence as a researcher would affect the environment, and that my observations within a naturalistic setting would be compromised. As I shall discuss later, when I began to conduct research as an overt researcher, my initial suspicions about reactivity were confirmed.

A number of aspects concerning the time that I spent simply observing are significant. First, I did these observations sporadically over nearly a year’s time. I also varied the times that I was in the clubs; sometimes I appeared during “happy hour”, which is typically late afternoon to early evening. Other times I arrived at the clubs during the evening and late at night. I visited clubs on weekends and during the week. I made observations during several different seasons, which made a difference in the number and types of customers, and I made these observations in three different states. Making observations over time like this increases reliability in qualitative work (Adler and Adler 1998; Huberman and Miles 1998) by reducing the risk that what I observed repeatedly only happened by chance.

\(^2\) Of course, since I was invariably either the only woman in the club who was not accompanied by a male date, or part of the only pair of women when I was accompanied by my female friend, covert in this case did not mean that I was unnoticed and that I really passed as “just another customer.”
I roughly followed the stages of observational research that are described by Adler and Adler (1998). During the first nights at the strip clubs, I made general observations about the scene. There was so much going on, so many impressions to gather, and so much data to immerse myself in, that I had trouble discerning what to watch, listen to, smell, or feel. So instead of trying to focus, I used this time to become comfortable in the strip club environment (not an easy task), and to learn the language, customs, rituals, and other normal behavior of the population (VanMaanen 1988). After a few nights in the clubs, I began to focus on particular elements of the environment. I was growing comfortable in the strip clubs, even though I was usually the only fully clothed woman in the club besides the occasional woman bartender and sometimes waitresses. I had learned the language, customs and rituals, and I was ready to move into the next observational stage and take a more active role in the research setting.

**Participant-observation**

Adler and Adler (1998) label naturalistic observation the “stepchild” (82) of participant observation, and note that most texts on qualitative research methods exclude a close examination of pure observation as a method. For me, naturalistic observation was a critically useful stage through which I needed to pass in order to learn the particulars about the strip club environment. By learning the mores, rituals, language, and other aspects peculiar to strip clubs before becoming a participant-observer, I hoped to be spared the agonizingly embarrassing moments in the field when naïve researchers unwittingly commit some blunder that estranges the research population and warrants a confessional tale (VanMaanen 1988) in the appendices of their thesis.
After thirty-six hours observing in strip clubs, I felt like I had become culturally competent and I was ready to become a more active participant. At this point I moved my observational activities to another strip club in another state. I did this so that the dancers, customers, and others in the clubs I had been observing would not feel that they had been betrayed when they discovered that I had been frequenting the clubs as a researcher. I believe that this helped to protect the individuals from potential psychological harm.

As a participant-observer, I disclosed my researcher role to key individuals: managers, bouncers, and dancers. Within hours of entering the new club as an overt researcher, word had spread about why I was there. As a result, three dancers requested to be interviewed, as did two bouncers. Although I was continually to experience problems with obtaining interviews, and even to be able to be an overt observer, as I will detail later, this initial period of becoming a visible participant-observer was a period of euphoria.

As a participant-observer, I largely sat at the bar and chatted with the bouncers, manager, and dancers. This type of active participation in the research site is a hallmark of feminist ethnography (Reinharz 1992: 46) because it makes the individuals being scrutinized “real” (ibid. 51). From my vantage point, I was able to observe patrons coming in and out, and to overhear conversations between customers and bouncers, and customers and dancers. I watched the dancers on stage and off stage interacting with customers. Because I was often sitting with one or more bouncers, or could easily chat with the bartender or manager, I was able to inquire about particular activities that I witnessed. Many times this proved useful to check if a behavior was considered legal or
not, as I shall discuss later. In addition, the bouncers, managers, and bartenders were able to identify dancers, tell me how long they had worked there, and give other pertinent details.

Much of the time spent as an overt participant-observer was spent in conversation with institutional members of the strip club. We nearly always were talking about the dancers, the strip club, where dancers and bouncers had worked before, how the laws differ in other states, and related issues. Thus the conversations amounted to informal interviewing. As Fontana and Frey (1998) point out, participant-observation is intimately connected with interviewing. Indeed, when interviews supplement data gathered from participant-observation, a researcher is able to connect broad theoretically based observations with the experiences of individuals (Reinharz 1992). This seems to me to be a technique that reestablishes the agency of individual actors; as this is a prime tenet of my research, conducting interviews was a logical next step in my research process.

Interviews

By the time I moved into the stage of being a participant-observer, I was having loads of fun in the strip clubs. The personnel in the strip club where I fully came out as an overt participant-observer initially were friendly and outgoing, and getting them to agree to doing interviews was at first quite easy. This is not to say that all of my attempts to get interviews were easy. In fact, gaining entry and obtaining interviews from dancers was extremely difficult in the first two clubs where I worked, as I shall discuss later. And after

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3 Thanks to Jackie Litt for pointing out the necessity of this “logical next step”
a few evenings spent observing and interviewing in the club where I finally gained entry as an overt researcher, the owner misunderstood my intentions and at one point had me escorted out of the club by one of the bouncers. After her misunderstanding had been cleared up on a later visit, however, I was back on track doing interviews. And once I finally gained stable entrée, interviews provided rich primary data.

After reviewing several types of interview techniques, I chose to conduct unstructured interviews (Fontana and Frey 1998) guided by a set of talking points. Some researchers prefer to use the term “open-ended interview” (Reinharz 1992) to describe this type of interview where there is not a pre-determined script that the researcher must follow while remaining distant and (some would say falsely) objective. One of the strengths of the unstructured, or open-ended, interview is that it provides a greater breadth of data than does the more traditional, structured type of interview (ibid. 56). Structured interviews, that provide dichotomous, narrowly worded categories, rob interviewee and interviewer alike of the opportunity to clarify and discuss issues that arise over the course of the research (Reinharz 1992: 18). Structured interviews also tend to reproduce hierarchical power relationships between those being researched, and those who are the researchers (Bloom 1998; Fontana and Frey 1998). Many feminist researchers object to the inequality inherent in structured interviews, and have developed an ever-growing body of literature describing alternate feminist methodological techniques.

In contrast to structured interviews, unstructured interviews allow the interviewee and interviewer to fully engage with each other, and even to create intimate relationships
that allow for greater expression (Bloom 1998). Because there is not a set of interview questions that the researcher must follow, there are no pre-determined limits to how the conversation will be structured (Fontana and Frey 1998: 56). Although I did use a set of talking points\textsuperscript{4} to guide the conversations that I held with interviewees, I also encouraged participants to digress. Most of the time I used the talking points only when conversation lagged, which it did only rarely.

Use of the unstructured interview technique worked to establish rapport with the interviewees (Fontana and Frey 1998). The technique allowed them to feel like they were in casual conversation with a non-judgmental ally, and I believe that this worked to my advantage as well as to theirs. Instead of feeling like they were being grilled by a distant, objective researcher armed with a pre-printed interview schedule, I believe that they felt they were being empathetically listened to and understood. Clearly the unstructured interviews provided the atmosphere that I wanted while working with research participants.

\textit{Ethical issues}

My choice of method, the ethnographic field study, came loaded with ethical baggage. In this regard, I am in fine company, as ethical issues have plagued ethnographers, especially in recent decades with the rise of institutional funding for research (Berg 1998; Fontana and Frey 1998). In this subsection, I first describe what kind of ethical concerns arose, and then detail how I addressed them.

\textsuperscript{4} Please see the Appendix to see the various “talking points” that I used with each interviewee
Probably the biggest ethical concern with ethnographic field studies such as mine is the invasion of respondents’ privacy (Adler and Adler 1998; Wolcott 1995). Men go to strip clubs, and dancers go to work, with little thought that they are going to be observed by a researcher. This is particularly salient in my study as there were numerous times when I witnessed illegal behavior in the strip clubs. In addition, I observed many dancer-customer interactions that were overtly sexual; few people would have enjoyed knowing that I was watching and making mental notes, and later taped and written notes, of what amounted to sexual activity.

I took care to protect the privacy of all those that I observed. Throughout my field notes, for example, I used only pseudonyms to identify customers, dancers, and bouncers. I came to know them only by their pseudonyms, and in no instance does the real name of any individual appear in writing.

I carried this concern with respondent privacy to the interviews, as well. To some of the people I interviewed, I offered them the choice of creating their own pseudonym. I did this in accordance with feminist methodology as articulated by Leslie Bloom in a conversation that we had. She notes that having the ability to name oneself is an empowering process. Above all, I wanted the respondents to feel empowered, and not disempowered, by the interview. I regret that I had not read Bloom’s work before interviewing the first three exotic dancers and three customers, as I did not offer them the chance to create their own name. Thus, they are stuck with the names that I created for them in this paper.
The issue of the invasion of privacy is, of course, especially a problem if the researcher conducts her work covertly. Covert research has been criticized by feminist sociologists and others who rightly point out its problems. Sheryl Ruzek (in Reinharz 1992: 69), for example, criticizes the covert researcher stance as being unethical in any setting that is not totally public. In addition, Wolcott (1995) discusses the ethical issues in being “social voyeurs” (152), and says that, ultimately, “the moral obligation of acting responsibly remains on the shoulders of the individual fieldworker.”

I took Wolcott’s exhortation to act responsibly and attempted to critically frame my research approach on a continuum of responsibility to irresponsibility. I rationalized my stance as covert researcher by labeling the strip club as a public site (Berg 1998: 38-39). Because, in theory, anyone over the legal age who paid their cover charge would be able to come into the club, I came to believe that strip clubs were just as public as any other public setting like restaurants, libraries, and auditoriums. Federal guidelines have explicitly stated that it is allowable to make observations as a covert researcher in public sites (ibid.).

Iowa State’s Human Subjects Review Committee is the institutional review board that oversees research conducted by members of the university community. Institutional review boards, such as this Committee, safeguard individuals from abuse by researchers by setting up requirements that researchers must follow. These requirements include warnings against placing individuals at risk, and exhortations safeguarding individuals’ privacy and insuring that individuals cannot be identified in the research. (ibid.). Throughout my research I was careful not to compromise individuals’ anonymity or
confidentiality. Thus, though I did conduct some research while in the covert role, I believe that I met the criteria that would make my work ethical, even in a feminist sense.

This is not to say that I was impervious to feminist concerns with ethical issues (Wolf 1996). As detailed above, I moved through various stages while conducting observations, and moved out of naturalistic observation and my covert role and into a more participatory and overt role. I was careful, however, to separate the sites and times when I was covertly researching and overtly researching so that none of the participants would be startled into realizing that the person they had previously thought was “just another customer” was, in reality, a sociological researcher.

I had to conduct rather complex negotiations with the Iowa State Human Subjects Review Committee about my research approach and concerns with respondents’ privacy. Informed consent, where a respondent must sign their legal name (Fontana and Frey 1998; Berg 1998) as an affidavit of having read and understood their rights about the research, is the usual standard required of research conducted by members of the Iowa State University community. I feared, however, that exotic dancers and customers alike would be reticent about signing their real name and pressed the Committee to allow me to use implied consent instead. I worried that requiring informed consent of my research population would impede my ability to locate people willing to talk to me. In addition, I was certain that I could not obtain informed consent from customers in strip clubs in order that I might observe them. Implied consent, meaning that the respondents imply their consent to being researched by their presence in a highly public setting (Berg 1998: 47-48), was what I wished the Human Subjects Review Committee to consent to as the
standard for my work. In the end, the Committee agreed, and I was allowed to proceed using implied consent for customers and dancers. When I interviewed these individuals, however, I was more explicit about their rights and my obligations and obtained a more formal type of consent. Thus I assured respondents of confidentiality, the steps I was taking to ensure safety of tapes and transcriptions, who would have access to the material, and the fact that their real names would never appear in written form. I shared this information with respondents before interviews took place.

Most of the interviews were recorded, with the respondents’ stated permission, on a cassette tape. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the research respondents, and to comply with my agreement with the Iowa State University Human Subjects Review Committee, I transcribed all of the recorded interviews myself. I stored the transcriptions on my personal computer that is accessible by a password known only by myself. As soon as the transcription was complete, I erased the tape.

My field notes are also stored on my personal computer, and are also accessible only by password. Any printed copies of transcriptions, field notes, or other notations use respondents’ pseudonyms only. The dates of interviews are the only identifying information that can be linked to individual interviews or observational visits to the strip clubs.

With these safeguards in place, I feel confident that I have met the important criteria set forth by the Human Subjects Review Committee. I also hope that I have met the larger, even more important, ethical concerns raised by feminists and others concerned with the well being of research participants. In the next section, I will begin to
describe the data collection process, detailing how I chose the sites where the research was conducted. I hope that these discussions demonstrate that my concern for the privacy, empowerment, agency, and other issues of respondent well being were paramount.

**Choosing the Research Sites**

I conducted observations in four different strip clubs that are located in three states. I chose the first club, which was an older working class bar, because of its location in an industrial/harbor town in northern Wisconsin. I felt that it was important to get the views of working class people, both dancers and customers. There has been a lot written about upper class strip clubs, but little to none that has focused on working class clubs. I believed that this lack of attention to working class strip clubs, the women who worked there, and the men who patronized them, represented an opportunity for me to plug a hole in the existing literature.

The second club that I studied opened next door to the older club while I was conducting my research. I chose to add this club to the research because of several factors. First of all, it was a more upscale club, which would provide me with good data for comparison with the working class club. In addition, it provided different types of services, and different types of performance styles. Perhaps most importantly for the goals of this research, the club exerted competitive pressures on the older club. These competitive pressures, I believe, were evident in the interactions between dancers and customers, and thus provided me with yet another element to my research agenda.
The third club I studied was another more upscale club located in a university town in Iowa. I chose this club because of its convenient location near where I lived, and also because of the fact that university students and others who are part of the university community, frequented it. During my first interview, I also discovered that students were workers in this club, as well. I thought that this population of university students would offer a neat contrast to the working class population of the first club, and the more upscale second club. I also chose this third club because it is the site of shifting legal status, as was discussed in the first chapter. The shifting legal status of the club resulted in continuous police pressure on the club; I thought that this legal pressure would result in some interesting recordable patterns of customer-dancer interaction.

The fourth club that I chose to study is located in a mid-size harbor city in northern Minnesota. One of the reasons that I chose this club is because it is uniquely located in an area of town that caters to tourists, as well as to out-of-town travelers such as foreign and domestic sailors and businessmen. This club is also unique among the four that I studied because its dancers are not allowed to perform lap dances (private dances) and because it does not employ a bouncer. I thought that these differences might provide contrasting perspectives on dancers’ experiences and on their interactions with customers.

**Getting Through the Door**

Once I decided on which clubs to research, I turned my attention to “getting in” (Berg 1998; Fontana and Frey 1998). As I shall discuss in this section, “getting in” was highly problematic for the first part of the research. Establishing trust and beginning to
actually gather data started out poorly, as I shall describe. This section ends on a bright note, however, as I was eventually able to “get in”, establish trust and rapport with dancers and bouncers through my fortuitous discovery of powerful gatekeepers.

“Getting in” as a covert researcher

As a covert researcher cum ordinary customer, I had little trouble actually getting into the clubs. There was a cover charge in the first club, the older working class club, located in northern Wisconsin. Across the street, in the newer, more upscale club, there was no cover charge for “ladies.” As long as I was considered to be a customer, I had no problem entering.

These two clubs I initially entered as a covert researcher. I did not begin to encounter problems “getting in” until I asked the first dancer if I could interview her, making my first attempt at being an overt researcher. She was wary of my intentions, told me that she would do it, and then backed out. Word traveled fast among the dancers in the club that I was a researcher, and they all began to ignore me. Their distrust of me was palpable, and hours spent in the club while these particular dancers worked were acutely uncomfortable.

After this experience, I went back into the closet as a covert researcher in that club. Fortunately for me, the turnover in exotic dancing clubs tends to be high. Thus I was able to return to my covert role the very next night of observation, only a few weeks later, because all of the dancers were new and none knew of my previous attempts at being an overt researcher.
One night I went to the second, more upscale club, with the intention of entering as an overt researcher and requesting interviews with dancers. To my chagrin, one of the dancers who had shunned me at the older, working class club, was working at the new club. It became obvious that I was not going to obtain permission to interview dancers in the way that I had originally intended.

**Hitting pay dirt**

My luck shifted when I shifted my tactics. After I let six months go by, I again approached the first, working class club. This time I approached not the individual dancers, but the manager of the bar. Over the phone, I explained my research goals and said that I wanted to tell the story of exotic dancers from the dancers’ side as a reaction against the negative portrayal popularized by the media. I hit pay dirt with this one phone call. The manager had been an exotic dancer herself and was angry at the way the media portrayed her occupation. In addition, there had been recent actions on the part of the local religious right to shut down her club. She was ready for an alternate story to be told about exotic dancing, and invited me to come to the club the following day to interview dancers. She even talked to the dancers, all new employees since my earlier observations, to tell them that they should talk to me. She was the gatekeeper, and she let me through the door that had been previously locked to me.

A similar experience with a gatekeeper at the third club under study, the one in Iowa, was even more fortuitous for me. Because of the shifting legal status of exotic dancing in Iowa, one of the co-owners was nervous about me. Early in the research process he agreed that I could talk to dancers, but he required that I pay him a kickback
fee of twenty dollars for each interview. He was hostile to me, probably perceiving me as another media type who would continue to perpetuate negative stereotypes about exotic dancing and strip clubs. As his clubs had been under continuous scrutiny by the media, police, and liquor board officials, his hostility was understandable. However, I was persistent, and was finally rewarded when I met another influential gatekeeper at this club.

One late afternoon I dropped by the club and asked to speak to the manager. As luck would have it, she was empathetic. I told her about my research and that I hoped to tell the story from the dancers’ side. She was agreeable to my setting up a time when I could talk to the dancers, and we made a date for later in the week when there would be four dancers present. During this conversation, one of the bouncers overheard me, and he asked if I would interview him as well. The manager and this bouncer proved to be influential gatekeepers (Berg 1998; Fontana and Frey 1998) for me, introducing me to dancers who worked there, and offering me somewhat private space in which to conduct the interviews. In addition, the bouncer introduced me to the head of security, who proved to be an even greater source of information and help in locating informants.

Finally, I was in! I had interviews lined up with people who were eager to talk. I had located and gained entrance to one site where I could be an overt researcher and still be welcome. People who worked in the club wished to engage me in casual conversation. My fieldwork experience shifted from being one where I felt unwelcome and marginalized, and often scared, to being one that felt like a welcoming community. I began to enjoy the research process and to remember why I had become interested in the
topic of interactions in the first place. I thought that I had finally reached the point where I could begin to seriously collect interview data. Overnight, my euphoria vanished.

*Getting thrown out*

In late October, I arrived at the Iowa club for a set of scheduled interviews. As soon as I stepped in the door, the manager called me over. In a belligerent tone she demanded that I turn over my interview tapes. She also demanded that I tell her who I had talked with, and when I pointed out one of the dancers who I had interviewed, she began to yell at both her and me. I was puzzled and mortified, shocked by her hostility towards me when just the past week she had been warm and welcoming. She told me to wait while she called one of the co-owners. After a few minutes of animated conversation, it became apparent to me that the other co-owner had misunderstood my intentions. And she was angry that I had been talking with dancers and bouncers. Over the phone, she repeated the manager’s demand for possession of my taped interviews and insisted that I be escorted out of the bar by one of the bouncers.

My field notes from that night reek of despair:

I’m just so upset about how this has worked out. I can’t believe the things [the manager] said to me. It was embarrassing, really really embarrassing, to be yelled in front of all those people. I could have just died. I really thought that this was going to be the ticket for me to be able to get in there and get the interviews. I am glad I got three interviews in last week, well, four counting Tiger. I was sure hoping to be able to do more. But this is not going to work out this way. I don’t know what to do! Do I need to start over?

After agonizing for several hours, I tried to deconstruct what might have happened and what kind of strategy I might take. From home, I called the manager and told her that I
would not be able to turn the tapes over to her. I explained that this was to protect the privacy of the people I had interviewed. I asked when I might meet with the upset co-owner, and she said to come by the next evening at midnight.

The next night I appeared at the club on the stroke of midnight. The place was packed. The bouncer who had previously been friendly to me was cold. He told me to wait against the wall just inside the door until the owner finished her dinner. I waited for nearly fifteen minutes before I was called over to sit at the bar beside an extremely attractive woman in her late 40s. In a hostile manner, she asked me what newspaper I worked for. When I explained to her that not only was I NOT a reporter, but merely a graduate student writing a thesis on dancers, she laughed and became friendly. She had thought that I worked for a newspaper and was doing an exposé on her club. I explained to her that I was approaching the research with the desire of telling the dancers’ side of the story. I told her that I would not ask about illegal behavior, such as soliciting prostitution. Her reply to me was, “you can’t study exotic dancers and not talk about prostitution.” After this blunt statement, she then agreed that I could come back another night and interview dancers. I was back in that particular club, battled-scarred, having withstood enormous, public embarrassment, but having a great story to tell my graduate student colleagues. After all, who else in the sociology department has ever been thrown out of a strip club?

Even though I had gained access to that club, I continued to have difficulty getting more interviews. I attempted to expand my research to Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. I thought that exotic dancers in a big Midwestern city might have important
insights to add to my research which had focused primarily on small to medium-size cities. I called all of the strip clubs in the Twin Cities, and spoke with many managers. Two of them hung up on me as soon as I identified my purpose in calling. Others flatly refused me entry to their club and refused to negotiate the issue further. One man who answered the phone identified himself as the assistant manager and was agreeable to me interviewing dancers. But he first wanted to check with his boss. When I called later, he said that his boss had nixed the idea and that I would not be able to visit the club after all. Finally, I located a large strip club in Minneapolis, one that had luncheon buffets, six stages with simultaneous performances, and a manager who said he was willing for me to interview dancers. He asked that I call him later that night.

After becoming excited about the possibilities of interviewing at such a large and upscale club (they served prime rib during their weekday luncheon buffet), I became very frustrated when I was told that the manager was not there when I called back at the appointed hour. Over the next two weeks, I called repeatedly, only to be told that he was busy at the moment, or he had just left, or he had not yet arrived for work. I began to realize that it did not make sense that a highly successful and busy strip club could operate with a manager who seemed to rarely be at work. I gave up, suspecting that he had been avoiding me as a way of refusing me access.

During this time I had also been calling all of the strip clubs that I could locate in Iowa. None but the one in the university town would allow me to enter as an overt researcher. I had become increasingly frustrated by my inability to locate clubs where the manager would grant me access. In desperation, I turned to some of the methodology
literature to diagnose what was happening to my research project and how my experiences might fit within the larger structure.

It became apparent that my problem was because of gatekeepers that were overzealous. And I can understand why they are so cautious about researchers. After all, clubs that feature exotic dancing are under tremendous pressure. Many activities that take place in the clubs border on illegality and that border is often crossed. Undercover police are constantly in the clubs, actively spying on dancers and customers. Communities are using questionable tactics to try to shut down strip clubs, such as dusting off obscure and ridiculous zoning regulations, picketing outside of clubs, and forming task forces to create ways to drive clubs out of business (please see Chapter One for details.) It was no wonder that managers were concerned about an unknown person claiming to be a graduate student calling to interview dancers.

After experiencing so much difficulty in gaining access to strip clubs and to exotic dancers to interview, I realized that it is important to study strippers precisely because I was refused entry by so many gatekeepers. Lee (1993) points out that if sociologists only study populations that are the easy to gain access to, we will end up studying only “the powerless, the near at hand or the relatively innocuous” (141). He is concerned that over the course of many decades of social research, we will end up with a skewed version of social life because the sites that were too difficult to get into, those with the staunchest gatekeepers, the most reticent respondents, will not be studied.

I persevered. I expanded the geographic range of my search and contacted more clubs. When the manager of a club in northern Minnesota agreed to let me interview
dancers at her club, I made a startling realization: all four of the clubs where I had been granted access were managed by women! All of the clubs where I had been denied access were managed by men. There are clear gender implications to this, and the importance cannot be denied.

**Collecting the Data**

Once I had finally been allowed entrance into the research sites, I was ready to collect data. As this section will document, I utilized the multi-method approach to data collection that is the hallmark of ethnographic research. This ethnography consisted of naturalistic observations, work as a participant-observer, interviews with dancers, bouncers, and customers. In addition, I engaged in pointed conversations with the managers and bartenders of the clubs that amounted to informal interviews. The use of field notes, including in-the-field jottings and taped field notes that I later transcribed, further documented my observations. I also was accompanied sometimes in the field by a co-researcher who assisted me as a peer de-briefer and inter-observer. I will begin this section by discussing how I collected data through observations.

**Observations**

The first way that I began to collect data for this paper was to make observations in strip clubs. While in the clubs, I observed dancers interacting with customers, and also observed dancers while they performed. Some of my observations consisted of eavesdropping on the conversations between dancers and customers. This is not as bad as
it sounds, because these conversations were designed to be part of the performance (Liepe-Levinson 1998), as shall be discussed later in this paper.

In addition to watching what occurred on stage, and what occurred between dancers and customers near the stage area, I also observed private dance performances such as couch dances and table dances. Both of these types of performances are meant to appear private, and, as shall be demonstrated in a later chapter, some care is taken to achieve the surface appearance of privacy. To watch these performances transformed me into somewhat of a voyeur and represented some of the most uncomfortable moments for me. As a fully socialized member of US culture, I have been trained from birth to respect privacy, especially privacy around sexual matters. However, as a researcher, the quality of my study required that I ignore cultural proscriptions about sexual privacy to peer directly into the scenes of other people’s intimacy, all the while meeting the criteria for respecting respondents’ privacy and anonymity.

There were many activities in the clubs besides the stage performances, lap dances and table dances, and I was an observer to them all. I watched bouncers scrutinize individual customers and proctor couch dances. Several times I was witness to the bouncers escorting customers to the door. In the third club I studied, the one in a university town in Iowa, the bouncers joked convivially with entering customers while they searched them for weapons and made them walk through a metal detector. In the older, working class Wisconsin club, there were nearly always a group of men playing video games or talking with each other at the bar. Their seeming disinterest in the activities of the nearly nude women on stage fascinated me, so I observed their behavior
as well. Between sets, some dancers wandered topless around the clubs talking with
customers and soliciting private dances. This, too, I scrutinized for its power and other
implications.

All in all, I estimate that I observed at least one hundred fifty customers, all but
three of them anonymous and faceless. I witnessed seventeen lap dances, and watched
twenty-two nearly nude “ladies working the floor.” I watched seven bouncers at work,
and interviewed two of them. Finally, I watched multiple performances of thirty-one
professional exotic dancers, and about fifteen amateurs who appeared on specially
arranged “Amateur Nights” at the clubs in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa.

Interviews

I interviewed twelve exotic dancers: four from the working class Wisconsin club,
five from the university town club in Iowa, and three from the Minnesota club. All of
these interviews were taped and transcribed by me. The dancer interviews typically lasted
about an hour, not counting any interruptions that occurred when dancers had to interact
with customers or when they had to stop the interview to perform. I was not able to
interview dancers for more than an hour at a time because they had to socialize with
customers while not dancing on stage. Because the dancers I interacted with do not make
an hourly wage, but rely on tips and income from lap dances, time not spent dancing or
“working the floor” meant that they were not making money. I tried to remain sensitive to
this and to allow dancers to leave the interview when it became obvious that they had an
opportunity to interact with a customer and to make money.
I interviewed two bouncers, both from the club in Iowa. One of these interviews was taped, and took about one hour. We did the interview at the club in the late afternoon before it opened. The other bouncer declined to be taped; this interview was conducted during his regular work shift. For his interview, I relied on my memory and recorded my recollections of the interview with him immediately following our conversation. Our conversation lasted three hours with frequent interruptions as he dealt with customers and dancers. Over the course of our conversation, he was constantly getting up to greet customers, search them for weapons, as well as joke with them as they were leaving.

The three interviews with customers took place over the phone. I typed notes on my computer as we talked. This allowed me to get down their words verbatim.

As stated previously, the interviews that I conducted were all open-ended and unstructured in nature. I used talking points only to direct the conversation when it lagged. I also used these talking points when I needed to probe on certain issues.

With the respondents’ permission, I taped most of the interviews. I transcribed them myself, and as stated previously, stored the transcriptions on my personal computer with a password known only to myself.

Field notes

For all interviews, I made cryptic notes on the printed copy of talking points that I identified with each person’s pseudonym. These notes included details about their dress, apparent race and ethnicity, approximate age, gender, and demeanor. For the dancers, I also made notes about their dancing style and details about other aspects of their
performances. After I left the clubs, I would complete these quick notes with more extensive taped and typed field notes.

After being in the clubs for observations, particularly during my period of naturalistic observation, I made field notes in two ways. Principally I would type field notes the following morning, as I was usually too tired after being in the club to work beyond 2:00AM. Towards the end of my observations, I began the habit of making field notes after being in the clubs by talking into my tape recorder, making no attempt to follow any train of thought, only to get my multiple impressions down. These field notes I later transcribed and organized.

I also used jottings (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) while in the field. These proved invaluable for jogging my memory as I was later taping or typing field notes. I began to do this on the second evening of observation after a pretty disastrous first night of observation. The first evening in the field, when I was still desperately trying to cope with anxiety, I spent part of the evening in the restroom stall writing up field notes. I also was trying to remember how much each dancer made in tips, which I assumed would be important revealers of interactional power. As a result, I missed some of what happened in the club. In retrospect, I count the first night as simply a chance for me to get used to the research site, and to overcome my feelings of initial shock at seeing so much bare (and often tattooed) female flesh.

During the second and successive research forays, I was able to relax and thus to notice more of the activity that was occurring both on-stage and off-stage. It was on the second night that I figured out an unobtrusive method of counting and recording how
much each dancer made in tips. I took out a dollar bill, which made it look like I was only planning on tipping a dancer or purchasing another Diet Coke. Each time the dancer would receive a tip, I would fold the dollar bill. At the end of each dancer’s set, I had a record of how many times she received a tip. As noted before, occasionally it was obvious that a dancer received more than just a dollar bill. I would take this into account as I folded and refolded my dollar. At the end of a dancer’s set, I would pretend to check my calendar, or scribble something in my checkbook. To any observer, I hoped that I looked only like I was obsessive about balancing my checkbook; in reality, I was keeping tabs on how much dancers made in tips during each set by making jottings.

Co-observer and peer de-briefer

During the first thirty-six hours of observations in the strip clubs, I was accompanied by Kayt Sunwood, a female friend. I chose to have another woman sitting with me while I was initially in the clubs for several reasons. For one thing, it made me feel safer simply to have a female companion in an otherwise male environment. Because of my gender, I felt especially vulnerable in the strip clubs (Adler and Adler 1998), which can be considered one of the last strongholds of male power. In addition, Sunwood was able to act as a co-observer and often pointed out events that I might have missed. Her role as a peer-debriefer after hours of observation proved to be invaluable, as she often jogged my memory about events. She also acted as an inter-observer to cross-check the validity of my perceptions of events (Adler and Adler 1998).

There might have been a negative aspect to her presence, as well. On at least one occasion I suspected that a dancer refused to interact with me because I was with another
woman. I wondered if she thought that the two of us were lesbians and were at the club for prurient reasons, instead of for research. My suspicions about this possibly were later confirmed when two dancers who I interviewed at another club complained about lesbians frequenting their club. The only other women I saw in the strip club were either dancers in between sets, cocktail waitresses, bartenders, or women who were with their male dates. My companion and I were the only women I saw over the course of my research who were either not accompanied by a man or who didn’t work in the clubs.

**Section summary**

True to the nature of ethnographic research, the data I collected originated from multiple sources, and this was a strength of my method, as I will discuss later. I gathered data from observations, both as a covert researcher and as an overt one. I also gathered data from interviews of multiple players in the strip club. I complemented my data set with field notes written both while in and also while out of the field setting. Finally, I utilized a co-researcher as a peer-debrief and inter-observer for part of the observational research. However, as I shall discuss in the next section, there are some weaknesses to my research approach that need to be addressed.

**Evaluating the Data Collection Process**

As in all research projects, not all of the research went smoothly. In this section, I will evaluate the data collection process, noting some of weaknesses of my particular

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5 Interestingly, both of the dancers complained that lesbians got as drunk as men and that they tried to inappropriately touch dancers, like men. Their complaints were not about lesbians *per se*, but only that they often acted as poorly as male customers.
approach. Some of the lessons that I learned may be some of the common, but painful, trials new ethnographers must undergo.

**Observations I could not confirm**

One of the major weaknesses of making the naturalistic observations of dancers is that I did not always interview the same dancers that I observed. Thus I could only infer the motives of all but twelve of the dancers that I observed. I was able to ask twelve of them why they used a particular strategy in their interaction with a customer, but not the other dancers who I did not interview. Similarly, I had to estimate the amount of tips that dancers received if I did not interview them. Once in a while it was obvious that a particular bill was more than just a dollar bill; other times it was not apparent to me. The amount of the tip certainly is an essential element in the power relationship, and only if I interviewed a dancer after she had performed was I able to definitely determine how much a tip was.

Making observations in the clubs was difficult work, as well. The scene was constantly shifting and there were nearly always multiple dancers “working the floor”, in addition to the activity on and near the stage. The scene in the strip club often shifted dramatically within seconds, and I was often left wondering just what had happened. This was another weakness to the approach. I was able to address this weakness during the first thirty-six hours of observation by having a co-observer along with whom I could check my perceptions and add her observations to mine. Later, as I spent even more time in the field, the constantly shifting environment of the strip club became normal to me and I was able to concentrate better on what seemed important. Also, after the initial
thirty-six hours of observation, patterns of activity and behavior became recognizable to me. I became able to anticipate and to predict events in the last half of the research, especially after beginning to interview dancers and bouncers.

**Environmental factors**

Another weakness to the observational approach concerns the nature of the environment. I suffered from many of the environmental factors common to the strip club. For example, I am allergic to cigarette smoke, and this in particular made my nights in the clubs physically difficult. I suffered from headaches, stuffy nose, and coughing fits for a full day after leaving the strip club, and my clothes reeked and needed washing.

The clubs were also very dimly lit. One club was lit only by three strategic spotlights and black lights. This hurt my eyes and gave me headaches. But worse yet, the lack of lighting caused me to fumble when taping interviews and labeling tapes. After a particularly difficult evening trying to figure out if I was taping or not during an interview, I decided that I needed to figure out a way to deal with the poor lighting. I purchased a tape recorder that had the record button slightly offset so that I could feel for the switch. In addition, the recorder had a tiny red light to let me know that I was recording, and not merely playing a blank tape. I also bought a tiny book lamp that easily fit into my bag and which I could use to load tapes and to label them easily. This also proved invaluable for skimming my talking points when interviewing dancers so that I could make sure that we had talked about them all.
Time-consuming method

Conducting an ethnographic field study and interviews is extremely time-consuming, and this is another weakness of this approach. However, even this represents a strength of the ethnographic field study approach. The interviews gave me one text to analyze, and my observations gave me another. Coupling the interviews with the field study presented me with multiple layers of events that occurred simultaneously and which begged for my attention and subsequent analysis.

Issues of safety

Occasionally the research setting felt unsafe to me, and this was another weakness of the field study aspect of the ethnographic approach. For example, in every research foray, I was either one of two non-employee women in the club who was unescorted by a man, the other being Kayt, or I was the only non-employee unescorted woman. The clubs in Wisconsin were located in the seediest part of a grungy industrial town; empty warehouses and other bars lined the street on both sides. Drunk men often were seen loitering outside the bars, and other men were parked in their cars, smoking cigarettes or marijuana. Empty syringes and used condoms littered the parking lot of one club. The bars became more active after 10:00 at night; thus I kept very late hours, often staying in the bars until 2:00 AM. There were several occasions when it became starkly apparent that my friend and I were the only women in the bar who were not dancers. In the Iowa and Minnesota clubs I was alone; one Saturday night I realized with a start that I was the only fully clothed woman in the place. To make matters worse, I could not be assured of the kinds of protections that were institutionalized for the dancers. I was surrounded by
drunk, leering men, some of them with what appeared to be erections. The two Wisconsin clubs were the stuff of every mother’s nightmare, and at times, the Iowa and Minnesota clubs felt similarly dangerous.

On the other hand, a strength of the environment described above is that it was exciting. It felt subversive and daring to be a woman in an all-male environment. I felt like I was in cahoots with the dancers, and that we were both consciously manipulating male customers—they were manipulating them in order to obtain tips, and I was manipulating them in order to obtain data.

I managed my discomfort by sometimes inviting my female friend along when I conducted observations, and by staying in the clubs no more than four hours at a time. Yet, this weakness of the ethnographic field study also worked out to be an advantage. Because I was nearly always struggling with fear and nervousness while in the field, especially while working in the Wisconsin clubs, my adrenaline ran high. This insured that I was totally alert and able to observe multiple events in a single moment. An unexpected benefit of the fear and nervousness, and resulting adrenaline rushes, was that I was able to stay awake well into the night. As I am normally in bed quite early, this surge of energy served me well when I was in the field.

**Interview challenges**

The main problem with interviewing dancers was that I had to interview them while they were at work. This meant that we were constantly being interrupted when they had to leave the interview to go dance. But this turned out to be a manageable problem for me, as I was also able to observe them while in the midst of the interview. Then,
when they came back to the table to resume the interview, I could comment and ask
questions about their performance.

Another, worse problem about interviewing dancers in their work site was the
noise level. Particularly in the second club where I interviewed dancers, the interviews
took place in the VIP lounge for privacy. Unfortunately, though we had physical privacy,
we were located right underneath a huge speaker. Music blared through the speaker
throughout the interviews, making the interviewees hard to hear at times. The problem
was magnified when I began the laborious process of transcribing these tapes. Similar
problems manifested during the interviews with the bouncers. Again, the interviews were
conducted during their regular work shifts, with the same problems as outlined above. I
finally managed the noise problem by asking the managers if the interviews could be
conducted in a quieter place. In the end, I was assigned interview spots where my
respondent and I were highly visible, but had a quieter atmosphere away from the
loudspeakers.

Interviewing of customers also posed potential weaknesses. Because the
customers were interviewed anonymously by phone, I was not able to see them actually
interacting with dancers. We also had to rely on recalled events, raising the possibility of
intentional or unintentional false data being reported. I dealt with these potential
problems with reliability and validity (Kirk and Miller 1986) by using multiple methods,
or triangulation. I made observations of other customers while in the strip clubs, and also
asked dancers and bouncers similar questions. Because I made observations of some of
the same things that the interviewed customers told me, and because the dancers and
bouncers also told me things to verify my impressions from the phone interviews, I believe that I can rely on the things that the interviewees told me.

Finding male customers to interview proved to be a challenge, and this is another weakness to the data collection process. I found it personally uncomfortable to even consider approaching a customer while he and I were in a strip club. The Iowa State Human Subjects Review Committee members also were reticent to grant me permission to approach male customers in bars. None of my male friends would admit to having ever patronized a strip bar. To reach men who would agree to an interview, I decided to place a small ad in the classified section of the *Iowa State Daily*. Three men answered my ad and agreed to be interviewed by phone. A valid criticism of this approach would be that the interviewees were not representative because they were self-selected.

There are several strengths to my chosen method of anonymous phone interviews, though, even if the men were self-selected. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic of conversation, I believe that anonymous phone interviews gave the men some sense of confidentiality that would not have been available in a face-to-face interview. For example, one man felt free to use expletives when talking about sexual acts and about exotic dancers. Although this may have been consciously executed performance, if we had been face-to-face in an interview, I do not believe that he would have felt so free, and therefore I would not have been privy to the kinds of rich data I was able to obtain.

**Section summary**

All in all, I think that the problems I experienced in collecting the data for this project would be familiar to other ethnographers conducting similar research. Some of
the problems were clearly the blunders of a novice. I identified the weaknesses as soon as I could, and took steps to rectify them when possible. More could have been done, of course, and in a subsequent study, I would certainly take pains to avoid the kinds of roadblocks that I encountered.

**Dates of the Data Collection**

I conducted the naturalistic observation component of the ethnographic field study during the course of several weeks in November and December 1998, early January, 1999; March 1999; July and August 1999; October through December 1999. I began my observations at the older, existing club in a northern harbor town in Wisconsin. When a new club opened across the street from this club during Thanksgiving weekend, I also started collecting data there. Later in the year, in October, 1999, I began to frequent the strip club in the university town in Iowa. In November, 1999, I interviewed and observed at the club in northern Minnesota.

Most of the interviews took place in 1999. The twelve dancers that I interviewed spoke to me in late summer and fall of 1999. The interviews generally lasted about one hour and were taped. I also interviewed three men who are regular customers of strip clubs. These phone interviews, which lasted between 20 and 45 minutes each, were conducted anonymously in fall of 1998. The two bouncers that I interviewed worked at the strip club in the university town in Iowa. These interviews took place in fall, 1999. Finally, I interviewed the head of the vice department of the local police in the university town in Iowa. This taped interview lasted an hour and a half and took place in his office at the police station during the late summer, 1998.
Approach to Analyzing the Data

After conducting hours and hours of observations and interviews, data began to collect heavily in my file cabinet. It was time to begin to sift through all of this raw material (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) and to try to make some sense of it all. I used the three-pronged approach to data analysis as outlined by Huberman and Miles (1998). Their approach includes these steps: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions from the data.

Three-pronged process

According to the Huberman and Miles model, the first step in the process of data analysis is to reduce the data to a manageable form. The way I began to do this was by transcribing all of the taped interviews and taped field notes. I organized each set so that they had identical headings and format. I created a coherent method of computer file management and labeled each interview transcription by the respondent’s chosen name and date of interview, and each set of field notes by club and date.

Then I began to code the transcriptions and field notes. I printed out a paper copy of all that I had. I read them all as a body of text for the first time. I began to make marginal notes on the printed transcriptions, using a loose form of open coding (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). In this stage of the coding process, I simply stated in cryptic partial sentences the themes and issues that immediately grabbed my attention. From these marginal notes, I created a short bulleted list of important points transcription and
typed this on the first page of the transcription. This worked as a quick index for each interview and each night of observation.

The next stage of my data analysis process was to do focused coding (ibid.). I re-read all of the transcriptions, marginal notes, highlighted blocks of text, and bulleted indices. I began to recognize patterns, incidents that I had seen occur more than once, things that more than one interviewee had told me. From the focused coding, I clustered commonalities and highlighted anomalies with marginal asterisks. Then I created rough categories from the important points I recognized through my focused coding. I read through the body of transcriptions for a third time, fitting events into the rough categories. I found that I was able to expand and refine the categories on this third time of reading through the transcriptions. Also during this process, I puzzled over the anomalies and discovered that some of them could be clustered together. This raised the possibility of an avenue of discovery and analysis that I had not yet thought of, and one that proved so important to my research that it became the fifth chapter of this thesis. I was then ready to take the next step of Huberman and Miles’ process, displaying the data.

To display the data, I returned to the refined and expanded categories. From these I created a matrix. Using my computer, I cut and pasted blocks of text from the transcriptions into the matrix of categories, moving them around until there seemed to be a logical flow to my ideas. Grouped like this, I was able to clearly discern connections and relationships among the data, cueing me that it was time to move to the next stage in the model.
The third stage in Huberman and Miles’ approach to data analysis is to draw conclusions from the displayed data and to begin the work of verifying initial conclusions. To do this, they suggest that researchers create a metaphor for their clustered data. Recalling Leidner’s work on employees at McDonald’s and Combined Insurance, I chose her concept of interactional strategies as the metaphor for my data.

**Shifting interplay**

At this point of the data analysis process, I had a nifty matrix of categories and examples of each, bulleted indices of all of the transcriptions, and a set of recognizable patterns of behaviors, activities, and events. The patterns that I recognized allowed me to begin to see that I could make generalizations across research sites and among different research participants. This is what Burawoy (1991) and others, after Glaser and Strauss, call grounded theory.

An important aspect of grounded theory is that there is a constantly shifting interplay between a researcher’s notes, her analysis, and her continued observations and interaction in the field (Burawoy 1991; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). I tried to utilize this strength of the grounded theory method and realized that it was okay to interpret an event, then re-interpret it, and even to reframe it a number of times until it seemed to fit with other events and things that interviewees told me. For part of the time that I was doing the last stages of data analysis, I continued to do interviews and to observe in the clubs. This meant that I was able to continually refine my categories and to re-interpret past events after talking with respondents. Of course, this reframing and re-interpreting
raises questions about validity and reliability, as Burawoy (1991) and others have pointed out.

**Confirmation of findings**

As I soon discovered after beginning the process of analyzing my data, the intense nature of participant-observation and interviewing raises questions about validity (Burawoy 1991). Kirk and Miller describe the problem of validity in qualitative research as “the quality of fit between an observation and the basis on which it is made” (1986: 80). Thus as I analyzed my data, I began to ask myself a number of important questions: Am I interpreting what I see and hear correctly? Am I using the correct language to describe what I see and hear? Would the interviewees interpret this the same way as I am? To address these issues, I turned once again to some of the feminist methodology literature in the hopes of finding answers.

Lather suggests that feminist researchers, especially those engaged in praxis-oriented research, must find ways to address validity when analyzing their data, but to do so in a way that does not return us to narrow constructs of scientific positivism (1991). She suggests that research designs that have researcher reflexivity as central are models that will begin to address the nagging problem of validity in the data analysis of ethnographic research such as mine.

Many other methodologists point to researcher self-reflexivity as a way to address issues of validity. Researchers have to locate themselves in the field setting, along with their respondents (Altheide and Johnson 1998; Lather 1991; Kirsch 1999; Stack 1996; Bloom 1998; Van Maanen 1988). What I find particularly exciting about the whole
notion of reflexivity is that it recognizes the effects not only that I may have on the research setting, but also what effects the research setting might have on me. Researcher self-reflexivity is a concept that I find exciting and liberating. I had really enjoyed several of the interviews because the respondent was friendly, engaging, intelligent, or interesting in some way. This became especially apparent to me as I pored over the transcripts. So for me, discovering the concept of self-reflexivity gave me permission to like the people I was interviewing and observing, and to interact with them in a way that seemed as reciprocal as many friendships (Bloom 1998; Lather 1991). To talk to respondents as if they were my peers seemed natural and enjoyable; to later incorporate this interaction as part of the analysis of my data was even more enjoyable.

I was delighted to discover that many methodologists suggest that researchers communicate with the participants in their research, creating an active dialogue with those who are being researched about what the researcher is seeing, hearing, and interpreting. I used this concept of member checking (Lather 1991; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) extensively in my interviews, asking different dancers and bouncers to interpret my observations and things that other interviewees had told me. This communication proved invaluable to me as I attempted to address the issue of validity.

Dialoging with respondents about my interpretations also addressed the nagging problem of reliability in my ethnographic study. I addressed the issue of reliability, or making sure that the research results will be consistent across sites and time (Huberman and Miles 1998), by incorporating triangulation in my research design and analysis of the data. Many times respondents told me similar things and interpreted events the same way;
this became especially apparent to me as I coded and organized my data. There were also many occasions when a respondent would tell me something, and I would later witness the same type of event in a different club. I also noticed that respondents from different occupations within the strip clubs were saying the same things; thus dancers’ and bouncers’ stories would corroborate each other’s. Finally, my data proved to be consistent not only across the four different clubs, but also across three different states.

I believe that I have addressed the issues of validity and reliability through member checking and triangulation. But I am still sensitive to feminist and postmodern critiques of ethnography and the data analysis that is central to it. Stack, for example, suspects that ethnography is only the “fiction of the writer herself” (1996: 99). Even though my focus in this thesis is on the power relationship that exists between dancers and their customers, my concern with self-reflexivity, with locating myself in the field alongside my respondents, has made me realize just how powerful my own position is. I am the one who is entrusted with telling the stories of the people who talked with me. And no matter how much I resist, my position is one of power. This realization makes me all the more sensitive to accurately interpreting and representing through my writing the voices of the women and men that I researched.

Section summary

After conducting hours of interviews in smoky, noisy strip clubs, and after being perched for even more hours on barstools making observations, the mountain of data that I accumulated was daunting. The model approach to analyzing my data suggested by Huberman and Miles (1998) seemed to me to be intuitive, respectful of the respondents,
and efficient. Their three-pronged method of analyzing data seems to me even still to be the most useful model for the type of research data that I had collected. Burawoy’s (1991) and Emerson, Frey, and Shaw’s (1995) concept of the shifting interplay between my analyses, observations, and interviews pointed out to me just how cyclical the entire process of ethnography is, especially ethnography that seeks to be empowering to the people that it studies. I believe that it was this shifting nature of my interpretations, the way that I was able to be self-reflexive in the field, and how I drew my interviewees into the process of interpreting their own data, that moved me from my initial objectification of them as research subjects to my later vision of them as co-participants in our research process. In the end, though, I am still the one to take responsibility for what I write. Although the women and men who I interviewed certainly took an active role in the interpretation of what I saw and heard, I alone must be held accountable for any errors that I might have made.

**Conclusion**

One night in late October, I sat at the bar chatting with Tiger, the head of security at the strip club in Iowa. He had just told me about a dancer who was taking a week off to have breast implants. He said that he had told her she did not need them, but, according to him, the dancer thought that she would make even better money if her breasts were larger. My eyes shifted from watching the dancer on stage take tips from men and rub her breasts on their faces to the picture above the hot pink pool table. Tiger saw me look at the picture. “She was here last month,” he said. “Hers are fake. Man, I told her they were too much.” Below our feet, the carpet was decorated with hot pink images of nude
women with large breasts. The song ended, I think that it was “Born to be Bad”, and the dancer who had been performing strolled over to the bar to where I was sitting. “Are you the lady who’s doing the interviews?” she asked. I said that I was indeed doing interviews, and asked if she would like to be interviewed. She eagerly said that she would like to, and we set up a time for the interview. I asked her name, and she said, “Destinee.” We chatted for a few more minutes about the interview, and about my work, and about how I promised confidentiality. Destinee and I had been talking for nearly ten minutes before I noticed that she was topless.

I understood this incident as significant only days after it occurred. In my mind exotic dancers had moved from being research subjects, as the opening vignette in this chapter frames them, to being persons. From my viewpoint, there simply is no language yet that adequately describes the status of those whom we study. Are they subjects? Interviewees? Respondents? Participants? Feminist and humanist researchers have pointed out the problems inherent in all of these names. For me, though, I understood Destinee as a person. True, I studied her, watched her perform and made detailed field notes on my observations of her. But I had moved from objectifying the people I was studying, as positivist-oriented qualitative methods classes had taught me in the past, to internalizing the feminist norms of desiring a more interpersonal, reciprocal, and feminist relationship (Bloom 1998; Reinharz 1992; Lather 1991; Millen 1997).

What I witnessed in the strip clubs, and what I understood from the interviews, transformed my concept of exotic dancers and others who populate strip clubs. The research proved to be extremely exciting. In fact, at times, being in the clubs was a
sensory overload. I nearly became inured to the sight of a woman clad only in a black G-string spreading her legs while sitting only centimeters from a customer's rapt face, even while I learned how to study the scene for implications of interactional power. In the next chapter I will turn to my observations and realizations, and begin to decipher their meanings.
CHAPTER FOUR

WORKING IT:
INTERACTIONAL STRATEGIES TO GENERATE TIPS

We control them. I don’t know how to put it...Like...we know how to tease them. So we have the control, you know? If we really want that money, we can go for it. We can get it. So I feel like we have the control. They might have control over their money, but we have the control over their mind.

—Mich’e

Depending on whom you ask, there appear to be three ways that exotic dancers are constructed. Since dancers are engaged in an occupation that is considered to be deviant, they have been described as social deviants who are sexually promiscuous, tend towards drug and alcohol abuse, and gravitate towards lesbianism and other perverse sexual practices. A second way that exotic dancers have been constructed is as powerless, oppressed pawns of the patriarchal social order. And a more recent, third way that dancers have been constructed is by looking at them as service workers, and thus alienated from their work, disconnected from each other, and from their own emotional authenticity. All three of these ways that dancers have been constructed raise important questions about whether they have any personal agency at all. But as you can see from the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, exotic dancers claim to possess not just personal agency, but to have active control over their customers. How can they claim this?

In this chapter, I will take you into the strip club environment and introduce you to twelve exotic dancers who will tell you how they “work it.” I contend that exotic dancers utilize a range of interactional strategies, much like Leidner’s respondents at McDonald’s and Combined Insurance did (1993), and surprisingly, for a similar reason: to mold customer
behavior into a desired pattern. My research indicates that these women, far from being perverse deviants, pawns of the patriarchy, or alienated and disaffected workers, are instead active agents who create and maintain a great deal of personal power within the environment of the strip club.

I will first describe when and why exotic dancers use interactional strategies, or as two dancers called them, “techniques” or “tricks.” Next I will invite you to join me as we observe some of the tricks that dancers use, and talk to the twelve dancers about their strategies. Like waitresses who see customers not as masters to “pamper and appease” (Paules 1991: 298), but as subjects to exploit for tips, dancers employ a variety of interactional strategies with their customers to get what they want. An analysis of the voices of exotic dancers paints a vivid picture of these dancers as creative and energetic protagonists who construct their own work environment and their relationships with their customers.

**Using Interactional Strategies**

“There’s a right way to do this to earn money, and still earn your self respect.”

—Sasha

There are three usual situations when dancers have the opportunity to utilize interactional strategies: when they are on stage performing for groups of customers, when they are off stage and mingling with customers, and when they are negotiating for and conducting private dances. Of course, none of these situations is discrete, but instead, they overlap and blend together. For example, a dancer might be performing on stage for a group
of men, and at the same time be engaging in negotiations with one or more men for a private dance to take place after she finishes her set.

As stated earlier, exotic dancers use interactional strategies for the general purpose of molding customer behavior into desired patterns. In the strip club, dancers simply want customers to be compliant, and the bulk of their interactional strategies are designed to get customers to be just that: to tip, and not to engage in a variety of non-compliant behaviors such as attempting to illegally touch dancers, to refuse to tip them, to sexually harass them, or to pressure dancers for prostitution services. In this chapter I will talk about techniques that dancers use to generate tips. The next chapter will talk about the tricks they use to manage customers who exhibit the kinds of non-compliant behaviors mentioned above. Throughout, I will highlight how the ingenious and energetic application of these interactional strategies has the effect of creating and maintaining dancers’ personal agency.

**Capitalizing on Stage Performances**

*You don’t make any money unless you know how to get their attention. You have to make them relate to your personality while you are on stage.*

—Katie

Much dancer-customer interaction takes place while the dancer is performing on stage. Most clubs expect dancers to perform between three and ten songs while on stage, depending on how many dancers are working that particular night. In all of the clubs that I studied, dancers rely on tips as their sole source of income from exotic dancing; none of the clubs paid dancers a wage, much less benefits or even worker’s compensation. According to one of my respondents, Ashley, one of the clubs she has worked for charged each dancer twenty five dollars a night in “rent”, as well as taking a percentage of the money dancers earn
from private dances. Because dancers do not get paid a wage from the club where they work, their entire focus is on getting money out of their customers. Stage performances are a good way not only to get tips while dancers are actually performing, but also a way to get individual customers’ attention so that a private dance may be negotiated after the stage performance is finished.

Most stage performances executed by exotic dancers are designed to valorize heterosexuality and its attendant sexual techniques. This means that dancers’ routines are often stylized sexual acts that work to normalize and naturalize heterosexuality through “ritualized public display” (Giuffré and Williams 1994: 228). Dancers typically have great leeway in creating their stage routines, but they all typically focus on stylized sexual acts and impressionistic foreplay. Thus dancers dance seductively, wiggle their hips, strut around the stage, remove clothing, make sexual gestures, lay down on stage, undulate their hips, perform tricks with other dancers, simulate fellatio with dollar bills, and, of course, take tips as part of their performance. Many of the interactional strategies that dancers utilize as part of their stage performance, as well as activities they engage in while mingling with customers and negotiating and conducting private dances, are designed to create an elaborate fantasy with their customers, as you shall see.

Dancing style

Only one of the dancers I interviewed and observed had professional dance training. Most simply loved to dance and loved being the center of attention. Mich’e, for example, told me, “I like to dance. Like at the clubs. I always liked to dance. I like to be the center of attention. When I’m at parties I just dance in front of everybody ‘cause I love to do it.” Some
of the dancers talked about using the same kind of dance steps they use when dancing with friends while they are on stage performing in the strip club. But clearly there are different elements to their dancing while on stage, as stage dancing takes on a decidedly sexual nature. What takes stage dancing in a strip club even further from dancing with friends is that the dancers are dancing for tips, and so solicit and accept tips as part of their performance. And of course, there is the omnipresent brass pole in the center of the stage that makes the strip club stage different from a stage in an ordinary dance club.

The brass pole figures prominently in the repertoires of Lexus, a strikingly beautiful African American woman whose stage personae is as elegant as the car for which she named herself. Her use of the brass pole was the most interesting and athletic not only of all twelve of the dancers that I talked with, but also the most extraordinary of the several dozen dancers that I observed. Keeping in perfect time to the bluesy R&B music that she played, Lexus would shimmy all the way to the top of the brass pole, then lean out and arch her back, hanging only by her clenched thighs. She would then slowly slide down, her long, obviously straightened and soft hair flowing, her hands caressing her nude breasts and belly, to land delicately on her back in perfect time to the last beat of the song. Perhaps most extraordinary of all, she told me that she learned this technique from her older sister, who is a feature act at a strip club in Las Vegas.

Another trick that she learned from her sister was to spank herself in time to the music as she was laying face down on the stage, her buttocks raised in the air. This was an effective move not only for her, but for the several other dancers I saw doing it. Queen (1997) theorizes that dancers spanking themselves is popular because many men find it erotic
to think of themselves as “daddy” leavening out discipline by spanking. So Lexus and other
dancers who exploit the eroticism of this activity by spanking themselves on stage are keying
into such men’s fantasies as an effective way to extract tips. Spanking in the traditional sense
is a display of power, usually the display of a dominant adult’s power over a subservient
child. Dancers whose particular interactional strategy is to spank themselves, then, could be
seen as subverting this power, seizing it for themselves, and making money from it.

Curious about how customers rewarded her amazing pole technique and on-stage
spanking as part of her performance, during my interview with Lexus, I leaned over closer to
her and asked in a conspiratorial whisper, “do you mind telling me how much money you
make?” With a delightfully gleeful laugh, she said:

I mean, when I worked in Atlanta, I would come home with twelve, thirteen
hundred dollars most every night. So when I came back to Iowa and I came
back to making only four or five hundred dollars a night, it was like, oh
wow...I mean...but still! Who’s to complain? I mean, nobody else makes
even five hundred dollars a day in Iowa! [laughs]

I have to agree with Lexus that making five hundred dollars a day in tips is not bad money
anywhere, but especially in Iowa in a stagnant farm economy. Clearly, Lexus’ interactional
strategies are proving to be quite effective for her.

Ashley, a twenty-year-old white woman who danced at an upscale club in northern
Minnesota, incorporated another interesting dance style. She told me that she is a kick boxer
and that she has trained since she was in her early teenage years. Her slinky, cat-like dancing
style was punctuated by sudden, choreographic and precise moves, kicks and air punches.
Men enjoyed the athleticism of her performance and she said that she made up to sixteen
hundred dollars a night in tips at a club where she occasionally performed in a larger city. All
four of the clubs I studied had TVs constantly tuned to sports channels, although they usually had the volume down and closed captioning on the screen for viewers to be able to follow the action. Indeed, *Sports Illustrated* (1993) noted that strip clubs installed television sets in clubs as a market survival strategy to keep men at the bar stools drinking and tipping dancers instead of being at home watching significant sporting events. So men who patronize strip clubs also seem to be attracted to sports as well as nude or nearly nude women. I think that this interest in sports may be a reason why Ashley’s athletic and aggressive performance style, her particular interactional strategy, netted her so much in tips.

Holly, who immigrated recently from Singapore and who is in her late twenties, incorporated lip-synching into her dance performance as a strategy to extract tips from customers. One evening I watched her lip-synch “Maybe He’ll Notice Her Now”, a plaintive country ballad about a man who finally started paying emotional attention to his woman only after she left him for someone else. I watched with fascination as she singled out one particular man who was perched at the bar several yards away from the stage and who until that moment had been paying little attention to the dancers. She stared at him while singing the words to the song, apparently to him, and he rose from his seat. Within seconds he was standing in front of the stage, singing the song along with Holly. Most important, in terms of this study, is that he not only tipped her after she had finished lip-synching the song with him, but he also sat at the stage and tipped her throughout the rest of her set. She had successfully utilized an interactional strategy, lip-synching, to transform him from a relatively disinterested by-sitter into an active and compliant customer who tipped her.
Kristal, like many of the other dancers, incorporated touching her customers as part of her on-stage routine as a strategy to encourage tipping. A full-bellied woman, white with impossibly blonde shoulder length hair, Kristal emphasized to me that she initiated all of the touching that went on between her and her customers, and that she never allowed the men to touch her. At the Wisconsin club where Kristal worked, there was a narrow metal rail that separated the dancers from customers seated around the U-shaped stage. The railing was just about shoulder-level for customers who were seated, and was about one foot higher than the surface of the stage. For tips, Kristal would sit on the rail, facing her customer, and wrap her leg around his neck. She then would use her high-heeled foot to bump her customer’s nose against her crotch. For five dollar tips, she said, she would “let him see it” by briefly pulling aside her narrow G-string so that her customer would be able to briefly glimpse her neatly hairless genitals. This, of course, was illegal in Wisconsin, as female genitals are never to be exposed. But her use of this interactional strategy routinely netted her large tips, and perhaps the illegality of it was an added attraction for her appreciative customers.

Katie, a raucous nineteen-year-old white woman from Denver who was performing at the Iowa club one evening, also used controlled touching of her customers to extract tips. Chunky, with a big belly, thick thighs, and waffly buttocks, she did not fit any stereotypes of how exotic dancers should look like suave fashion models (Morgan 1998). I was fascinated at how she manipulated customers using a variety of interactional strategies, particularly her use of what she calls her “flip trick.” Katie, who weighs at least 160 pounds, does her “flip trick” by positioning her shoulders onto a man’s knees and flipping herself backwards, landing her crotch right at his face. She then squeezes her thighs around the customer’s head,
taking any hat that he was wearing with her once she rolls back down onto her feet. Katie says:

Oh, it’s easy! I can do it when they’re just sitting in their chair. You just put your shoulders on top of their knee and then you just kick yourself back and kick yourself forward. But you make sure you land on your feet! And they love it when you squish their hat. They really love that.

Her customers did go wild for this. I saw a group of three men not even waiting to hand her the tips, but instead throwing wadded dollar bills onto the stage while hooting and hollering for their turn at the “flip trick.” She has created a very effective interactional strategy through her use of controlled touching of her customers, and it nets her tips that she simply scoops off the stage at the end of her set. Katie proves that it is the use of creative techniques, or interactional strategies, that is the key to economic success in a strip club, and not just displaying conventionally accepted norms of female sexual beauty. In a later section you will meet Katie again when I describe how she used another interactional strategy to transform the bar from a quiet room filled with disinterested and seemingly bored men watching sports on TV to an exciting, laughter-filled noisy club bristling with sexual tension.

Removing clothing

Not all exotic dancers actually conduct the kind of clothing removal usually associated with strippers. In fact, I never saw any dancer doing the kind of “take it off, take it all off” strip performance made popular by Gypsy Rose Lee and her 1960s imitators. Instead, what I saw was more subtle removal of clothing, and usually only if there were tips flowing.

Most dancers would come on stage at the start of their set more or less fully clothed in skimpy, short, clingy, and often see-through material. Usually dancers wore a narrow G-
string under their clothes and this was revealed only after one or two songs. Sometimes
dancers would not remove clothing, but would lift up their blouses or dresses to give
customers a fleeting glimpse of their breasts or bras. In a later section of the chapter, I
describe the types of costumes dancers choose to wear in quite a bit of detail. Here I want to
concentrate only on the removal of clothing aspect of dancers’ stage performances, taking
special note of the degree of autonomy dancers have in making choices about clothing
removal.

Dancers in three of the clubs that I studied exhibit a great deal of personal agency in
determining how much clothing they will remove as part of their performance, and even
whether to remove any clothing at all. Ashley, for example, said that she only takes off her
clothes for men who tip. If there is no one tipping her as she performs, she will not take off
any clothes, using the threat of remaining clothed as an incentive to get the tips flowing. She
said:

I don’t like being completely naked and have no one tip me. I like...some
people think that they can just come sit and watch and have you be completely
naked and have them just sit there and watch. But um...if nobody’s tipping
me, then I won’t do anything, you know? But if a lot of people are tipping me,
then I’m going to like show them my boobs or whatever. But if a couple of
people are tipping me, I’ll show them, and then put my clothes back on
afterwards. So I’ll just reward the people who are tipping.

Clearly she is utilizing her choice of when and whether to remove clothing as an interactional
strategy for control and it is one that maintains her personal agency.

In some clubs in Minnesota and Wisconsin, however, dancers do not have much in
the way of choices about clothing removal. Ashley said that she has worked in clubs in those
states where the management requires that they take their tops off within a certain amount of
time or face being fined twenty-five dollars. She said that this lack of control over her work environment made her extremely unhappy and that was the reason why she quit working at those clubs. Having control over some of the details of one’s work environment, e.g. having free choice about clothing removal, is cited by Hochschild (1983) as one way that employees can feel like they have a measure of personal power, and thus be happier in their jobs. Hochschild’s observations seem to reverberate in the words the dancers I interviewed.

**Incorporating tip taking as part of performance**

Much of the show at strip clubs involves dancers taking tips from customers and incorporating the act of taking the tip as an important aspect of their performance. Tip taking is a vital element of the power relationship between dancers and customers. Indeed, many dancers maintain that it is the act of taking a man’s money that gives dancers their power over customers (Sloan, Bell, and Strickling 1998; Hurd and Preston 1980). Many of the dancers I got to know had developed their own unique styles of taking tips that had become their trademark. Most dancers had several different styles of taking tips that varied in the amount of touching they would do to the customers; the amount of touching that dancers were willing to do to the customer increased as the amount of tips from him increased.

Kerry is typical in this regard. A thirty-year-old white woman who worked at the working class club in Wisconsin, Kerry is friendly and outgoing. If the tip from her customer was a dollar, she said that she let the customer slip it into her G-string at her hip. If he wanted to tip more than a dollar, or if he was a repeat tipper, then she let him put it between her breasts and she would rub his face with them. A customer who wanted to tip yet again, or who proffered at least a five dollar bill to her would get to enjoy the next step up in her
tipping routine. For this she would take the bill off his forehead with her butt cheeks as he
leaned back in his chair, his head tilted back and hat removed. The next step up in her tipping
hierarchy is what she calls the “fake blow job.” Kerry explains her tipping sequence:

Yeah, I get them to put it on their head and then I get it with my butt. But I
only do that for guys that tip good, or that I know are regular customers. I
don’t want gross guys to touch me, so if I don’t know you, I generally don’t
do that unless you tip good. I do the fake blow job for really good tips. That
blows them away! [laughs] They get so excited! I only do that for five dollar
tips. Or for a dollar if the guy has been tipping me pretty good. I do the fake
blow job. And the guys, they say, “oh thank you!” and they can’t breathe and
get all red. They act like I really did something with them! [laughs] Even
though the buck is sticking out of the top of their pants, and my face is a good
foot away from their thing, they still get all excited. It blows them away.

The “fake blow job” is a popular trick at the clubs and dancers at the older, working class
Wisconsin club utilize it as a regular part of their performance. From a distance, the
simulation of fellatio is effective because the dancers bob their heads up and down while
taking the bill. This act, as part of the dancer’s performance, was usually met by hoots and
yells from other audience members, who often then waved five or ten dollar bills to the
dancer so that they, too, could be part of the show. I think that this particular interactional
strategy is an extremely creative one for the dancers to employ because of several reasons.
First, because this act typically stimulates other men to tip the dancer, it usually nets the
dancer several dollars in tips from customers other than the original one. Second, taking tips
this way brings the customer who is having his tip taken in this way into the limelight; in a
sense, he becomes part of the dancer’s performance. Liepe-Levinson (1998) notes that
making customers part of the act is an important reason why some customers go to strip
clubs. They enjoy being part of the show, and are willing to pay in order to become part,
even if only for a moment. They want, she says, “their own stage time” (3), when they can be
viewed not only by the dancer, but also by their fellow customers. Men who come to the club in groups often purchase the “fake blow job” act for one of their friends, especially if the men are there as part of a bachelor party. Third, the “fake blow job” is a creative interactional strategy because it underscores the sexual nature of the strip club, while at the same time playing with sexuality so that it does not become serious. Being playful around sexual matters is an important strategy that dancers utilize, as I shall talk about later.

*Performing tricks with other dancers*

When tips are not flowing at the strip clubs, dancers will employ a quirky and attention-getting tactic: they perform a trick with another dancer (Lewis 1998; Snowden 1993). One night at the club in Iowa, there were fourteen customers sitting at tables in small groups of two and three. A thin blonde woman with chestnut colored puffy hair and a clingy pink strapless dress that came down just to her crotch was gyrating on stage. She was into her third song and no one had tipped her yet. Men were talking to each other, to the other dancers wandering around the room soliciting couch dances, or were playing pool or watching the football game on the TV. Then Lexus went up to the bar and got some kind of exotic looking drink, maybe a strawberry marguerita, in a broad rimmed glass with a long stem. Tall and lithe, her ebony skin making her invisible under the black lights, she sauntered up to the stage and set the glass down on the edge. The dancer on stage smiled at her and started moving slowly towards her, exaggeratedly undulating her hips as she moved. She kneeled down in front of the glass and she and Lexus started drinking out of the glass together, sucking the pink liquid through clear straws. The men in the club went wild. They started hooting and hollering and several moved down to sit at the tables next to the stage. Clearly the dancers
had gotten the customers’ attention through this most clever trick. And the tips flowed quite well from that point onward.

Mich’e also used the tactic of performing a trick with another dancer as a way to get men’s attention and to start tips flowing. Mich’e, a chunky white woman who is twenty, married, and supporting three kids from her earnings, sports naturally wavy and lustrous brown hair. She is built sturdily. I asked her what she does when the flow of tips has stagnated although there are customers present:

I’m not bisexual; I’ve never been with a female. But that’s every guy’s fantasy, seeing two girls together. So I’ll get on the stage with another girl and do little things to get more money. I’ll do that. And then we split the tip. I take the dollar out of her mouth, or I rub on her. That usually does the trick.

Mich’e was careful to assure me that she was heterosexual, and that her performance of this trick did not imply that she was bisexual. She may have been worried that I might think she was not heterosexual, especially since I was also female, certainly an anomaly in the strip club. She consciously manipulated men’s fantasy of two women having sex with each other for money. It is quite an intriguing interactional strategy, and it seems to work well for the dancers who use it.

Kristal also employs the strategy of performing a trick with another dancer. Kristal will get on stage when another dancer is performing and untie the other dancer’s top, and rub her breasts and belly from behind. Kristal will also utilize Mich’e’s trick of rubbing on the dancer, kind of a simulated and stylized act of upright tribadism. This makes her laugh, and usually the other dancer as well, but she said that it also makes the tips flow. And the laughter is only part of the playful atmosphere in the strip club in Wisconsin where she works.
Kerry, who also works in the working class Wisconsin club, uses this trick. She says:

All guys dream of two girls getting it on. So we play to that, yeah, we play it up. We moan and stuff and the guys love that. Sometimes I’ll rub on her chest, act like I’m sucking her boobs and stuff. It gets things going when it’s slow.

Mich’e, Kerry, and Kristal all emphasized that they were not lesbian or bisexual, even though they performed these acts with other women while on stage. And I doubt that any of the customers suspected that they were lesbians in reality, either. Even this act of simulated and stylized lesbian sex could be seen as supporting the strip club’s purpose of valorizing heterosexuality because it is designed to titillate men and to get them to tip. The act is an invitation to audience members to engage in tipping, which is a surrogate for joining the two women in the simulation. The on-stage simulation of lesbian sex is thus markedly similar to lesbian scenes in porn videos where the two women are simply getting each other hot for the man who is waiting on the sidelines to join them and to complete the sexual act. Thus the interactional strategy of two dancers performing tricks with each other functions not only to stimulate tipping, but it also valorizes heterosexuality. It assures audience members of the necessity of a male presence in any sexual act, even that occurring between two women.

The interactional strategies to generate tips that are associated with dancers’ stage performances—dancing style, stripping and removing clothing, and performing tricks with other dancers—intertwine with other interactional strategies. In the next section, I will describe how dancers talk with their customers to generate tips. As you will see, talking is often conducted from the stage and is therefore an integral element of stage performance.
Capitalizing On Verbal Communication

A lot of times you got to work them for a tip. You know, walk around, conversate with them. And you have to be a good communicator.

—Lexus

Most of the dancers I talked with relied heavily on verbal communication with their customers as a way to generate tips. They talked to their customers from the stage, while they were off stage mingling with customers, and when they were performing private dances. In this section I will describe a variety of types of verbal communication that dancers exploit for cultivating tips.

Conversing in a regular way

One stereotype that pervades most people’s concept of the strip club atmosphere is that all of the talking that occurs between dancer and customer is sexual in nature. According to some of the exotic dancers that I interviewed, many men come to the club with this expectation. And although sexual conversations are certainly part of some dancers’ repertoire, a more common interactional strategy that dancers employ to generate tips from their customers is simply having what I call regular conversations.

Regular conversations between customers and dancers occur primarily when dancers are mingling with audience members while they are in between performance sets. Sometimes dancers will also utilize regular conversations with customers as part of their stage performance if the club is not crowded and there are only one or two men sitting at the stage. Although often dancers use regular conversations as a way to initiate negotiations for a more lucrative private dance, often the customers will pay dancers just to sit and talk with them (Ronai and Ellis 1989).
Tylyr, for example, says she talks to men about their family problems. Her trick to generate tips is to just sit and listen to them. She said:

I love to talk. I just, I will talk to them. I will listen to anything they have to say. Most of my customers will tell me about their family problems and I will just sit there and listen. I like to talk with them, and that’s just how I usually get my money.

Tylyr worked hard to come across as a “regular girl”, a “natural girl”, to her customers by talking to them in a friendly way about their real life issues. Articulate, pleasant, and conventionally feminine, Tylyr is a nineteen-year-old white dancer who worked in the Iowa club that I studied. She is currently a student at a Midwestern university and has used her experiences as an exotic dancer to write papers for English and other classes that she has taken. She used her excellent communication skills to simply sit and chat with customers, and this interactional strategy has proven to be very successful for her.

Lexus is another dancer I talked with who chose to engage in regular conversations with her customers in order to generate tips. Lexus comes across as having a genuinely sweet personality, an important interactional skill that her sister, also an exotic dancer, taught her to use with her customers. She occasionally used Ebonics in a lilting, nearly Southern accent that revealed her Oklahoma roots: Lexus said:

I’ll sit there and conversate with the guy for a while, you know what I’m saying? And then say, well, from there on, just talk with them, you know? The men know what they’re in here for, they know. When they walk in this door, they’re knowing what’s going on. Once in a while you get a couple of guys who don’t really want to tip you for talking to them, but I don’t have much trouble with that. Guys know.

Lexus also said that one of her tricks is to only engage in simple conversation with her customers so that she does not have to remember many details about them beyond their
names, and perhaps their occupations and what state they are from. “I keep it simple,” she said with a charming laugh. And this seemed to work well for Lexus, as she said she routinely made four or five hundred dollars a night, even when working in Iowa.

Cinnamon also engages in regular conversations with her customers. She is a white woman with long, light-colored hair and, gathering from the unnatural perkiness, breast implants. Like the other names that dancers chose for themselves, I found Cinnamon to be an intriguing name. When I asked why she chose this name, she said it was because she is “spicy”; in addition, her hair was nearly a cinnamon color. She worked at the working class club in Wisconsin that I studied. Her interactional strategy was to talk to her customers like they’re good friends that she parties with. After she had worked as an exotic dancer for a year, she realized that her regular customers were tipping her, not because of her dancing, but because she would talk to them. Cinnamon says:

I was working in Seattle when I was like, oh! Okay…you don’t want to sit and watch me dance, but you want to talk to me. And then they just started saying, you know, hey! I didn’t give you any money, and you’ve been talking to me. So here you go! And I’m like, wow! Come back and talk to me again! And they’re not regular customers like normal girls can call regular customers. Mine are just like friends that I sit and talk to.

Cinnamon’s strategy, like the strategy of Lexus and Tylyr, of just sitting and engaging in normal, regular conversation with her customers as a way to generate tips, underscores the fact that exotic dancers are service workers who engage in conversation as part of their job. In a way, Cinnamon, Lexus, and Tylyr are markedly similar to psychologists, waitresses, bartenders, insurance salespeople, and other service workers who use simple and ordinary conversation as part of their technique for interacting with customers. And customers are willing to pay for these simple, rather mundane conversations.
Chapkis, in her research with various sex workers, noted that customers in strip clubs are often paying for “focused attention” (1997: 77), very much like that which a psychotherapist, another type of service worker, provides. And indeed, much of the conversation described by my respondents is parallel to conversation that would take place in a therapist’s office—discussions about family life, difficulties at work, and talk about hometowns. Another type of verbal communication that dancers utilize as part of their vast repertoire of interactional strategies to generate tips is to make customers laugh. I will talk about this strategy next.

Making them laugh

Exotic dancers make customers laugh either while mingling with customers off stage, or when they are on stage as part of their routine. Frankly, a room full of laughing customers was not part of the stereotype about strip clubs that I harbored when I first started doing research on exotic dancers. But there were several evenings of observation when my field notes detailed descriptions of jolly dancers, laughing customers, and lots of money exchanging hands.

My observations and interviews revealed that there tends to be differences among the dancers about the use of humor. The differences in the use of humor to generate tips are probably related to the different personalities of the dancers, so that who is scheduled to perform on a particular evening determines the level and type of humor that will be used. Some dancers use humor as their main interactional strategy. For example, Sasha told me that her main tactic to get tips is to use humor and to have fun. Sasha, at 38 the oldest dancer that I interviewed, is a white woman who is married with two children. She is a very beautiful, glamorous woman who learned how to do this work when she was a Playboy Bunny. She
relies on her humorous and responsive personality to get tips, and eschews talking to customers about sex. Sasha says:

I’m not one to get up there and sell sex. I just... I can’t fake something I don’t feel. Men will tell me, you’re awesome, Sasha, because you laugh, you have fun up there. You have such an awesome personality. You’re, you get up there, and you try to entertain us. You’re not nasty. I’ve worked in clubs where the girls were real nasty. I would just leave.

Sasha has been an exotic dancer for five years, and has been relying on her humorous and responsive personality as her particular interactional strategy to generate tips with great success.

Belle is another dancer who uses humor as her interactional strategy. Twenty-seven, Belle is cutely pudgy, with shoulder-length dyed blonde hair. Like Sasha, Belle has two children. She uses humor both on stage and off stage while she is mingling with customers. But unlike Sasha, who kids with customers, Belle actually tells jokes while she is performing on stage. I witnessed her telling a dumb blonde joke (though her hair is blonde), and a racist joke (she is white.) She told the racist joke one evening from the stage while there were at least three American Indian customers at the club. Although I doubt that they heard her, because of their location several yards away from the stage and because they were watching sports on TV, I was acutely uncomfortable. I asked Belle about her joke telling in a later interview:

I get the jokes from my boyfriend. I don’t know where he gets them! Some of them are pretty off-color, but what harm does that do to anyone? I mean, I’m only joking.

Katie is another dancer who used joking and other types of humor as her interactional strategy to cultivate tips, but, to my relief, I never heard her use a racist or sexist joke. Katie
told me that she wants to be entertaining for her customers, and having fun and using humor is part of her technique. One evening at the Iowa club where she was working I saw just how effective her use of humor was for her. Things were quiet in the bar, and the few customers who were there were watching a football game on television. Four dancers were sitting with various customers, and there did not seem to be much activity going on at all beyond drinking and watching TV. And then Katie took the stage. As soon as she got up there, she yelled, “Oh, we’re having good clean fun at the titty bar!” Three men who had previously been watching TV at the bar took their drinks to the tables at the stage and sat down. Katie began entertaining them, laughing with them, teasing them, and doing her trademark “flip trick.” She was fun, enthusiastic, loud, and boisterous. She transformed the club. Within minutes men were laughing, and paying no attention to the game on TV anymore. Instead, they were hooting and going “RR-OOO!” like men will do at live sporting events. And they were wadding up dollar bills and throwing them on stage. At the end of her 15-minute set, she raked up an armful of bills. Clearly, her interactional strategy of making them laugh, of having fun with them, was effective. Katie told me:

The fun girl you see on stage is really me. Oh yeah. [laughs] That’s what the guys like, a real fun girl. And I’m the kind of person, I don’t really care if I’m having a bad day. It doesn’t faze me. I can be broke down on the side of the road and still waving at people and having a good time, you know? It’s impossible to make me miserable! [laughs]

And as I saw, it was impossible for customers to be disinterested in her, much less miserable, while she was performing. Katie talked more about having fun as part of her interactional strategy to generate tips:

The first three weeks [working in the strip club] I just kind of watched and thought...And I got to the point where I realized that it’s the ones who are
extremely outgoing and constantly happy and extremely entertaining and fun loving who were making all the money. Because you can never get bored with me! [laughs] That’s what I tell guys! You can’t be bored! [laughs] You know? I have to have fun.

Spradley and Mann (1975), in their discussion about the power relationship between cocktail waitresses and their male customers and male co-workers, note the importance of joking relationships. A common element that cultural anthropologists have noticed about joking relationships, according to Spradley and Mann, is that joking is a way to resolve tensions in relationships where one person has more social power than another (87). In the bar studied by these two sociologists, male bartenders had more social power than the female cocktail waitresses and so engaged in joking banter with them as a way to resolve the tensions. In the bar they studied, male bartenders could joke with waitresses, engaging in sexually-tinged jokes, for example, but would take offense if waitresses did the same kind of joking back. I think that the same sort of joking relationship existed in the strip clubs I studied, only the traditional male-female power relationship was inverted. Dancers could joke with customers, even make customers the butt of jokes, as Katie often did, but customers were not welcome to make the same kinds of jokes to dancers without risking offending them. I think that this demonstrated that dancers possess more social power than customers within the strip club environment. Thus joking with customers is another effective interactional strategy that dancers employ that not only nets them tips, but also maintains their personal agency and sense of empowerment.

Belle’s tactic of telling racist and sexist jokes, however, is another matter. It seems to me that what she was doing was maintaining the dominant power relationships, men over women, whites over ethnic and racial minorities, through her re-telling of offensive jokes to
her white male customers. Or perhaps it was her way of participating in the ownership of power, or at least the recognition of power, much like a dog being offered a bite of food while its family eats at the table. Maybe since she was the one who instituted the offensive joke telling, she felt like this was an exercise of power.

Whatever Belle’s motivation, she and the other dancers who exploited humor, laughter, and their fun-loving personalities to maneuver customers into tipping were using yet another creative and effective interactional strategy that involved verbal communication. Several of the dancers that I interviewed and observed also used conversations that are sexual in nature as another interactional strategy involving verbal communication, as I will talk about next.

*Conversing sexually*

Conversations between dancer and customer that are blatantly sexual in nature rarely take place while the dancer is performing for the audience at large. Instead, most of these types of conversations take place either while the dancer is mingling with customers while she is off-stage, or they take place in the context of private dances. They also occur while the dancer is on stage but is performing for a particular man who is tipping her; in this case, the dancer simulates a sense of privacy by whispering to the customer so that most others cannot hear, and by getting really close to the customer, often while revealing her breasts or genitals to him.

Queen (1997), a peep show worker cum researcher and labor activist, says that she uses sexual talk as her primary way of communication with her customers. Her purpose is to make her customer hot and to make him experience orgasm quickly so that the private booth
that he occupies will be available for her next customer. Talking sex, Queen says, is the fastest way to get a man to ejaculate, and thus is the fastest way that she makes the most money.

Many of the thirty exotic dancers interviewed by Sloan, Bell, and Strickling (1998) also used sexual talk as an interactional strategy to manipulate men. These women said that they incorporated promises of actual sexual acts into their conversations with their customers to get them to pay money for private dances. Their respondents felt that these promises of sex were what made customers give them money; and giving them money was what gave dancers power over their customers.

Mich’e also uses sexual conversations with her customers as a quick way to make money. After negotiating a private dance with a customer, she leads him to the VIP Lounge, a cordoned area that is to the left of the stage that is hidden by a low wall from the rest of the Iowa club where she works. Although the mirrored walls actually provide an excellent view for the bouncers to proctor the activities taking place, and for any customers in the club who know how to look, the feeling in the VIP Lounge is one of privacy. Once she has her customer alone there, she starts to dance between his legs, sometimes to grind herself on his lap, and to “talk dirty to him.” Mich’e says:

And then, whatever, you talk shit to them. Like “spank me,” you know. Or something like that. Just talk shit. Or “come back here with me, you like this stuff.” “You come here,” that kind of stuff. That works. Some of the guys just like it when the girls talk dirty to them, they ain’t never had no girl talking that shit to them before, you know? And it’s even better when you’re dancing on them.”
Mich’e also engaged in this kind of talk when she was on stage and accepting a tip from a customer. She told me that it really works when she whispers something sexual in his ear and then blows in his ear. “That does it for them, it really does,” she said with a delighted grin.

Katie also talks sexually with customers, but true to her fun-loving, non-serious personality, twists her sexual conversations so that she is having fun more than she is being sexual. Here she describes a trick that she says is particularly effective for older men who patronize strip clubs:

And I really, I get a kick out of the dirty old men who come in here. Because there’s a lot of them! And they’ll be like 70 years old and they’ll come into the club. And they know, they’ve been around the block. They know that if you sit down next to them you want a drink and you want their money. And I’ll sit down next to them and I’ll tell them something dirty, you know? I’ll stick my tongue out at them and I’ll say, hey, buddy, what do you think my tongue ring is for?

All of the dancers that I talked with who use sexually-tinged conversation as part of their interactional strategies to get tips use them routinely in much the same way that Leidner’s fast food workers and insurance salesmen used scripts about more mundane things such as drink size or whether a customer wants an apple pie with their Big Mac. They are part of dancers’ scripts, part of the tricks that they use to manipulate customers into tipping. Using standardized sex talk to manipulate customers is a common strategy for all types of sex workers, not just exotic dancers (Dudash 1997; Funari 1997; Ronai 1993).

Another standardized interactional strategy that involves verbal communication is bargaining for tips. As I shall discuss next, bargaining for tips is another highly effective strategy for exotic dancers.
Bargaining for tips

Bargaining for tips is another important strategy that exotic dancers use to manipulate their customers (Ronai and Ellis 1989). The dancers that I talked with used bargaining for tips either as part of the negotiation around a private dance, or as part of their stage performance. Sparkle, for example, told me that she nearly always bargains for tips when she is negotiating a private dance. Sparkle, surprisingly reticent during our interview, but outgoing and manipulative while interacting with customers, is a twenty-year-old white woman working at the club in Iowa. Private dances at the club are twenty dollars, and the dancer gets to keep all of that. Sparkle will often bargain with customers to get them to pay more than the customary twenty dollars. She said:

So I will sit with them and talk with them and then usually I can get them to come back here and do a private dance. And those are twenty dollars. But you can actually make them any price you want. It’s like a minimum of twenty. But if I’m willing, if I thought that a guy would give me more money, I’ll say it’ll cost you fifty but I’ll do more than I would for just twenty. I’ll give you more. So sometimes I’ll do that.

Sparkle works at a club where she gets to keep all of the money that she makes for private dances. Kerry, however, works at a club in Wisconsin that takes fifty percent of whatever she makes from couch dances. “There’s no incentive to do couch dances,” she says of this arrangement. Still, she finds other ways to bargain with her customers about tips. “I’ll tell them I got to feed my kids. I’ll say right out, give me money and I’ll take off my top. If they don’t, then I’ll keep my top on. I’m kinda kidding when I say that, and you can kid them. But I’m serious about not taking it off. I won’t go naked if they won’t tip me.”

Of all the dancers that I talked with about bargaining for tips as an interactional strategy, fun-loving Katie’s strategy is the most creative. If tips are slow in flowing, she gets
all the men at the stage to write their names on a dollar bill. After she collects the bills, she
does a drawing and gives the winner her panties or top (bought on sale at a Denver lingerie
shop.) She says that this is a way to draw out shy guys who she thinks want to tip, but are too
shy to do it. Since she gets to keep all of the bills, she said this interactional strategy usually
nets her between five and twenty dollars each time that she does it. And because she only
uses this when tips are slow in coming, it usually lubricates the tipping process and even
more money flows her way.

Katie’s technique of bargaining, and also Kerry’s, are teasing in their tone. Teasing
customers even more blatantly, as part of a verbal strategy to get tips, is what I will talk about
next.

*Teasing customers into tipping*

Enck and Preston (1988) note that teasing customers is a highly effective strategy that
exotic dancers utilize to manipulate customers. The dancers that I talked with also used this
strategy. Sometimes dancers would go beyond mere teasing to outright embarrassing
customers into tipping, as I shall discuss. Most dancers tease customers not only in their
private one-on-one interactions, but also while they are performing on stage. Teasing
customers in front of other customers is an effective way to spur peer pressure, as I will talk
about in a later chapter on techniques dancers employ to handle non-compliant customers.

Kerry, employed at a Wisconsin club, said she yells to customers who are sitting at
the stage but who are not tipping her: “What are you in here for if you’re not here to tip the
dancers?” Kristal, employed at the same Wisconsin club, will tell a group of non-tipping
customers: “Come on! I’m lonely up here!” Both of these dancers use these one-line remarks as scripts to tease customers into complying with dancers’ demands for tips.

Cinnamon also uses a script to tease customers. Noticing a shy customer who is sitting away from the stage, she will needle him into moving closer to the stage and therefore more liable to tip:

Sometimes guys don’t sit at the stage, and you can tell that they want to. So I will go up to him when I’m on break, or sometimes I do it like when I’m dancing, if there’s no one up here, and I’ll say, hey, the waitress wanted me to tell you that this table is broken. You’ll have to move to the stage. Usually I joke with them about that. And then he can move to the stage and not feel too shy. Kind of makes him feel special, that the girl noticed him and wants him to be closer to her. Closer to the stage. And that gives him the chance to tip.

Cinnamon is careful to avoid antagonizing customers through her teasing, so she will not attempt any further manipulation of a reticent customer if this script fails to work for her.

Of all of the teasing scripts that dancers use, however, certainly Belle’s would make her the queen of tease. She, too, worked at the Wisconsin club where Kerry and Kristal worked. She was nearly ruthless in her teasing of customers when no one was tipping. One evening when I was at the club observing, and negotiating an interview with Belle, there were about twenty customers in the club, none of them sitting at the stage, and none of them tipping. She danced one or two songs without getting any tips, and then she suddenly stopped, and propped her high-heeled foot on the railing separating the stage from the rest of the bar. “What’s the matter with you guys??” she teasingly demanded. “Didn’t anybody get paid this week?”

Another evening Belle was working hard to get tips from a set of heterosexual couples out on a date. She had pulled out many of her customary tricks, but to no avail. She
had tried using her “come hither” gesture, had tried seducing customers with her eyes (including me), and had tried pouting. No tips were flowing her way. Again she stopped dancing, and she pointed at one of the two women who were sitting with their male dates. “Get him to give you a dollar and come up and tip me. I think he’s afraid of me! Come on! I won’t bite you! Unless you want me to!” And that did it for Belle. Both of the men sitting with the women handed their dates dollar bills in a somewhat chagrined manner, and the women sauntered up to tip Belle and to receive her scripted, whispered thank you. Belle, like other dancers who used teasing as a strategy to solicit tips, was successful that night and was demonstrating her personal power as she did.

The final way I will discuss that dancers use verbal communication to get tips is making invitations for a private dance. I will talk about this next.

*Inviting a private dance*

Private dances are generally the most lucrative activity for exotic dancers. Not all clubs allow them, however. Among the four clubs I interviewed in and made observations, only the upscale Minnesota club did not allow private dances. Because they are so lucrative for dancers, most exotic dancers concentrate on talking customers into purchasing them (Thompson and Harred 1992). But as stated earlier, not all clubs let dancers keep all of what they earn for private dances. Both clubs that I studied in Wisconsin take half of the money earned by dancers from private dances, called “fantasy couch dance” in the parlance of those two clubs. And, as Kerry complained, this policy robs the dancers of any incentive to do them. The club in Iowa allowed dancers to keep all of what they earned for private dances, called “VIP dances” there. Business for VIP dances was brisk in that club, which illustrates
that clubs that allow dancers to keep all of the money they earn from private dances will sell more private dances. Selling more private dances makes dancers happy, because they get to make more money. Again, as Hochschild notes (1983), awarding as much control as possible over work conditions is a prime way that employers can keep their employees satisfied and thus at the peak of their performance.

Three basic types of private dances are performed in the Midwest. The types vary in legality and in the amount of dancer-customer touching that is allowed to occur. Lap dances are private dances performed by a dancer who actually gyrates and grinds herself on the customer’s body, often on his lap. Clubs that allow this usually require that the customer not touch the dancer in any way, but dancers are allowed to touch customers wherever they want. Couch dances are similar to lap dances, but some clubs and municipalities do not allow the dancer to touch the customer. This means that dancers are able to dance between a customer’s outstretched knees, but the two cannot touch each other. Typically couch dances are performed while the customer is seated at an actual couch, which is why they are named couch dances. A table dance is another form of private dance. A table dance is when a dancer comes off stage and performs at a table for either one customer or for a group of customers; the amount of touching that is allowed varies.

Dancers usually solicit private dances from customers while they are mingling with audience members in between sets. They will also solicit a private dance from a customer who has been tipping repeatedly while the dancer is performing on stage. Like the other interactional strategies that dancers employ to generate tips, each dancer has her own creative
approach to soliciting a private dance. Tylyr chooses a non-aggressive approach to soliciting
a private dance. She said:

I don’t…it’s really hard for me. A lot of girls will just, you know, talk and tell
them the nasty stuff that they’re going to do back here. But I’m not, you
know. I’ll say stuff like, if you’ll do this, then we can get to know each other
better, one on one, in the private area, just talk.

In contrast, Sparkle who worked at the same club as Tylyr, is a little more aggressive in
getting customers to agree to purchase a private dance:

Well, if I’ve been sitting with him a while and he still hasn’t asked me [for a
private dance], then I’ll say, don’t you think it’s time that we had a private
dance? And I’ll just look at them kind of cute. You know? Maybe touch their
shoulder or something. And then usually, they’re like, yeah! Most of them
can’t say no. [laughs]

Mich’e is even more aggressive in her solicitation of private dances. She has more
experience than either Sparkle or Tylyr, having been an exotic dancer for four years. This
makes her twice as experienced as either Sparkle or Tylyr, and this maybe gives her
confidence in being more aggressive about jockeying men into buying a private dance with
her:

So you know, I look them directly in the eye. You can see them while you’re
up on stage. And if I feel like a private dance, I dance on their lap for a second
and then get up. Then I make more money from them. I tease them, I get on
their laps, and then I’ll ask them, you know, do you want to come up there and
play with me all by yourself?

Among the dancers that I spoke with, the most aggressive style of soliciting private
dances belongs to Katie. Direct, forthright, and blunt, Katie eschews “phoniness.” True to her
nature, then, Katie simply asks customers outright if they want to purchase a private dance:

“I’m not phony. I just ask them, I say, would you like a private dance? If not, then I say,
okay. Then would you buy me a drink?” If a customer turns down Katie’s invitation for a
private dance, her scripted comeback is to ask for a drink because she makes a commission on the drinks that customers buy for her. Thus she uses her direct, straightforward approach, including not taking no for an answer, as a way that is markedly similar to the scripts performed by Leidner’s insurance salesmen respondents. And the result is the same: these kinds of verbal interactional strategies are difficult for customers to resist. Most likely customers will respond the way that dancers intend for them to respond, by tipping.

The kind of profuse verbal communication between dancers and customers that I observed and that the dancers told me about was something I did not expect when I began this research. The variety and creativeness of dancers’ verbal techniques were surprising to me. Also surprising to me was the power of dancers’ gaze in soliciting tips, which I will look at in the next section.

**Capitalizing On Eye Contact**

*Oh, all I do is just to keep eye contact with them. Look at them, smile at them, make them think that I’m looking at them in a special way.*

—Cinnamon

Tina Turner made the song, “Private Dancer”, a hit in the 1980s (Knopfler 1984). In the song she sings: “You don’t look at their faces. You keep your eyes on the wall.” Her words are a complete contradiction to what I observed in the strip clubs and what the dancers told me. Instead of keeping their eyes on the wall, as Turner suggests, dancers exploit visual communication with their customers as yet another creative interactional strategy to obtain tips. Most of the kinds of eye contact that I observed dancers engaging in occurred while they were on stage performing. I will talk about two instances of dancer-customer eye contact: intense eye-to-eye contact, and eye-to-crotch contact.
**Intensely gazing**

Eye contact is a socially charged act, especially in the strip club environment (Snowden 1993). Elements of eye contact such as length of eye contact, who drops their eyes first, refusal to even make eye contact, are all expressions of power. And exotic dancers exploit all of these elements.

Sparkle is typical in her use of eye contact to get men to tip her. “You know, I just like keep eye contact with them while I’m dancing. Just little stuff like that.” Cinnamon also uses eye contact while she’s dancing to get customers to tip her. Of this tactic, she said:

I like single out one guy at a time, really focus on him. I seduce him with my eyes and with my dancing. I make him feel like I am dancing just for him. It only works if I concentrate on the one guy. Then after he tips, I move on to the next guy. And I’ll look at him, too, really look him in the eyes, and make him feel special, too.

Cinnamon is careful to work her audience methodically, staring at each potential tipper sitting at the stage, getting him to tip, and then moving on.

Sometimes, though, men are not sitting at the stage, and thus are unlikely to tip dancers. In these cases, dancers have to use other methods of eye contact to get men to at least come down to the stage where they are more likely to engage in tipping the dancer. Belle said that when there is no one at the stage, or if there are other customers in the club who are watching her but are not at the stage, she would make intense eye contact with them to entice them to come to the stage and tip. She stares at such customers to get their attention. Her goal is to get him to the stage, because, as she said, “if he’s at the stage, he’s there to tip me.”
Staring at crotches

Some dancers use the power of staring in an even more blatant way than mere eye contact with their customers. Some dancers will stare at men’s crotches as a way to manipulate them. Holly, who you will remember also engages in sexual conversation with her customers, stares at her customer’s crotch and then flicks her eyes back up to his face and smiles. She does this to make them feel like she notices that they are turned on.

The trick of staring at customers’ crotches does not work for all dancers, however, Kristal, for example, said that she tried this trick once. The problem for her was that she started laughing and the customer did not tip her because of this. I think that the customer’s reaction highlights how staring at people’s crotches is a blatant exercise in power that has the potential to objectify, to reduce a person to her/his genitalia (Dudash 1997). Men are expected to stare, or at least excused, when they look at a woman this way. But when a woman looks at a man’s crotch, she is subverting cultural norms of power. Perhaps when Kristal’s customer felt like she was not only staring at his crotch, but also laughing at him, he felt that she had seized too much power for herself, and thus reacted by invoking one of the few sources of power left to him in the strip club environment: refusing to tip.

All of the interactional strategies I have talked about so far mesh together. Dancers’ stage performances, their verbal and visual communication with their customers, all work together as interactional strategies to manipulate their customers. The next interactional strategy that I will discuss is fantasy construction. As you will see, the construction of fantasies in the strip club is a complex interactional strategy that incorporates all of the interactional elements that I have talked about so far.
Capitalizing on Fantasy Construction
You can kind of tell what kind of fantasy they want just by talking to them for a while.
—Ashley

Fantasy construction in a strip club is an elaborate process combining a dancer’s costumes, her stage name, her choice of music, any props she chooses to use, and her personality, to create a fantasy personae that appeals to certain customers (Ronai and Ellis 1989; Snowden 1993). The illusion that the dancer creates through her manipulation of all of these elements allows her to manipulate her audience to her own ends (Lewis 1998); in this case, to generate tips. Queen (1997) says that her experience as a peep show worker has demonstrated that men need fantasy to be able to experience sexual arousal and orgasm and that it is her responsibility to co-create it with her customers. Fantasy construction is an active process (Minkowitz 1998) and both the customer and dancer must participate, but, as you will see, they participate in different ways. Based on my interviews and observations, I believe that dancers take the more active role in fantasy construction and that customers fit themselves into the fantasy that the dancer creates.

Figuring out customers’ fantasies

Dancers take an active role in creating fantasies for their customers, and use it as another interactional strategy to cultivate tips. Lexus says that it is hard work to figure out what kind of fantasy a customer wants, but that it is an effective way to make money from customers. Lexus explains:

You got to know just what to say to get this guy to want to play. Everybody comes in here with their own little fantasy, you know what I’m saying? Everybody comes in with what they want. And somehow you got to figure out just what to do to make it be what they want, you know? So you kind of play
into their fantasy. But you got to figure out what it is. You got to know the
person. And, you know, really listening to what they’re saying. Because if you
don’t, well, okay, there’s another dancer. And maybe she’ll communicate
better than you, figure out what he wants, and then she’ll get that money.

Lexus has four years of experience as an exotic dancer, and she relies heavily on her years of
accumulated experience to help her determine what kind of fantasy might appeal to a new
customer.

Sparkle also figures out a man’s fantasy and then plays to it. She specializes in telling
“strategic lies” (Chapkis 1997: 106) to her customers to create a fake common bond with
them to make them tip her. She said:

Like if a college kid comes in here, then I say that I’m in college. If a farmer
comes in here, then I say that I grew up on a farm. Stuff like that. Just stuff
that’s going to make them really like you. Do you know what I mean? I just
care if they give me a private dance. Because I’m never going to see them
outside of work, so I’ll just tell them whatever they’re going to hear. Like…if
hunters come in, then I make up a story about one year when I went hunting
with my dad when I was 15. I just make up a story. I don’t know if all dancers
do that, it’s probably bad, but I’m really good at doing it. [laughs]

Sparkle’s tactic of lying to her customers has some interesting elements. First, all she has to
do is to ask a customer what he does for a living for her to be able to immediately figure out
what strategic lie she might tell him in order to tap into a potential fantasy he might harbor.
This establishes a commonality with her customer that she can then use to connect with him
(Snowden 1993). It structures conversation, and the customer feels that he has something real
that he can talk about with Sparkle. The customer then feels like Sparkle is more emotionally
accessible to him, which increases his willingness to tip her. Sparkle is deliberately utilizing
lying as a strategy to figure out and then manipulate customers’ fantasies. She emphasizes
this here:
It’s not like it’s hurting anybody, you know what I mean? I couldn’t lie if I thought that it was going to hurt anybody. But what does it hurt if I say I went hunting with my dad? These guys are in here to get into a fantasy, you know what I mean? And if I have to lie to help them get there, I’ll do it. And you know, that’s what they want. They know they’re not going to have a relationship with you outside here, so why does it matter? They just want you to be like their perfect woman just for, you know, just so they can have their fun. That’s what they’re paying for, I think. They’re paying for me to be what they want me to be. So I’ll just pretend to be that. I’ll pretend to be what they want.

Sparkle uses strategic lying as a creative interactional strategy to help her figure out and tap into men’s fantasies. After figuring out what kind of fantasy a customer might have, then dancers use several other resources in order to create the fantasy. Dancers choose costumes as a prime way to attract customers who may harbor common fantasies (Ronai and Ellis 1989), as I will talk about in the next section.

Choosing costumes for their symbolic value

Dancers are extremely creative when it comes to using costumes to create fantasies for their customers. Tylyr courts customers who are attracted to her girl-next-door, Midwestern farm girl look by wearing extremely short, faded, ragged, cut-off blue jeans and a simple white tank top. She said that farmers are especially attracted to her when she wears this costume. She also wears a very short, clingy pink dress that highlights her exaggerated femininity. Her ever-present white frilly garter that she wears on her thigh so that men can slip bills into it accompanies both of these costumes. Her look of exaggerated femininity and farm-girl physical fitness tap into customers’ fantasies of having an erotic relationship with a feminine farmer’s daughter.
Sparkle takes a different approach. The Iowa club where she works is primarily lit with black lights, and she chooses costumes that capitalize on the type of lighting that this provides. She wears neon colored outfits, like orange bikinis and short white dresses, that make her glow under the black lights. She believes that these outfits make her stand out, get her noticed by her customers, and make her “sparkle.”

Mich’e, who has worked as an exotic dancer for four years and thus is one of the most experienced dancers I interviewed, manipulated customers’ fantasies by using several different costumes that are caricatures of popular female images. About her different costumes, Mich’e said:

Yeah, I’ve come out as a nurse, and like in school costumes. I’ve been a businesswoman, with glasses that I let a guy take off for me. You know. Stuff like that. Long shirts and a tie. And I’ll just start teasing them. They really go crazy for the nurse outfit. They really do. One time I wore a real hot pink dress with some hot pink shoes and I had my hair in pigtails. Whoa! Like a little girl! Yeah, they went crazy. They loved that. I made a lot of money that night.

Mich’e has figured out what customers like, and she plays to those fantasies. She changes her costume every two sets to keep customers interested.

Ashley plays to similar male fantasies involving hyper-feminized caricatures of popular female images:

Um…well, I like to wear this cheerleading outfit, this red and white cheerleading outfit. There’s a lot of guys, they have a fantasy with cheerleaders. So I play to that. In Minneapolis I came out one night with another outfit on and did not get a good response. And then I went into the dressing room two minutes later, put on that outfit, and came back out and they all started cheering! [laughs] Or I’ll have guys that request me to wear that outfit. They’re like, [said in playful deep tone] where’s your cheerleading outfit? Go put it on! I’ll tip ya!
In wearing her cheerleading outfit, I think that Ashley is creatively tapping into a couple of related cultural ideas. Ashley, you will remember, is trained as a kick boxer, and her stage performance is aggressive and athletic. But a cheerleader has a very different role in sports than an active player. So perhaps Ashley is assuaging her male customers’ anxieties about her power as an athlete when she takes on a more gender appropriate role of a cheerleader, who is stereotyped as being on the sideline, rather than an athlete who is the center of attention. Second, Ashley is tapping into customers’ not-so-secret fantasy of having an erotic relationship with a cheerleader. It is no coincidence that cheerleaders for NFL football teams appear in advertisements using poses that are markedly similar to those you would see in *Playboy* and similar magazines. So Ashley is being quite creative in manipulating customers’ fantasies about cheerleaders when she dons her red and white outfit.

Cinnamon also wears specific costumes to tap into men’s fantasies. She said:

I have like a naughty black outfit with black thigh high stockings. And I have these shoes with these big spike heels. I call them my porno shoes because the first week I couldn’t walk in them. I twisted my ankle three or four times! And I was like, jeez! How do they walk in these? [laughs] Only porn stars can wear shoes like this because they don’t have to walk anywhere! And then I have a school girl outfit and I put little pigtails and look all innocent, but you know I’m not because I’m working here! [laughs]

Cinnamon has fun with her customers talking about her costumes, but she is very clear that she is tapping into their fantasies as she does it.

Holly also taps into men’s fantasies through her choice of costume. She tends to wear a black G-string and a man’s black jacket with thigh-high black patent leather boots. Her hair is jet black, revealing her Asian origin, and she wears it loose to her knees. She courts the image of a dominatrix with this, her trademark outfit. By wearing this outfit, Holly is
subverting the cultural expectation that a femme presentation (Queen 1997: 181) is necessary to be successful as an exotic dancer. However, this outfit and her dominatrix outfit net her mixed results, as she tends to make less in tips than her co-workers who are nearly all blonde, natural or otherwise, and white.

Costumes are part of an entire complex of resources that dancers use to create, tap into, and manipulate customer fantasies. Dancers use other resources, including music, as well. I will talk about the use of music next.

*Choosing music to create atmosphere*

In three of the four clubs that I studied, dancers were able to choose their own music. This means that dancers were able to use their music choice as another way to sell the image that they have constructed of themselves to their customers, another way to manipulate fantasies.

Mich’e, a white Midwestern woman from a large urban area, likes music that is associated with the African American community. She chooses the slower R&B numbers because she likes the feel of the music. She also chooses African American music because she likes to attract black men. Mich’e said that she used to dance in a club in Minneapolis that had a largely black clientele. She said that black men tend to be more appreciative of her and more polite than the white patrons that she now usually performs for in the club in Iowa where she currently works. Lexus echoes Mich’e’s view that African American men are more polite to dancers than white men are. And she also chooses music by African American artists as the backdrop to her performance. She chooses this kind of music, she said, to
emphasize the fact that she is African American. Both of these dancers are weaving their choice of music into the elaborate fantasies that they are co-creating with their customers.

Tylyr also uses her choice of music to work into her customers’ fantasies. She likes the fast songs and refuses to dance to slow ones. Immediately after I interviewed Tylyr, she performed on stage. It was her first night at the club in Iowa, and the DJ did not yet know that she would only dance to fast songs. He inadvertently put on a slow song, and she simply stopped performing, playfully glared at him, and demanded that he put on a faster number. He quickly complied. Tylyr said that she will only dance to fast songs because she has constructed herself to be “a party girl” for her customers. “Guys aren’t here to get slowed down by the music. They’re here to have a good time! They don’t want to hear that sad stuff,” she told me.

Katie also chooses fast music. She likes her music to feel “sexy” with the expectation that this sexiness will transfer to her customers who will then want to tip her and to purchase a private dance. She wants her customers to feel like dancing, she said, because then they are more drawn into her performance.

Belle also uses music to bolster men’s fantasies. She likes to use country ballads the best, saying that they are romantic and about love. This puts customers into the mood to be romantic and sexy, she said, and thus they will tip. As I will talk about next, dancers also use props as part of their fantasy construction with their customers.

**Using props to manipulate fantasies**

Some dancers use props to manipulate fantasies for and with their customers. Kristal uses a stuffed animal, Tigger from Winnie the Pooh. Occasionally she will pin her long
blonde hair up into girlish pigtails, don a short pink nightgown, and carry Tigger on stage while she performs. She often sucks her thumb while performing with Tigger. While she is off stage mingling with customers in between sets, Kristal carries the toy, as a small child would do, holding Tigger by the arm and letting its tail drag the floor.

Nearly all dancers use the omnipresent brass pole as a prop to manipulate customer fantasies. The pole is centered in the middle of the stage at all of the clubs that I studied. Dancers use it to hold onto while they wiggle and dance, and they use it to hang from as part of their performance, as discussed earlier. Many dancers also shimmy against the pole, lay down with the pole between their legs, hump the pole, and rub their crotches against it. The implication that the dancers are trying to get across to appreciative audience members is clear: the pole is a symbolic phallus.

Reification of phallic props in the strip club often extends beyond the brass pole. In an amusing evening at the Iowa club during the week before Halloween, I witnessed other club employees manipulating customers' fantasies through the use of phallic props. From my field notes:

Tiger hung a Halloween dummy behind the dancers on stage. The dummy is life-size, and has red eyes that are lit and so glow rather eerily. Its head is a skull, and it is wearing a black Zorro costume. The funniest part about the dummy is that Tiger put a lime green plastic snake where the penis would be. And of course, everything glows in the black light, so the snake glows, though the rest of the dummy is dark. Tiger has it fixed up with wires so that he can make the snake go up and down like a lime green, neon erection. The dancers were having a great time with it, simulating fellatio on the snake-penis and occasionally pretending that it goosed them. And the customers were hooting and laughing and tipping dancers who played with the dummy.

This incident demonstrates that fantasy construction with the use of props and other resources is meant to be playful and fun. Certainly dancers are tapping into serious fantasies
that customers harbor, but they are also playing with those fantasies and helping customers to have fun with them. Still, all of the fantasy construction that dancers do is to make money, to generate tips. Thus fantasy construction, as another interactional strategy, is a way that dancers exert power over their customers. Kerry may echo what many dancers think about fantasy construction as a source of personal agency. “I control their fantasies, you know? And so I control them.”

A related interactional strategy that dancers utilize is manipulating the emotions of their customers. Of course, much of fantasy construction is actually manipulating emotions, but there are other aspects of emotional manipulation that I want to talk about in the following section.

**Capitalizing On Emotional Manipulation**

_I think they know that we have these tricks that we do to make them feel whatever we want them to feel._

—Holly

My interviews and observations of exotic dancers pointed out to me that dancers consciously manipulate both their own and their customers’ emotions as an interactional strategy to obtain tips. Chapkis (1997) believes that emotions are socially constructed, and she illustrates this through her analysis of ways that her sex worker respondents manipulated emotions, such as faking sexual attraction to a customer, to achieve desired ends. Several of the women that I interviewed talked about manipulating customers’ and their own emotions to get tips. I will explore emotional manipulation at this point.
Faking emotional accessibility

One way that dancers manipulate their customers’ emotions is by making customers feel that the dancers are emotionally accessible to them. For example, Kerry wants her customers to feel that they could actually date her, that she would be accessible to them. She accomplishes this in two ways. First, she chooses costumes that are ordinary, like bikinis or short shorts with a tight tank top. “When was the last time that you saw a girl in a spangled evening gown?” she asked me when we were talking about her costume choice. “I go for the girl-next-door look. I like want guys to look at me and think, hey, I could date her. Guys want to see someone that they aren’t intimidated by. They want to feel like they could have you, that they could date you.” Second, Kerry accomplishes making her customers feel that she is emotionally accessible to them by talking to them “like a regular girl.” She engages in ordinary conversation with them, as I talked about earlier, and talks about mundane, ordinary things. This achieves her goal of making her seem emotionally accessible to them, and they tip her as a result.

On the other hand, some dancers consciously intimidate their customers. As I will talk about next, some dancers use intimidation as an emotional strategy to generate tips.

Intimidating customers

Consciously intimidating customers taps into emotions that may feel dangerous to men, and thus adds to the power of the dancer. Holly, who you will recall usually wears black, nearly masculine outfits with a dominatrix-like flair, says that men like to be intimidated by a pretty woman. Some men find intimidation by a woman erotic. But since
Holly’s tips were lower than the other dancers who worked with her, I think that this bald exercise in power over customers may have mixed results.

Sparkle also intimidates her customers. She is six feet tall, and wears six-inch heels so that she appears even taller. She said:

Yeah, I think that I intimidate them. I’m like really tall. A lot of men are intimidated by that. I’m six feet, and then I always wear six-inch heels when I work. I’m taller than most of the guys who come in here. [laughs] So I just automatically assume that men are going to tip me, and if they don’t, then I come down [off the stage] and stand in front of them like I’m expecting something. [laughs] And usually they will tip me.

Both Sparkle and Holly consciously intimidate their customers, manipulating their customers’ emotions of fear, social anxiety, and unease around dominating and aggressive women as a unique interactional strategy. Other dancers manipulate more classic female emotional behaviors, as I will explore next.

**Pouting as a manipulative strategy**

Pouting is classically believed to be a behavior manifested by both little children, especially little girls, and women as a way to manipulate men, “to get their way.” And dancers utilize this belief as a way to manipulate customers. Belle, for example, pouts when customers are refusing to tip her or when there are no customers sitting at the stage. To get their attention, she will stomp her feet, purse her lips, and say with exaggerated feeling, “Oh, come on!”

Katie also pouts to get her way, as she says here:

I was an only child, so I was always used to getting a lot of attention. Pouting worked for me when I was a kid and it works for me now. If they don’t pay attention, I stomp my feet and throw a little fit.
Both Katie and Belle are exploiting men's emotions through a stylized rendition of classic manipulative female display of childish behavior. And to tie this back into the complexity of fantasy construction, because Katie and Belle are nearly nude or are dressed provocatively when they stomp their feet, purse their lips, and enact other childish behaviors, they are also tapping into the fantasies that many men have of being sexual with young girls.

In a sense, nearly all of what dancers do can be construed as manipulating emotions, either their own, or their customers'. This aspect of their work makes dancers seem like any other service worker. As is the case with other categories of service work, some people have concerns about what the continual faking and manipulation of emotions does to employees. I will talk briefly about this aspect of emotional labor next.

**Voicing concerns about workers' emotional authenticity**

Hochschild's (1983) classic work on emotional labor suggests that feelings are such an integral part of selfhood that the commercialization of emotions threatens individuals' emotional authenticity. Leidner (1993) voiced similar concerns. Hochschild maintains that one way to alleviate the potentially damaging effect of the commercialization of emotions is to give employees more control over their workplace expressions of emotions.

I think that my respondents had great control over their workplace expressions of emotions, much more than Hochschild's airline attendants, or Leidner's fast food workers or insurance salesmen had. A primary difference between my respondents and the workers that Hochschild and Leidner studied is that corporations whose eye is on profit were manipulating the emotions of their interviewees. My respondents were manipulating their own emotions
for their own interests, which gives them greater control over their workplace emotional performances than either Leidner’s or Hochschild’s respondents.

Chapkis’ respondents, who were sex workers in various fields, also had to create strategies by which to manage the potentially damaging effect of the commercialization of their emotions. They did this by drawing and maintaining strict boundaries around their selves. One of the most important ways that they did this was to create not just a fake name, but also an entire fake personae that they used when with clients (Chapkis 1997: 75-6).

All of my respondents used fake names as their stage names. And to a certain extent, they created stage personas as well. Lexus, for example, chose her name because of its association with an elegant, expensive, luxury car. She also dressed in elegant costumes that had gold fibers woven throughout. She walked with elegance and grace, and performed with a delicate flair. In reality, Lexus is about to leave her work as an exotic dancer and return to work in her family’s funeral parlor business. I am not saying that Lexus is not an elegant and graceful woman in real life, only that she has adopted and perhaps emphasized an elegant personae as a way to maintain the boundary between her exotic dancing identity and her real, more authentic, personal identity, as Chapkis, Leidner, and Hochschild maintain are important to do in order to protect emotional authenticity.

In this next section I will again use Leidner’s work. Here I will talk about how dancers manipulate another aspect of their selves and their customers’ selves that may be akin to emotion: their gender and their customers’ expectations about gender.
Capitalizing On Gender Expectations

I think I look good in pink. So I wear pink stuff a lot, and white. ‘Cause men like to think that you’re innocent, or at least pretend that you are.

—Belle

There are several aspects of gender that I saw dancers exploit to get men to tip them. This is one of the more interesting interactional strategies that dancers employ, and I would urge future researchers to delve deeper into this issue. Here I talk about how dancers manipulate their femininity, their subordination to men, and their customers’ masculinity to explore how dancers capitalize on gender expectations to make money.

Reifying dancer femininity

According to Leidner, organizations want to provide what customers like and what they consider to be normal, including what they expect about gender (1993). In the strip club environment, most men assume that the women will be feminine. Thus dancers capitalize on this expectation of their femininity, even to the point of appearing hyper-feminized. Dancers exploit this hyper-femininity, because, as Dallis (1997) notes, the performance of an exotic dancer is “an unapologetic display of the power of the feminine” (6).

Belle’s strategy of appearing hyper-feminine is a good example. She wanders around between sets seeking customers who want to purchase a private dance, telling them that she is shy in a stylized, demure manner. When invited to sit down, she is careful to keep her body language hyper-feminine. She keeps her knees together, and requests men to light her cigarettes for her. She tries to be femininely “sweet” to customers when talking to them. When taking tips from male customers, she gives them a whispered “thank you” in a breathy,
Marilyn Monroesque manner. Her choice of costumes also reflects her hyper-feminine style, as does her fluffy hairstyle. About her hyper-feminine personae, Belle said:

I think men like me because I’m a girl, you know, I act like a girl. They like to do little things for you, like, you know, light your cigarette or hold out chairs for you. They like it when you let them do that. When you act like you’re helpless without them. [laughs]

She is exploiting customers’ expectations that women be extremely feminine, incorporating elements of being demure, needing male protection, and being helpless to do such things as light her own cigarette.

Tylyr also chooses to appear hyper-feminine as her stage personae. When I asked her about her stage name, she told me that she chose it because the two “Ys” make her name sound “more feminine.” She also cultivates customers’ expectations of her as a demure, extremely feminine woman by inviting them to purchase her drinks and to light her cigarettes for her.

Some dancers take hyper-femininity to a further extreme and reify women’s subordination to men as an interactional strategy to get tips. Sasha provides the best example of this. She routinely calls her customers “gentlemen” both to their face and when she talked with me. She also calls them “sir” to their face, which reifies her status not only as a subordinate to her customers on the basis of her gender, but also subordinate to them because of her status as a service worker. However, Sasha is acting in a subservient manner to her customers, in a sense faking her subordination, not because she accepts this construction of her status, but as a tactic to get tips (Paules 1996).

Vanwesenbeeck (1997) maintains that “it is a postmodern feminist strategy to appropriate stereotypes of femininity and thereby take control over them” (178). She further
argues that it is a postmodern feminist strategy for women to take control of their objectification as sexual objects, and by doing so, transform themselves into active agents. This, of course, is what the dancers do when they wield traditional stereotypes of femininity and feminine status in order to extract money from their male customers, as Sasha, Belle and Tylyr did. Dancers also exploit notions of masculinity for financial gain, as I will next describe.

**Reinforcing customer masculinity**

I asked Lexus if she ever assured men of their masculinity, and she rolled her eyes and laughed:

Oh yeah! You got to make them feel secure about their masculinity. Tell them that you think that they’re attractive, comment on their looks, you know what I mean? Tell them they are good looking, just stuff like that.

Lexus is utilizing what Zita (1998) says is the unstable and fragile nature of dominant masculinity in order to get men to tip her. Men, she believes, need to be assured that they are masculine, and that their heterosexuality is assured (ibid.). She feels that she is assuring men of their masculinity, and Zita would say their heterosexuality, by being a beautiful woman who sits with them and acts like she is having a good time with them. She said that she acts out some of the classic feminine behaviors to assure men that they are real men:

Oh, you know, I laugh at their jokes. I practically fall out of my chair, you know what I mean? I laugh and tell them [in mockingly high, feminine voice] you are so funny! I mean, you just got to look like you’re having a good time.

On the face of this, it might appear like she is being submissive to her customer. But Paules’ work on waitresses (1996) notes that although they may exhibit a submissive or exaggeratedly interested manner towards a customer, they are doing this to manipulate the
customer into tipping (277). Thus Lexus is using a classic feminine move, assuring men of their masculinity by being exaggeratedly interested and feigning that they are extremely funny, in order to manipulate her customers into tipping her.

Dancers use other creative techniques to reinforce customers’ masculinity, including valorizing the cultural notion that men are innately jealous. Tylyr, for example, uses men’s sense of masculine jealousy to obtain private dances. Tylyr said:

I’ll say stuff like, if you’ll do this, then we can get to know each other better, one on one, in the private area, just talk. And we can get to know each other more. And that’s just what I say. And they get you to themselves for a whole song, you know. And they think that you’re just dancing with them and no one else, you know.

In a sense, men pay for a sense of ownership of her, even if that ownership is only for one song. Kristal employs a similar strategy. She tells her customers that they are purchasing a private dance, not a couch or lap dance, in order to emphasize that the men will get to dance with her alone and not have to share her attention with other customers.

Both the clubs in Iowa and Minnesota forbid the husbands or boyfriends of dancers from entering. Mich’e said that this is to make the male customers feel like they have exclusive rights to the dancers, and that they do not have to share them with men who have a more legitimate “claim” on them. So in a way, the club rules about forbidding boyfriends and husbands entry works to reinforce customers’ masculinity and sense of masculine entitlement to dancers. It further capitalizes on the notion that men are innately jealous. And though dancers may kid about the jealousy that their husband or boyfriend may exhibit, there does seem to be an undercurrent of anxiety that their man might punch a male customer who is touching “his woman.”
Valorizing customers’ masculinity by playing to the cultural idea that men experience sexual jealousy is yet another very creative interactional strategy that dancers use. In a sense dancers are tapping into a potential anxiety that customers may nurse about their masculinity. It seems to me to be a clever strategy and one that highlights the fact that dancers possess a great deal of personal power in the strip club environment.

**Conclusion**

*I’ll see men who come in here that weren’t blessed with good looks, and they’ll give me their last dollar. And their respect.*

—Sasha

The twelve women that you just met have a wide repertoire of interactional strategies that they call upon to generate tips from customers. They use stage performances, verbal communication, visual communication, fantasy construction, the manipulation of emotions, and the exploitation of normative gender expectations as ways to exert power and control over their customers’ tipping behaviors. After meeting these women and hearing their stories it is hard to imagine that they are passive pawns of the patriarchy, as feminist anti-pornography activists have constructed them. Nor are they social deviants, as the classic 1960s and 1970s deviance perspective viewed them. And finally, the exotic dancers that you met are not powerless and exploited because of their status as service workers. Instead, these twelve women are creative and energetic in constructing their work environment. They take charge of their relationships with their customers. The interactional strategies that they use to generate tips are but one way that they demonstrate their personal agency.

There is yet another way that exotic dancers use interactional strategies to control the relationship with their customers. Sometimes the creative strategies that I have outlined in
this chapter do not work on customers, and, despite these techniques, some customers exhibit non-compliant behavior. In the next chapter I will explore the methods dancers use to manage these non-compliant customers.
CHAPTER FIVE

MAKING THEM BEHAVE:
INTERACTIONAL STRATEGIES TO HANDLE
NON-COMPLIANT CUSTOMERS

One time this guy was with his two friends. And he was being really rude to me but his friends were nice to me. He said that my dance wasn’t worth a dollar or something stupid like that. So I said, I don’t give a rat’s ass what you think. Then when I turned around he flicked me off. So I walked right over to him and I hit him super hard and knocked him on the floor. And his friends thought that was pretty funny.

—Ashley

Although this chapter is about exotic dancers and not about their customers, the men who frequent strip clubs will be more present in this chapter than in preceding ones. Customers are more prominent in this chapter because here the customers are examined as problems with which dancers must contend. As you will see, customers exhibit an array of problem behaviors that range from being mildly annoying to dancers, to being extremely abusive of them. To maintain control of the relationship between themselves and their customers, dancers must use interactional strategies. But although some of the interactional strategies that dancers employ to manage problem customer behaviors are similar to the ones that they use to generate tips, other strategies are uniquely designed to control difficult customers. The fact that dancers have a separate set of interactional strategies designed to control problem customers aligns exotic dancers even more closely with Leidner’s fast food workers and insurance salesmen. The existence of these “problem customer strategies” illustrates and highlights dancers commonality with other types of interactive service workers.
Sometimes dancers have to go to rather extreme measures to control a customer’s behavior, as the dancer quoted in the epigraph above relates. But usually less extreme measures work to control customers who display non-compliant behavior. In this chapter, I will first talk about the kinds of behaviors customers may exhibit that dancers consider non-compliant. Following that will be descriptions of some of the interactional strategies that dancers employ in order to manage non-compliant customers. These descriptions paint a progression of strategies, from mild to severe, tailored to the severity of the problematic behavior that a customer exhibits. The picture that emerges brings into focus dancers who have come up with some ingenious tactics, the deployment of which work to maintain dancer agency in spite of the often-abusive treatment that the worst of the non-compliant customers bestow on exotic dancers.

Contending With Problem Customers

Some of them come in here and they try to test you and stuff. They do stuff that they know they’re not supposed to be doing. If you know that guy’s not supposed to be doing that, then it’s up to you to put a stop to it, do you know what I mean?

—Lexus

Customers exhibit a wide range of behaviors that cause problems for dancers. In this section I will discuss some of the most egregious problem behaviors that dancers described as being the most troubling for them. I also witnessed some of these problem behaviors while observing in the strip clubs. What makes these behaviors problematic for dancers is that the customers are being non-compliant: they are refusing to fit themselves into the pattern of behavior that dancers are attempting to proscribe for them. In a sense, these customers are refusing to play the role assigned to them when they first walked into the strip club.
Refusing to tip dancers

Refusing to tip a dancer is the most common problem behavior that dancers talked about. As I have mentioned before, all twelve of the dancers I interviewed relied on tips as their sole source of income, as none of the clubs I studied paid dancers a wage. Kerry illustrates how lack of wages paid to dancers translates into customer non-compliance:

Some men that come in here, they don’t know that we only work for tips. They seen those talk shows where girls say they make thousands and thousands and they think, hey, she doesn’t need my money. But I say, where are those girls? And where is that money? I’m just here to feed my kids. I’m here because I have a rotten ex-husband and mouths to feed. And tips is all that I make.

The reliance of dancers on tip income alone means that they are especially vulnerable to customers who refuse to tip. Dancers see the roles to be played in strip clubs as clearly delineated: dancers entertain audiences, and audiences pay them for the entertainment. It is a clear exchange relationship, just like the relationship that a fast food worker has with her customer. So when a customer refuses to tip, dancers see him as refusing to play his assigned role. He is being non-compliant and his behavior must be dealt with through a range of interactional strategies.

Inappropriately touching dancers

The second most common complaint that dancers made about problem customer behavior is customers trying to inappropriately touch them. Touching is regulated in strip clubs in several ways. There are legal restrictions that limit touching, and these differ from state to state, and even differ by municipality. Dancers and customers alike must know the laws, but both the police and club management usually charge the dancer with the ultimate
responsibility of maintaining legally appropriate touch boundaries. There are also club rules
that designate where dancers may be touched and by whom, and these also differ depending
on the club. But perhaps of most importance to this study because of its focus on the personal
agency of dancers, individual dancers express strong feelings about limits on touching.

Cinnamon commented:

> It’s Minnesota law that says, you know, that they can’t touch you, and he
[club owner] won’t let them touch you either. But sometimes they try to touch
you any way. They grab at your tits and I’ve had guys try to lick me. They
know they’re not supposed to, but they’re going to try. And I just hate it when
they do that. I just hate it.

Her comments illustrate that dancers feel that unwelcome touching is a violation of what she
called her “personal space.” Sometimes customers go beyond mere inappropriate touching
and do things that really scare dancers. Mich’e relates a harrowing experience that she had:

> I quit one place in Minneapolis because the customers scared me so bad. They
pulled me down from the stage once, and the security guards didn’t do
nothing. So that was scary. And it was right on Halloween, too. That was too
scary.

Mich’e’s story about customers not only touching her inappropriately, but actually seeming
to attack her by pulling her from the stage was not unique among my respondents, as you will
see. She has had more experience than most of the dancers I interviewed as she has worked
as a dancer for four years. Through her years of experience, she has come up with a complex
set of interactional strategies to encourage customers to adhere to limits on touching, and to
punish them when they violate those limits. In the incident related above, however, Mich’e
felt like there was no one and nothing protecting her, not even her interactional strategies.
There was no institutional support for her in that club, as she notes that no employee came to
her aid: not the bouncer, and certainly not the manager. She felt like her only solution was to quit at that particular club.

**Sexually harassing dancers**

Sexual harassment of dancers is another common complaint levied by my twelve respondents. Sexual harassment is defined as sexual attention that makes the work environment seem hostile to the employee (Giuffre and Williams 1994; Cockburn 1991). In the case of exotic dancers, two, or even three sources of sexual harassment abound. The first source, obviously, are customers. But if the job description for exotic dancers includes being sexually stimulating, and if a role of customers is to be sexually stimulated, then is sexual harassment taking place when a customer hoots and whistles at a dancer in a sexual manner? According to my respondents, yes. They complain about sexual harassment from customers with much the same words that the waitresses in Giuffre and Williams' study of eighteen waitresses use. For example, Ashley complained about customers sexually harassing her:

Yeah, like I hate it when they yell at me, like when I'm just walking to the bar to get a drink of water or something, you know? And then some guy will yell, 'hey baby, nice tits! Nice ass!' And I'm like, please. It's just like when guys yell at you on the street. Don't disrespect me like that. My name is Ashley.

She is describing a hostile work environment when she says that she cannot even walk to the bar to get a drink of water without having to fend off unwanted sexual attention from a customer. Cockburn (1991), who has written extensively about the pervasiveness of sexual harassment in work cultures and its effects on women workers, insists that men who pester women with unwanted sexual attention are attempting to exert power over them. She sees incidents such as that described by Ashley as ways men try to control a woman in order to
“diminish any sense of power she may be acquiring” (Cockburn 1991: 142.) This seems to be an especially salient analysis of what is happening to Ashley and to the other dancers who talked about sexual harassment because of how the relationships between dancers and customers are so heavily power-laden.

A second source of sexual harassment, and one that surprised me, is the same origin of sexual harassment nearly every working woman has encountered at some point of her work life: male bosses. Ashley talked about an ex-boss who sexually harassed not only her, but her co-workers as well:

I quit working at that place because the new manager tried to sleep with all the girls. He’d follow you around, come into the dressing room when you were changing, stuff like that. Once he followed me into the bathroom. And I said, ‘I’m not having this,’ and I quit. So then, he said, ‘you’ll never work in my club again.’ That is the only club that I ever had problems with, you know? And he still can’t keep dancers. They work a week and then they quit because he’s so, you know.

Ashley is describing a work environment that would be considered hostile by nearly every working woman. Of course, one thing that complicates the issue of sexual harassment in the strip club environment is that dancers are usually hired because of the attractiveness of their bodies (Cockburn 1991), which they are expected to display in sexually titillating ways. Although bosses, male bosses in particular, may also be affected by a dancer’s sexual attractiveness, she, like any other worker, has the legal right to work in an environment free from sexual harassment from her boss. Sexual harassment at work is, as feminist theory reminds us, not an expression of “men’s unbridled desire but of power” (ibid.: 141.)

A third source of sexual harassment that dancers must face is one that I did not expect to hear about at all: bouncers. In three of the four clubs I studied, bouncers maintained an
aggressive presence. At least one bouncer was always on duty, and on weekends and other busy nights there were as many as four. Bouncers’ status in the organizational hierarchy is parallel to that of dancers in the clubs that I studied, though the two bouncers that I interviewed in Iowa felt like they were supervisors as well as co-workers to the dancers. I think that the reason they felt like they were just above the dancers in status, even though the dancers made nearly ten times the money that bouncers made, is because the bouncers are considered to be regular employees. While bouncers get paid only six or seven dollars an hour, they also are permanent employees and thus are eligible for worker’s compensation, have taxes taken out of their paycheck, and have contributions made to their Social Security account by their employer. Dancers not only do not get an hourly wage, they are also not eligible for worker’s compensation or any other benefit, including the employer paying Social Security. Bouncers may feel that this difference translates into a power differential between themselves and dancers, and unfortunately, some of them apparently utilize that power differential to sexually harass dancers. Ashley talked about her experience with bouncers:

The place where I worked in Minneapolis had eight bouncers on all the time. They had really big bouncers. Some of them, you know, were really just guys off the street who want to have a job at a strip club because he wants to see naked girls, you know? That’s mainly what I see, these 19-year old boys who think they can get a job at a strip club just to see you naked. And that bothers me. Some of them are worse than the customers when they look at you.

Here, Ashley is noting that sexual harassment often comes from other strip club employees, and that it is not only the customers who can sexually harass dancers. Another important power differential that Ashley pinpointed is that the bouncers were physically large. These large men might have been even more intimidating to her because of their size. A man who is
physically intimidating and who is perceived to be sexually harassing would be a threat to most any woman worker, whether she is an exotic dancer or not.

Obviously there are multiple tensions around sexual harassment in the strip club, and dancers must creatively utilize interactional strategies to negotiate these tensions. Although Ashley talked about sexual harassment beyond what is committed by the customers, in this chapter I will mostly deal with how dancers handle problems with customer behaviors, and not problems with employers, bouncers, or other co-workers.

**Getting too drunk**

Many of the dancers also complained about customers getting drunk. In fact, they attribute a lot of non-compliant customer behavior to drunkenness, and thus tolerate it in varying degrees. Holly said:

A lot of these guys, they get so drunk, you know? And then they do things that I don’t like and that they’re not going to remember in the morning. Or they do remember and they think, oh god, did I really do that?

One of the ways that drunkenness is complicated is that clubs routinely advertise happy hours, two-for-one drink specials, or all-you-can-drink beer specials for a cheap price, as little as ten dollars. So when customers take advantage of these kinds of drink specials, and they get drunk and behave in drunkenly offensive ways, it is hard not to point the finger of blame on the club itself. Still, it is up to the dancers to be the first to handle drunken customers, even if they have to call later for assistance from bouncers or others in charge.
Pressuring for prostitution services

Almost all of the dancers found men’s incessant pressure for prostitution services to be the worst customer behavior that they had to manage. Dancers reported that at times this pressure felt like extreme sexual harassment. Indeed, the two types of behavior are markedly similar, both in men’s expectations about sex and in dancers’ reactions to sexual pressure.

Sasha explains how pressure to engage in prostitution feels to her:

That’s like the worst thing that can happen to me, when a man propositions me for prostitution. I can have a pretty decent day with my children, and then come in here and try to do my job and some jerk wants me to go home with him. And when a man does proposition me, it’s very hard to look at him and say, ‘no, I’m sorry, I’m not a prostitute.’ There’s not a night goes by that some man doesn’t proposition me. That just makes me sick. It really does.

Sasha is telling us here that it is upsetting to her for customers to assume that she is a prostitute just because she is a dancer. Most of the dancers I interviewed, including Sasha, made a point of telling me that they did not engage in prostitution. Most of them also said that they knew some of their co-workers did. Lexus explained:

Yeah, there’s a lot of [prostitution] in this industry. It...well, just when you get into making that good money and maybe get the opportunity to make that even better, well, a lot of girls think that, well, if I can go to this extreme, then I can go to another, you know?

The fact that some dancers do engage in prostitution makes it harder for those who choose not to because men’s stereotype about all dancers being prostitutes is reinforced every time one dancer does it.

The thorniness of the issue of prostitution in strip clubs was emphasized for me when I was trying to negotiate entry into the Iowa club by talking to the female owner, a former exotic dancer. I assured her that I would not ask about prostitution if she would allow me to
interview some of the dancers. Because police commonly use accusations of prostitution as tools to close down clubs, I assumed that promising to avoid the issue of prostitution would make it more likely that she would grant me access. To my surprise, she said to me, “You can’t talk about exotic dancing and not talk about prostitution.” And, as I discovered, she was right. Prostitution is intricately linked to exotic dancers in multiple ways: some dancers actually engage in prostitution; others must contend with customers’ assumption that all dancers will prostitute themselves; and dancers must negotiate the stigma of their perceived status as prostitutes. The issue of prostitution is sticky and complex, but dancers manage it through the use of a variety of creative interactional strategies, which I will describe in the next section.

Not all of the responsibility for the management of customer non-compliance falls to the dancer. Three of the four clubs that I studied had active and aggressive bouncers employed who managed such violations as under-age entry and under-age drinking. The bouncers also handled other violations, such as asking men to leave when they were acting too drunk, or throwing out customers who continually violated the no touch rule or violated rules against public masturbation. But the first line of responsibility for non-compliant customer behavior was in the hands of the dancers. As you will see, dancers utilize a wide range of interactional strategies to manage their problem customers’ behaviors, progressing from mild tactics to more severe actions. First line strategies include: talking to customers about their behaviors, relying on symbolism, reminding customers of other powers, teasing and embarrassing customers, and physically controlling them. When these tactics do not work, dancers have alternate strategies to fall back on: withdrawing attention from
customers, getting assistance from others, and finally, hitting customers. All of these are spirited and active interactional strategies that dancers can apply as needed to manage customers who get out of line. These strategies are what I will next turn to.

Talking to Customers

_I start out and just say, 'don't do that.' Because he's not supposed to, you know? And he knows that he's not supposed to._

—Lexus

As interactive service workers, exotic dancers ordinarily engage in a good deal of verbal communication with their customers. As you saw in the last chapter, many of the interactional strategies that dancers rely upon to generate tips are verbal in nature. It thus seems natural for dancers to also use talking to their customers as the first and mildest way to manage customers’ problem behavior. In this section I will describe two types, or perhaps, more explicitly, two levels of verbal communication that dancers utilize: “nicely” talking to customers, and yelling at them or talking back to them.

Nicely talking to customers

The first line of defense that dancers engage in when they need to manage a problem customer is talking to them. For example, if a customer touches her, Sasha simply asks him not to. In the Minnesota club where she works, customers are given three warnings not to touch the dancer before the manager throws the offender out of the club. Sasha explained what she does when a customer touches her:

I’ll ask him nicely. ‘Sir, please don’t touch me, it’s not your right.’ It really is NOT their right. When they think that...I’ve heard women say, ‘sir, please don’t touch me.’ And they’ll say it nicely. But then I’ve heard men say, [uses a sloppily drunk, masculine voice] ‘oh, you’re a stripper. I don’t care what
you think.’ And I say, ‘you know what? Whether you care what I think or not, I’m asking you nicely for you to not touch me. Do NOT touch me.’

Sasha’s comment demonstrates that although dancers politely and “nicely” ask men to not touch, men will resist. Some customers will continue to touch dancers, citing the fact that the dancer is a “stripper” as a rationalization for the normal restrictions about touching women to be moot. In such a case, as you will see later, sometimes dancers have to escalate their management of problem customers.

Kristal also begins her management of problem customers by talking to them nicely. She first asks customers to stop touching her or to stop whatever other non-compliant behavior they are exhibiting. She thinks that as a rule customers just need to be asked to stop their behavior because she thinks that they do not want to be thrown out. Kristal said that men want the service that she provides and that they only have to be reminded of the laws and the rules of the strip club that forbid touching and other behaviors.

Both Sasha and Kristal are at once accepting cultural norms of femininity and resisting them. A major cultural expectation of women is that they be “nice.” So Sasha and Kristal rely on their “niceness” as their first line of defense against non-compliant male behavior. But they are also engaging in an act of resistance against cultural norms of female behavior. To ask a customer not to touch them is to resist the cultural expectation that women are more congenial than men and that women are willing to do emotional labor for men (Chapkis 1997: 81). In this case, women are expected to blandly tolerate behavior from male customers, inappropriate touching, that would be considered abusive in most other social situations. So for these two dancers to tell customers not to touch them, politely or otherwise, is an act of resistance. In a sense they are subverting cultural norms about female
submissiveness when they manage problem customers by telling them to stop their behavior. Often, though, problem customers resist when dancers talk nicely to them. The next step up for dancers is to talk back to their customers, or even to yell at them.

Talking back to customers

A major problem for dancers, as described earlier, is the customer who refuses to tip. Often a customer will refuse to tip any dancer at all, or he may just single out a particular dancer and not tip her. In a way, customers use their tip as a way to exert power over a dancer, just like customers do in any other part of the service industry. Because traditional, gendered sources of power may be subverted in the strip club, with female dancers having more power than male customers, this aspect of tipping may be especially important to examine.

Some customers withhold their tips as a way to punish a dancer. Sasha related an experience that she had with customers who did this to her:

I’ve had customers tell me, ‘I’m not going to tip you a dollar because your boobs are too small. You need to get implants.’ And I’ll tell him, ‘well, I consider myself normal!’ [laughs]

Customers who say this to her are trying to punish Sasha for her refusal to have breast implants. They are projecting their expectation that she must have large breasts in order to be worthy of their money. She creatively handles this by talking back to them. Her remark, “I consider myself normal,” is one that Paules’ respondents would relate to. Paules’ (1991) work with waitresses illustrates that they assign blame to the customer if the customer refuses to tip. They do not take personal responsibility for such negative customer behavior. Waitresses, just like exotic dancers, feel like they have a right to be angry with non-tipping
customers. Clearly, Sasha felt the same way; instead of accepting blame for having small breasts and refusing to have implants, she projected blame onto her customers. By her saying that she felt like she was “normal”, her implication was clearly that she felt the customers were abnormal in their desires.

Kerry also exhibits anger at customers who refuse to tip. Like Sasha, she projects blame for the non-tipping onto the customers, and does not accept personal responsibility. She also talks back to customers by calling them “butthead”, “asshole”, “dickhead”, and other expletives. “Yeah, I’ll say, hey dickhead! Where’s my tip?”, she told me. Ashley, too, uses expletives to relate her anger to a non-tipping customer. To men who “expect that I’ll get naked for a buck, I just tell them to stick their dollar up their butt,” Ashley said.

Kerry also related an incident when she talked back to a customer. But instead of refusing to tip her, this problem customer called her a “whore.” And her reaction was immediate and angry, as she related to me:

This guy was the owner of Godfathers or some pizza place like that. Or so he said. And he came in here and said that he was going to buy pizza for us all. And after a while, there wasn’t no pizza coming. So we said to him, ‘hey, we’re hungry. Where’s that pizza?’ And so he gets back on the phone, real big shot, and he said, ‘hey, these whores are hungry.’ I got so mad! I just walked off. I mean, he didn’t know nothing about me. He doesn’t know me! And he knew I was mad and he said to me, ‘don’t you want some pizza?’ But I said, ‘hey you jerk, you don’t know nothing about me. You’re nothing but a asshole!’ And one of the other girls who works here, she said, ‘man, you got him!’ And I did, too.

Kerry, Ashley and Sasha are demonstrating their personal agency when they refuse to take responsibility for problem customers and instead project all of the blame onto the men who are being non-compliant. Their strategy is to verbally resist being degraded by
customers who exhibit non-compliant behavior. Another interactional strategy that dancers utilize to manage problem customer behavior is relying on symbolism, as I will next discuss.

**Relying on Symbolism**

There are several cultural symbols that dancers can call on to manage problem customers. Of course, this interactional strategy only works if the customer recognizes the value of the symbol and if he chooses to accept the importance of the symbolism. In this section I will talk about a variety of cultural symbols that dancers employ to handle customers who are non-compliant.

*Displaying another man’s mark*

An interesting way that a dancer can handle problem customers, especially customers who try to touch inappropriately or who pressure for prostitution, is to display the fact that she is marked by another man. Engagement and wedding rings are especially useful to use to exhibit the dancer’s status as being another man’s property and thus out of reach to customers. This strategy relies on the customer not only recognizing the symbol, but also recognizing its implications.

Tylyr used this strategy. She handles men who touch her inappropriately by flashing her boyfriend’s ring under the offending customer’s eyes:

I’ve had plenty of guys who will get drunk and try to touch me. And what are you supposed to say? I’m like, ‘don’t do that!’ I wear my ring that my boyfriend gave me right here. And I just do that [flashes it by waving her hand in a broad gesture]. And they’re like, ‘well, why do you dance if you have a boyfriend?’
Tylyr’s strategy relies on a few assumptions. First, the customer must recognize the ring as one that her boyfriend gave to her. She wears the ring on her left hand ring finger to aid in this recognition. Second, her strategy relies on men realizing that because she has a boyfriend, there is probably an expectation of monogamy between Tylyr and her boyfriend. Third, the customer must make the conceptual leap from the recognition of the ring, to the realization that the ring carries an expectation of monogamy, to the perception that his behavior violates that expectation.

In her narrative, Tylyr reveals a significant potential problem with men making the right assumptions based on her display of being marked. She says that this happens when men are drunk. Alcohol is widely known to cause problems with perception. Thus men whose perceptions are clouded by an excess of alcohol may not recognize the symbol itself, much less be able to make the appropriate assumptions and then stop their offensive behavior. Despite this unfortunate reality, however, another way that dancers manipulate cultural symbols to control offensive behavior is to remind customers that the customers themselves, are marked as another’s property. I will talk about this usage of cultural expectations and symbolism next.

**Reminding customer of his wife/girlfriend**

A dancer may use cultural expectations of monogamy both to demonstrate to customers that she belongs to another man and to remind offending customers that they, too, belong to another. Sasha, for example, appeals to men’s sense that their wife or girlfriend has a justifiable expectation of monogamy. She said:
Because they’re married and they come in here and approach a woman. You know, like it’s nothing. And I’ll look at them and I’ll say, ‘sir, does your wife know you’re in here propositioning me or another lady?’ It’s sad. It’s almost like you want to go running and tell her! [laughs] It’s really not like he’s just stopping by to get a gallon of milk! He’s in a strip club!

Sasha’s strategy relies on customers’ valuing their relationships with their wives or girlfriends. Some of her strategy might also count on men’s sense of guilt: this is seen in her last statement when she notes that an offending customer can not really feel like he is just stopping by to pick up milk before he goes home to his wife or girlfriend. She reminds the customer of his relationship in the hopes of shocking the offender into the kind of appropriate monogamous behavior that his wife or girlfriend expects.

**Reminding customer of gentlemanly virtues**

Sometimes reminding a problem customer of his gentlemanly virtues is using a cultural symbol that works to stop offensive behavior. Two of the dancers I talked with use this strategy with success. For example, Sasha said that many men feel uncomfortable when they see a young woman who is their daughter’s age dancing topless or even nude. And she uses this to her advantage:

> I’ve seen men come in here that see the young girls dancing and they feel a little guilty because they’re so young. Almost like, ‘omigod she could be my daughter. That looks like my daughter.’ And so I tell them, ‘well, don’t you disrespect her, then. And don’t you disrespect any of the ladies here, because they’re all somebody’s daughter.’

Sasha’s strategy relies on customers not wanting to be seen as disrespectful to a lady, especially if that lady resembles their daughter. It seems to me that Sasha’s reminder to customers that all of the dancers are “somebody’s daughter” is an especially creative symbol
to use to make men feel guilty about their disrespectful treatment of exotic dancers, and thus more liable to stop their offensive behavior.

Cinnamon also reminds customers of gentlemanly values as her interactional strategy to control problem behavior. One of her first lines of defense against a customer who is doing something she finds distasteful, for example sexually harassing her, is to talk to him in an exaggeratedly feminine way: “Oh, I say real sweet, I say, ‘please sir, please be a gentleman. Please respect me as a lady.’ ”

Cinnamon’s and Sasha’s strategies have two important effects. First, to remind customers of their gentlemanly virtues helps not only to maintain customer dignity (Spradley and Mann 1975: 113), but also to maintain customer masculinity. This then salvages the possibility that the customer will not only modify his non-compliant behavior, but it increases the likelihood that he will even tip the dancer.

_Telling customers that she’s a lesbian_

One dancer told me about a strategy that she uses with problem customers that she learned from a couple of her co-workers at another club. Ashley often tells customers who are either pressuring her for prostitution or otherwise sexually harassing her that she’s a lesbian and therefore not sexually interested in men. This works to her advantage in a few important ways.

You will recall that several dancers in the previous chapter talked about how they manipulate men’s fantasy about two women being sexual with each other as an interactional strategy to generate tips. According to the dancers I talked with, this is a common male sexual fantasy. For Ashley to tell men that she is a lesbian, then, plays to this fantasy while at
the same time symbolically telling the men to stop pressuring her for sex since lesbians are not interested in men. This tactic relies on two significant cultural assumptions about lesbians: they are not sexually interested in men and they are sexually interested in women. In fact, there is a pervasive stereotype exploited in pornography, portraying lesbians as hyper-sexual. Many strip club patrons are undoubtedly affected by this stereotype. Thus a dancer who proclaims her lesbianism as a tactic to control problem behavior is assuring her customer that she is still a very sexual creature, and therefore the customer is being masculine in responding to her. But at the same time, she is symbolically removing herself as an object that he can sexually conquer.

This strategy unfortunately can backfire. Morgan, a lesbian exotic dancer (1998) often tells her problem customers that she is lesbian. She said that though some customers are chagrined and stop their non-compliant behavior, others are even more titillated by her revelation and just escalate their problem behavior. Still, when a dancer declares that she is a lesbian, whether she is in reality or whether she is using this as a creative strategy to handle a problem customer, she is publicly proclaiming her own sexual agency.

At times, though, using cultural symbols does not work in getting men to stop their offensive behavior. In these cases, dancers must move to the next level in their range of interactional strategies. A strategy that my respondents told me about to handle problem customers is reminding men of other power, both inside the club, and outside. This is what I will talk about next.
Reminding Customers of Other Powers

I just like point at [the bouncer] and tell the guy, ‘if you don’t stop it he’s going to see you.’

And the guy we had working then was really big.

—Belle

Besides the dancers, there are multiple power structures that govern what happens inside the strip club. Power structures include club management, the presence of physically imposing bouncers, and legal codes. Exotic dancers are creative in exploiting these power systems when necessary to manage customers who are being non-compliant about tipping, touching, harassing, or pressuring for prostitution services. Here I will explore how dancers exploit the presence of two of these power structures: bouncers and the legal code.

Reminding customer of the power of the law

Perhaps Lexus’ strategy of reminding offending customers of the legal code is the most straightforward. When a customer is doing some sort of behavior that is breaking the law, like touching her inappropriately, she literally will point him to the letter of the law. On the wall just as customers enter the Iowa club where Lexus works hangs a laminated photocopy of the state and municipal codes governing exotic dancers. Everyone who enters the bar must pass this sign. It hangs in the foyer of the club, located conveniently at eye-level. It is also positioned immediately in front of the imposing metal detector that customers must pass through in order to enter the club. Patrons simply cannot miss seeing this sign. But just in case a customer misses it, Lexus points it out to him:

The first time he tries to test me I just point to the sign. I say, ‘hey, didn’t you see that sign when you come in here?’ Because you know, dancers, we’re taking the risk of getting ourself in trouble. You got to take responsibility of telling them, ‘hey, you’re not supposed to do that.’
Lexus is using the power of the law to protect herself. I find this an interesting strategy.

From my interview with the police officer in charge of monitoring activities in the Iowa town where Lexus works, it is apparent that the police are anxious to shut down all strip clubs in the area. One of the ways the police officers work towards this goal is to try to bust individual dancers for prostitution by having undercover cops enter the clubs and pressure dancers for prostitution. Lexus talked about police presence in the club:

Oh, I recognize cops right away. They always ask the same silly-ass stupid questions. That tips me off. Oh, they’ll come in here and they’re like, ‘oh, how much do I pay for some sex?’ You know? How much do I have to pay for some sex? [laughs] They just, they be blunt about it! So you might as well walk in here and say, ‘hi, I’m an officer!’ [laughs] In Iowa, they just work these places because they don’t want these kinds of places here, you know? They want to shut us down.

According to the two bouncers that I interviewed at the same club where Lexus works, uniformed police also enter the club several times a night on busy weekend nights, and occasionally during the week as well. Lexus, and the two bouncers that I interviewed, echoed the opinions of the officer that I interviewed: the law is hostile to exotic dancers and the police are out to shut down strip clubs in Iowa. So for Lexus to remind wayward customers about the law as a way to manage offensive customer behavior seems to be an interesting and complex strategy. I think that she may be twisting the law to suit her own ends by subverting a legal code aimed at putting her out of a job in order to get her customer to behave himself.

**Reminding customers of the power of the bouncers**

Two of the dancers I talked with used a strategy of reminding customers of the presence of the bouncers in order to manage customers who were getting out of line.

Bouncers in strip clubs tend to be physically imposing, hulking men. Many of them sport
I saw several Harley Davidson logos, dragons, and a howling wolf tattooed on bouncers’ bodies— all ultra masculine icons. Most of the bouncers I observed also had bushy beards and wore blue jeans or other work clothes. In Iowa, the two bouncers that I interviewed routinely carried black metal police-style flashlights, the kind that are nearly two feet long and weigh several pounds. They deliberately manipulate their flashlights in ways that are designed to be threatening: bouncing it in their hands, flashing it in customers’ faces as they enter the club, and holstering it as one would a gun. The result is that bouncers appear intimidating and hyper-masculine. But bouncers have institutional power, as well. They scan customers’ IDs when they enter, and usually take the cover charge from the customer. In Iowa, they make customers remove keys and other metal objects and require customers to pass through a metal detector. They have the power to refuse entrance to anyone, and they have the power to throw anyone out. Sasha talked about bouncers in a club where she used to work:

I’ve worked in clubs where these bouncers... I don’t know about you, but you get intimidated! You see a guy that’s five times bigger than you! They get paid to stand around and look mean. And when they make the customers stand still to get searched for guns and knives, well, everyone pays attention to that!

Thus bouncers have a very real, institutional power, as well as informal, perceived power. I think that dancers are exploiting this power when they remind customers of the bouncers. In essence, what they are doing is reminding men of other men’s power.

Among the dancers I interviewed, Sparkle’s strategy of reminding customers of the power of the bouncers was the most creative. Sparkle, you will remember from the last chapter, specializes in lying to her customers as her strategy to establish a common bond and thus to generate tips. She also uses lying to her customers to control their problem behavior:
Sometimes you lie to the guy. Sometimes, you know. Like you’ll be like, [soft and sensual, lowered voice] ‘oh I wish you could touch me, but if the bouncer sees you’ll be in trouble.’ You know? You pretend that you really want them to. So that way they don’t get mad. And then usually if he’s told that, you know, ‘oh I wish you could but I just can’t let you,’ then usually they don’t try. Because then they realize that it is the rule and it’s not that you’re being, you know.

Her strategy works in three ways. She reifies her customer’s masculinity by assuring him that she really wants to be touched by him and that it is not her decision to stop him. She reinforces the rules against touching. And her strategy also shifts the responsibility for rule enforcement away from herself and onto another, more powerful man. This makes her strategy all the more creative.

Just like other interactional strategies, though, Sparkle’s tactic relies on men’s recognition of other men’s power. It also relies on customers’ realization of their own place in the status hierarchy of the strip club (Spradley and Mann 1975: 68-9). When Sparkle’s strategy fails to stop men’s non-complaint behavior, it is probably because the customer fails to recognize his place in the club hierarchy. Or he may refute the institutional and perceived power of the bouncers. In any case, he is most likely to have to face the bouncer and possibly be ejected from the club.

The hierarchy of the strip club is supported by both the dancers and the bouncers, as well as by the men who are compliant about their position in the hierarchy. In this next section, I will explore how dancers use teasing and joking with their customers as a way to resolve tensions surrounding the hierarchy in the strip club.
Teasing and Embarrassing Customers

And so a lot of them will ask, hey, ‘will you have sex with me for money?’ And you’re saying, ‘no, I’m sorry, I don’t do that.’ And then sometimes they’re like, ‘are you sure?’ And I go, ‘wait. Let me think about that. Am I sure? Hmmm...am I sure...Let me think about that again...Hmmm...I just said no, didn’t I? Did I say yes? Because maybe I forgot that I said yes.’

—Cinnamon

Joking and teasing with customers is an exhibition of dancer power, as described in the last chapter. Joking relationships also manage the tensions between people with different statuses (Spradley and Mann 1975). Although dancers routinely tease customers as part of an interactional strategy to generate tips, they often carry the teasing to a more intense level to control customers who are being non-compliant. In this section, I will first talk about how dancers may tease customers into compliance. Following that I will talk about how some dancers carry teasing to an extreme, and deliberately manipulate their problem customers into feelings of embarrassment.

Teasing customers

Kerry uses teasing to her advantage, especially if she is teasing a customer who refuses to tip her. She related a humorous incident where her teasing of a customer worked especially well:

One guy said to me, ‘I don’t tip the girls, but I will take you to dinner.’ And I said to him, ‘hey! do you see a sign on my back that says “will work for food?” Cause if it’s there, I don’t see it!’ And he said that he didn’t see it and then he laughed and said I was pretty funny and he tipped me after that. I think it made him think.

Kerry’s tactic effectively turned a self-identified non-tipper into an appreciative customer who began to comply with dancer expectations of tipping. Kerry used teasing as a way to needle him into compliance.
Cinnamon also teases customers as a first line of defense against problem customers. She told me about an incident when an elderly customer continued to pressure her for prostitution services. “I told him that I was too good, that I’d kill him if I had sex with him,” she laughed.

Katie, true to her fun-loving nature, uses joking and teasing her customers as her primary defense tactic against all kinds of problem behaviors. When a customer touches her inappropriately, she says really loudly to the offender: “Uh uh! You can’t do that, buddy! They’re going to arrest you and haul you to jail!” This tactic not only reminds customers of the legal boundaries, it also reminds customers that others in the club are watching him: bouncers, club management, and perhaps most importantly, undercover and uniformed police officers. But Katie said that this strategy has an added benefit. She said that her teasing makes customers feel like naughty little boys, and that they start to behave just as if they had been yelled at by their mother. Katie also teases her customers into feelings of embarrassment, as I will talk about next.

**Embarrassing customers**

Katie is simply ruthless when a customer does not behave himself around her. She teases him without mercy, usually resulting in his embarrassment. But she does this in such a way that it would be difficult for a customer to become angry because she is obviously having so much fun with him, albeit at his expense. One way she embarrasses customers who try to touch her inappropriately or who pressure her for prostitution is by yelling from the stage or from the table where she is sitting with the customer. Katie explains:
So you know, when they get too pushy or something, like there’s always some guy who wants to take me home. So I’ll stand up and say real loud, ‘uh oh! Somebody’s got a crush on the dancer!’ [said in a mocking, sing-song tone, with ‘dancer’ drawn out] And just, you know, then he’s like ‘Oh! Everyone knows I’m doing that!’ And then he leaves me alone. And it doesn’t hurt anyone else’s feelings, and then I don’t have to get the bouncer in on it, you know. I just embarrass them. It’s easier than saying, you know, ‘that’s it! You’re out of this place!’ That’s not fun for anyone.

An added benefit of this strategy, according to Katie, is that it often instigates peer pressure. If a man is in the club with friends, his companions will often take over teasing him for Katie, jeering at him, thus making him even more chagrined, and hopefully, more well-behaved. Minkowitz (1998) notes that men often tease and torment each other as a way to continually test each others’ masculinity. This, she says, is one of the more unfortunate elements of male domination. Katie’s strategy of getting other men to tease an offender into compliance thus taps into the forces of male domination.

Cinnamon also embarrasses customers as a way to control their offensive behavior. If a customer tries to talk “dirty” to her, for example, she laughs at him. Being laughed at, she said, usually makes a man behave, though it often makes him leave.

Teasing and embarrassing customers is a good way to handle non-compliant customer behavior, as the dancers’ stories illustrate. This strategy helps to manage the tension between dancers and customers, and also works to bring customer behavior in line with dancers’ expectations. Physically controlling customers, especially their hands, is another tactic that dancers use, and one that I will next discuss.
Controlling Customers’ Hands

I always make them sit on their hands when I’m doing a couch dance. That’s just my policy. Otherwise they’ll touch you. They always try to touch you unless you stop it beforehand.

—Belle

Nearly all of the dancers complained about customers trying to touch them in inappropriate ways. Because this is such a problem, they have created unique methods of controlling customers’ hands. In this section I will talk about two aspects of the physical control of customers’ hands: dancers controlling customers’ hands and customers controlling their own hands as instructed by the dancers.

Dancers controlling customers’ hands

Few things that happen to Kerry bother her more than a customer inappropriately touching her. She usually lets men tip her by slipping their bill into the side or front of her G-string. Every night, though, at least one man tries to slip his hand in further. She complained to me:

There’s always a complete asshole in here. They don’t respect you or what you’re doing for a living. They push the limits. They try to push their finger inside into me.

She manages this offensive behavior by firming placing her hand just above her pubic bone so that when a customer tips, he is unable to push his hand further than she will allow. Still, the occasional customer will persist and will push past her hand:

Still! Some guys will ram their hand past mine and jam their hand up me! Just like that! Wham! I can’t believe it.

For this offense, Kerry will have him thrown out. Before she does that, though, she often hits the offender, as I will talk about more in the final section.
Katie also physically controls customers’ hands when they try to touch her inappropriately. When doing a lap dance, she routinely kneels on her customer’s hands so that he cannot touch her. That way, she explains, he won’t be tempted to touch her. Katie explains her reasoning:

This is where I come from. If a guy’s drunk, it’s just natural. If there’s a girl on top of him, he’s going to grab a hold of her! So I’ll just hold their hands down, or I’ll put my knees on their hands so they can’t grab me.

Of course, Katie, so fun loving and congenial, accomplishes this with a teasingly playful attitude. Customers, she said, can rarely resist her friendliness and thus she seldom has a problem with a customer becoming angry when she controls his hands in this way.

Katie seems to have a great deal of compassion for her male customers, reflected in her statement above that a man’s desire to touch the woman gyrating on him is just “natural”, especially if he is drunk. She exhibits more of her compassionate side:

I usually just play with them, you know, so I probably get touched less than anybody else. But sometimes they’ll try to grab you, so I just grab them back, you know, sort of hold their hand. They just want to know what you feel like. So I’ll let him hold my hand, and then he won’t try to touch me in a bad way.

She rationalizes that men try to touch her only because they want to know what she feels like. Still, for all of her fun-loving, friendly and compassionate demeanor, there comes a point at which even Katie breaks and strikes back at offenders, as you will see later.

Customers controlling their own hands

Sometimes dancers will instruct problem customers to control their own hands. For example, they will instruct customers who are attempting to touch to sit on their hands, as
Sparkle describes: “You have to catch them before they really touch you and then you tell
them not to. And if they do, then you tell them to sit on their hands.”

Katie, ever the entertainer, enacted one of the most fun ways of making problem
customers control their hands one night when I was observing the activity at the Iowa club.
There were four men sitting near the stage and she had climbed down from the stage and was
doing a table dance for them. At first only one man was reaching out to try to touch her, but
then another one did it. Without losing a beat, she hollered, “freeze, suckers!” and stuck her
hand out like it held a gun. Amazingly, all four men raised their hands over their heads as if
they were being placed under arrest. At the time, I was sitting at the bar beside one of the
bouncers. Even he was amazed, and he chuckled about it to me. The next evening I got to
talk to Katie about this:

It’s amazing what guys will do if you tell them to. But like last night, those
guys were still having fun, you know? I was like, ‘freeze, sucker!’, and they
were all like, ‘okay!’ It was just crazy. It was a good time.

Katie’s and Sparkle’s strategies of making customers control their own hands has
important implications. For one thing, since they are only giving instructions to customers,
and not physically controlling customers’ hands, it appears that the dancers are giving
control over customers’ hands back to the customers. This hands customers the obligation to
act like responsible adults and to obey the law, club rules, and to respect the personal
boundaries that the dancer enforces about her own body.

Sometimes, though, joking with customers, and controlling their hands is not enough. An
escalation in the dancer’s strategy of control is necessary. For many dancers, the next step is to
withdraw attention from the customer who is being problematic. This is what I will talk about next.
Withdrawing Attention

Once you’ve crossed that boundary with me, you know? Then I’m not going to pay any attention to you. I will just give you your dollar back. I’ll say, 'hey, I don’t want your dollar.' And then I won’t look at them again. Even if he waves a fifty dollar bill at me, I don’t see it.

—Ashley

Withdrawing attention from a non-compliant customer or refusing to acknowledge his rude behavior is a powerful tool that dancers can wield when necessary. Because customers have to pay a cover charge to even enter the club, they have invested money just in being present. For a dancer to refuse to pay attention to a customer who paid to be in the club is an exhibition of her power. In this section I will chiefly talk about two ways that dancers withdraw their focus from customers when these customers exhibit non-compliant behavior: ignoring customers and their rude behavior, and refusing to perform at all.

Ignoring rude behavior

Before examining how dancers ignore rude behavior, it will be helpful to first take a look at research on how other service workers respond to rude and abusive customers. Leidner (1993) talked with her service worker respondents about the gender implications of how they handled abusive customers. McDonald’s interviewees thought that women took abuse from customers easier than men were able to, and that women were better able to simply ignore rudeness and to not be bothered by it. Interestingly, from a gender standpoint, is that Leidner’s male McDonald’s respondents thought that it would be an affront to their masculinity to ignore the kind of abuse from customers in the way that female employees were expected to do. But the gender implications about ignoring abusive customers are more complex than this, because, Leidner’s male respondents who were insurance salesmen
thought differently. The insurance salesmen believed that the kind of abuse that customers leveled against them was so bad that women would not be able to handle the stress at all. Clearly, then, perceptions about who handles abusive customers better are wrapped up in gender dynamics and affected by the kind of work that the workers do. But these differing perceptions are also related, I believe, to the work culture in which workers toil. Combined Insurance, where the male sales people maintained that women would be unable to handle the stress from abusive customers, worked hard to assure corporate employees of their masculinity. Thus the work culture valorized ignoring abuse as a valued masculine trait.

Fun-loving Katie, the dancer who says she can be “broke down on the side of the road” and still be having fun, was the dancer most able to ignore customer behavior that she considered abusive. She simply does not let the behavior bother her. Katie said:

I probably get grabbed the least of any one. Because I can deal with it. Or maybe I get grabbed and another girl would be irritated at the guy. But I’m not. I just ignore it.

Katie’s strategy of just ignoring abusive behavior is a strategy that McDonald’s employees would probably be expected to follow. It is clearly in the corporation’s interest to require that their employees refrain from offending customers. Ignoring abusive behavior is much less likely to offend customers than is staging a strong or even violent reaction to the abusive behavior. Whether it is in Katie’s psychological and emotional interest to accept abusive behavior, or to ignore it, is unclear. What is clear, though, is that at some point, even fun-loving, easy-going Katie quits ignoring abusive behavior and she strikes back. We will look into this later, after examining other instances of dancers ignoring rude behavior.
Issues not faced by most of the other dancers I interviewed impact Lexus’ strategies for ignoring rude behavior. Lexus, you will recall, is African American. I asked her if customers ever treated her differently from white dancers, if she had ever experienced racism. Lexus replied:

Oh yeah. I mean, just like, it depends on where you’re at. Now, in Iowa, yeah, I would say there is racism towards me. Because a lot of guys that come in here are looking for the little perfect Barbie, pretty blonde hair, blue eyes, that sort of thing. But I don’t really let it get to me, you know? I just let it roll off. When I get up there, I just make myself feel good about myself. I don’t complain about the money I make. I’m making a lot more than a lot of others, even white women. So I... I just relax. I take a deep breath and do what I’m here to do.

Lexus ignores customers who are exhibiting racist forms of non-compliant behavior. The most common problem with racism or ethnocentrism, according to both Lexus and Holly, who originates from Singapore, is customers who refuse to tip them, or even to watch them, because of their race and ethnicity.

Racist behavior was especially apparent when Holly performed. One evening when I was observing at one of the Wisconsin clubs, there were nearly a dozen men watching a blonde dancer perform just before Holly’s set. The men were tipping the blonde dancer (who had obviously dyed her hair, by the way) and all of them seemed to be fully engaged with her. But when Holly came on after her, almost all of the men left the stage and moved to other places in the bar. Some played video games, some played pool. A few went to the bar and ordered more drinks, and others sat at tables far from the stage and just talked. There was such a mass exodus of customers away from the stage that within five minutes only one older white man was sitting at the stage.
At first I did not want to believe that racism or ethnocentrism was at work. But when the next dancer, a white, relatively non-attractive brown haired woman took the stage, and the customers moved back to the stage and began tipping her, my suspicions were unfortunately confirmed. When I talked with Holly about this incident, though, she denied its significance: “I don’t let them get to me. I don’t think it is important enough to do anything about. I’m just here to do my job. Whether they like me or not does not matter to me.”

Holly’s interactional strategy was not only to ignore these customers, but to act like she had not even noticed that they were no longer there. On another night, there was no one at the stage at all when she performed. So Holly performed for herself. She sang to herself, she smiled and acted like she was thoroughly enjoying her own performance. I think that her strategy is to ignore such incidents not only to get through the night, but also just to get through her life. She clearly wants to invest her energies elsewhere besides reacting strongly to incidents of racism and ethnocentrism. And besides, these events are such subtle acts of racism, what other options or strategies would be available in such situations? To do other than Holly did would be to confront deeply ingrained institutions, perhaps unleashing extremely negative consequences for Holly that might outweigh any benefits she might accrue. If she, or Lexus, confronted the racism and ethnocentrism directly, the consequences could have been dire: being fired, being ostracized by other dancers, and/or being treated even more rudely by customers. Holly and Lexus both chose the path of least resistance in choosing to ignore the behavior. Perhaps this is not the best long-term strategy, but it is one that worked for these two dancers at the moment.
Both Lexus’s and Holly’s experiences with racism and ethnocentrism were echoed by Chapkis’ respondents in their assertions that racism is a pervasive and problematic issue within the sex industry (1997: 105). Alexander (1998), who has written a history of sex work in the United States, notes that racism is a continuing problem. Most clubs that feature exotic dancing, she says, refuse to hire African American women or hire only those dancers who adopt “white” appearances (206). I believe that this need to appear more “white” is the reason that Lexus has straightened her hair and the reason why she chooses to wear it in a long and flowing style.

When ignoring customers is not enough to control problem behaviors, sometimes dancers have to make it even more obvious that they are withdrawing their attention from non-compliant customers. The next logical step for dancers is to just refuse to perform, as we will next explore.

Refusing to perform

When customers are being really rude, are refusing to tip, or otherwise exhibiting non-compliant behavior; one of the ultimate dancer weapons is to refuse to perform. Kerry said that she uses this tactic when customers are refusing to tip:

They gotta tip to get anything from me. I mean, I won’t even dance if nobody’s tipping. I will just leave. I’ll just walk off the stage. I’m only working for tips, you know, not because I like to show off my butt.

She simply will not dance if no one is tipping her. She not only leaves the stage, but she also threatens to leave the club and go home unless tips start flowing. She said that usually her threat to leave is enough to stimulate tipping, but that occasionally she has had to make good on her threat and actually leave the club.
Belle also uses this strategy. If no one is tipping, or worse still, if no one is at the stage to watch her perform, she said:

I make a big deal about it. I say, ‘I’m going to put my clothes back on and march out of here if you’re not tipping me. Cause I’ve got babies at home who will pay attention to me.’ So that’s what I say.

These dancers’ strategies of threatening to leave the stage, or even the club, are usually effective for stimulating tipping or otherwise shocking men out of their non-compliant behavior. Some dancers, however, choose another interactional strategy that involves taking leave. We will explore this form of leaving next.

**Psychologically leaving the scene**

Two dancers talked about psychologically leaving the strip club as a way that they handle difficulties with customers. Mich’e, for example, used this strategy when she is doing a private dance for an undesirable customer:

Like if they’re really old, or gross or something, then I just close my eyes. I pretend that I’m at the [dance] club and I’m dancing with my friends.

Mich’e psychologically exits from the site that is causing her difficulty, in this case older men or men who she thinks are “gross.” Many dancers refuse to do private dances for such undesirable customers, but Mich’e has found a way to do the dances, and thus make money.

Ashley also uses this strategy. When faced with undesirable customers, or when men are being mildly abusive to her, she said that she mentally transforms the scene. Instead of dancing topless in a strip club, she pretends that she is dancing in a play on Broadway and that the men are clapping, not throwing wadded bills at her.

This psychological strategy of leaving the scene has the effect of returning personal agency to the dancer. I think that this strategy is a way that dancers can say to their non-
compliant customers, “I may be here physically, but I am not here psychologically.” This returns a sense of control over their environment to dancers. Sometimes customers act so offensively that dancers are unable to control them. In such cases, often another party in the strip club must be enlisted to intervene. This is what I will next discuss.

**Enlisting the Aid of Others**

Guys come here in groups, you know? And there’s usually only one bad guy. I’ve seen it where his friends will tell him, ‘oh quit ragging on her’ and he’ll stop.

—Ashley

Getting help from others in the strip club when a customer is being non-compliant is an escalation of a dancer’s strategy for control over offensive customers. In this section I will talk about three different sources from which a dancer can enlist aid: other dancers, bouncers, and surprisingly, other customers.

**Dancers helping out**

Dancers routinely help each other out when there is a troublesome customer in the club. Sasha, in particular has had to rely on other dancers for assistance:

Yeah, I’ve had girls to help me out. And I respect them for that because if I see somebody, you know, like if I was out on the street and I saw somebody being treated with disrespect, I should help that person. And the other girls know that I’ll help them out, too, if they need me.

In the Minnesota club where Sasha currently works, there are no bouncers. The person who takes the cover charge and greets customers as they enter is not the hulking, imposing, scary bouncer that monitors the entrance at the Iowa and Wisconsin clubs. Instead, she is an elderly woman, silver-haired, frail, and grandmotherly in appearance. I doubt that she would be any help to a dancer experiencing real trouble with a problem customer, and the dancers that I
talked with agreed. According to Sasha, the male owner of the club rarely makes an appearance. Thus Sasha and her co-workers have to rely on each other for assistance, should the need arise.

Belle also relies on other dancers for assistance with problem customers. Even though there is at least one bouncer on duty most of the time in the club where she works, she said that dancers help each other out. They do this by telling each other which customers are being troublesome. Dancers who follow another dancer’s performance can then avoid the problem customer, often by totally ignoring him thanks to the advice given to her by her co-worker.

Most of the dancers I interviewed tend to view other dancers as co-workers and allies, rather than as competition. Only one dancer, Kerry, seemed to view her co-workers in a competitive way. My observations thus contrast with those of both Paules (1991, 1996) and Spradley and Mann (1975). Both of these studies researched waitresses and both found them to be competitive and even territorial. Although some dancers that I interviewed told horror stories about cutthroat co-workers, in general they seemed to genuinely like and to respect each other. For example, Lexus described a reason why she likes being an exotic dancer:

I mean, this is the place where you get to meet a lot of interesting, beautiful women, you know? It’s a great place, but you got to stay open minded about it. You meet a lot of great women and you have a lot of fun with them. I’ve met a lot of friends working in this industry.

Lexus is describing a work environment where she not only has friendly co-workers, but she also has friends that she can count on to help her out should she ever experience difficulty with a customer’s behavior.
In the club where Lexus works, dancers can also count on bouncers to come to their assistance. This is what I will talk about next.

**Bouncers helping out**

As I discussed before, bouncers maintain an active and aggressive presence in most clubs that feature exotic dancing. But as I also mentioned, some dancers feel like bouncers are actually a threat to dancers; you will recall the dancer who feels that bouncers have sexually harassed her. I think that a bouncer’s personality is the key to whether he will be helpful or harmful to a dancer when she is experiencing a problem with a customer. Of course, in an ideal world, management would only hire bouncers who can be counted on to assist dancers. Still, for those dancers who said that they appreciate the bouncers’ presence, having bouncers around made them feel safer.

Tylsr, for example, likes having bouncers in the club. She feels that the bouncers who work at the club where she does are constantly watching customers and actually prevent most problems from happening in the first place. To get help from bouncers, she said, all she has to do is to signal them and they are immediately at her side. She has also told bouncers of an incident after it occurred, and the bouncer has ejected a customer based on what she told him.

Sparkle also has relied on a bouncer to help her out with a non-compliant customer:

There are times I have had guys thrown out. Just last night I was back here doing a private dance and the guy like tried to...poke me...like in my zone. He was trying to touch me there. I just got up and told [one of the bouncers]. He...because like, I get paid before I do the dance. So he had already given me my twenty dollars and I only had a G-string on and he tried to touch me there. So I just got up in the middle of the song. And I had him kicked out. [The bouncer] made him leave.
Sparkle works in a club where the bouncers are especially vigilant and willing to uphold both the law and dancers’ sensibilities.

In one of the clubs in Wisconsin, I witnessed a couple of men being ejected from the club by the bouncers. On that Saturday evening it was amateur night, and I was there very late. The club was packed with customers; maybe it was packed because it was amateur night, but more likely I think that it was packed because of an all-night two-for-one drink special. Many men were very drunk. At the table next to me, a man passed out in his chair and his head hit the table with a soft thud. Within seconds a bouncer appeared on each side of him. They talked to him and then they each took one of his arms and dragged him to the door. Even though he was being thrown out, one of the bouncers told him to “come back another night” and gave him a friendly pat on the back. Thus the bouncers in that club, at least, could be counted on to eject customers when the customers exhibited drunken behavior.

Most dancers ask the bouncer to eject a customer as their very last resort, because a customer who is no longer in the club is no longer available to exploit for tips. Even very drunk men often engage in tipping behavior, so dancers try everything possible before they suggest that a bouncer throw a customer out, no matter what the offense.

As I said earlier, not all clubs have bouncers that the dancers can rely on. Other clubs, like the one in Minnesota, did not even have bouncers. In those clubs, dancers have to rely on others to help them out when necessary. I was surprised to hear from two of the dancers who work at the Minnesota club that customers have been known to come to their aid. This is what I will turn to next.
Other customers coming to the aid of dancers

Both Sasha and Ashley, who work at the Minnesota club, told me that they are nervous about working in a club that has no bouncers. At the same time, though, Ashley is the dancer who complained about being sexually harassed by bouncers at another club where she had worked in the past. So, the question of bouncers seems to be more than one-dimensional for Ashley. While having concerns about working at a bouncer-less club, Ashley might also be glad that she does not have to contend with being harassed by bouncers at this club where she now works.

Because there are no bouncers at this club, dancers have to rely on others in the club when things escalate to a point beyond which they can handle on their own. I talked earlier about how dancers often come to each other’s aid when a customer is proving difficult to handle. I was surprised to hear from Sasha and Ashley about incidents when other customers intervened on their behalf. Sasha talked about this:

One thing that I’ve learned about this club is that it is a respectful club. And if there are other gentlemen in the club that see a man get out of line I’ve seen them jump to a lady’s defense. They’ll go right in front of the guy and say, ‘you know what mister? You are making a total A-S-S of yourself. Sit your butt down, because you’re ruining it for the ones that are in here for a little bit of clean fun. And we’re not going to sit here and watch you degrade the lady. Get out if you can’t behave yourself, because it bothers me to see you treat her like that.’

Sasha sees these customers as appealing to the offender’s gentlemanly virtues, the dancer initiated strategy of relying on cultural symbolism that I talked about previously. Because the intervention is framed in a manner to paint the troublesome customer as offending not the dancer per se, but another customer, this strategy works to bolster the intervening customer’s
masculinity. He is intervening on behalf of “the lady” because he is “bothered” by the way
the offender is treating the dancer. Of course, this particular framing of assistance from
customers might be unique to Sasha, who used the terms “gentleman” and “lady” to refer to a
customer and dancer throughout our conversation.

Ashley also talked about how customers often police each other in the club where she
works with Sasha. She notes that men frequently come into the club in small groups of two or
three, or even more if it is a bachelor party or other celebratory event. Ashley said that
usually there is only one man in a group who exhibits non-compliant behavior. When he gets
out of line, she said, she has many times seen other group members tell him to behave
himself and exhort him to stop his offensive behavior.

As both of these dancers work at a club that is unusual because of its lack of
bouncers, I am not sure if customers would intervene on behalf of dancers in other clubs.
Probably Ashley’s story of customers disciplining one another as part of small group
dynamics would be enacted at all places where men gathered in groups. But I am not so sure
that customers would find it necessary to intervene in an interaction between a man who was
a stranger to them and a dancer. Ideally, usually there would be a bouncer there first.

The structure of the club determines who is most likely to come to the aid of dancers
who are experiencing serious difficulty with a non-compliant customer. In clubs where
bouncers are employed, the bouncer is the most likely to intervene. In clubs where there are
no bouncers, both other dancers and other customers can be counted on to help dancers
manage problem customers. And, of course, other dancers can be a great source of support
for each other, not only in helping to manage a problem customer, but as friendly co-workers,
as well. Relying on others to help them control customers who are being non-compliant is an interactional strategy that highlights how much exotic dancing is embedded within a social context, the same as other service industries.

In this next section I will talk about the most drastic interactional strategy that dancers utilize to handle non-compliant customer behavior: striking the offender.

**Hitting the Non-Compliant Customer**

*I’ve punched a few guys who do that. We all have! You can’t take that from a customer.*

—Kerry

Hitting a difficult customer is the last and most extreme step in most dancers’ array of interactional strategies. If hitting the customer does not work, the last resort is to have the customer thrown out. Thus, most dancers do not take this action lightly. And as you will see near the conclusion of this section, some dancers are afraid to take this action at all. Dancers’ striking of customers can be categorized at two levels: slapping a customer or otherwise gently striking him, and striking customers more forcefully.

**Slapping customers**

On the very first evening that I observed in a strip bar, I saw a dancer slap a customer. He was trying to touch her inappropriately and she rapped him smartly on his bald head, and incorporated this move into her performance so that it appeared to be choreographed as part of her act. I was totally unprepared for this action. So I was somewhat surprised to hear from some of the dancers I talked with that slapping their customers is a common strategy to get the customers to behave.
Ashley said that she thinks of slapping men as “discipline.” Slapping customers who get out of line, she said, especially works if the offender is sitting with friends. In this case, she said, his friends tease him unmercifully about being hit by a woman, but it usually works to bring him back into compliance.

Ashley also has struck customers more forcefully, as the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter illustrates. Hitting customers with more force is the next, and final, interactional strategy that I will talk about.

**Forcefully striking customers**

Kerry said that she has had occasion to forcefully strike a customer. She counts this as her very last interactional strategy before having a customer thrown out. In the case of very abusive customers, like the ones who persist in touching her genitals in spite of her best efforts at controlling their hands, she both hits them and has them thrown out. She explained:

I’ve punched a few guys who do that. We all have! You can’t take that from a customer. Any man who does that is a complete pig. They will try and try and try. I’ll just!! [simulates punching motion] Then I get [the bouncer] to kick him out.

Kerry seems to be correct in saying that nearly all dancers have hit customers when they get too far out of compliance, when they break too many rules. Even Katie, the one who lets nearly every abusive behavior just roll off, has her breaking point. Katie said:

I have only one pet peeve. I don’t let any one touch my ass. Don’t touch my ass! So I was like extremely irritated when [this one customer grabbed me there.] I hit him so hard it knocked him down and I was like ‘throw him out right now!’ Everyone’s like, ‘oh god!’ Nobody had ever seen me mad before [laughs]. They’re all like, ‘whoa! Somebody pissed Katie off! I wonder what they did!’
What this customer did was to violate Katie’s one personal boundary. He touched the one place on her body that she considers untouchable. This was her final breaking point, and she resorted to the most drastic interactional strategies in her repertoire: hitting him and then having him ejected from the club.

Sasha is different from the other dancers who commonly use hitting a customer as a way to control their behavior. Sasha has been a dancer for five years, and thus has more experience than any of the other dancers I interviewed. Because of this, she has had more than her share of negative work experiences. It was a very negative experience that led to Sasha’s wariness about hitting customers to control their behavior, as she related to me:

I’ve seen girls...respectful girls, nice ladies, deck a customer. I’m afraid, because I don’t know who, who’s in here and where these people have been and what these men have done in their past. And I really...the other girls will come in the back and say, I just couldn’t handle him. So I decked him. But I had a girl friend, a lady I worked with, who did that one time. And she went home, the guy followed her, and he killed her.

Because of this frighteningly horrible incident that happened to a co-worker at another strip club, Sasha chooses not to hit her customers for fear of what would happen to her. This incident, more than any other that I heard about from the dancers, points to how the strip club environment can be deadly. Sure it can be a place of light-hearted fun, playful sexual tension, and good times, but it also has elements of danger. So dancers have to be ever vigilant while they are enacting whatever set of interactional strategies they choose to manage non-compliant customers.
Conclusion

As you can see, exotic dancers use a wide range of interactional strategies to control customers who exhibit non-compliant behaviors. This range of strategies allows dancers to escalate their actions to match the level of misbehavior of their customers; milder offenses get milder responses from dancers, while the most offensive customer behaviors are dealt with in more severe ways.

Dancers, more than many other types of service workers, have at their command a greater variety of interactional strategies to manage wayward customers. It would be unthinkable, for example, for a McDonald’s worker to slap a customer who was being rude and to have her employer openly approve. Few Combined Insurance agents would be encouraged to withdraw attention from a customer who was being non-compliant. Instead, both of these sets of service workers would have a more narrow set of interactional strategies that they could call upon. But dancers possess a wide range of strategies, including: talking to the customer, yelling back at him; calling upon cultural symbols such as wedding rings and gentlemanly virtues; reminding the customer of other powers, such as the legal code and the omnipresent, hulking bouncers; teasing and embarrassing customers into more appropriate behavior; physically controlling customers’ hands; withdrawing attention from customers and ignoring problem behavior; getting assistance from others in the club, such as customers and other dancers; and finally, hitting the offender, either gently, or more forcefully. Few service workers except exotic dancers would be supported by their employers if they enacted more than the mildest type interactional strategies. Because dancers have such wide latitude
in determining what interactional strategy to use, I contend that they are more empowered, that they possess more personal agency, than most other service workers.

Chapkis’ work on the role of the employment structure in determining the level of personal agency that sex workers possess will illuminate this discussion of dancer empowerment and personal agency (1997: 80). Chapkis notes that workers who have the most control over their work environment, such as being able to choose which clients to see and which to reject, and how much to charge for services, are the ones who have the most positive work experiences and who feel like they have the most personal agency. Chapkis is describing the work environment of the exotic dancers that I interviewed.

The twelve women that I talked with feel like they have personal agency, even personal power, when they interact with customers. Even problem customers, those who refuse to tip, sexually harass the dancers, and/or pressure dancers for prostitution services, have little power over the dancers. The only real display of power that a customer can level at a dancer is to ignore her, or refuse to tip her. In contrast, dancers have a wide range of interactional strategies that they can use to exert power over customers.

This analysis, of course, is limited to the interactions and displays of power within the clubs themselves. The very real possibility of a customer injuring or even killing a dancer when she walks out the door of the club has not been considered in these conclusions about dancer empowerment and personal agency. Sasha’s co-worker was killed because she maybe displayed “too much” personal power. This murder adds her name to a list of several thousand, perhaps millions, of women killed because of a display of power that a particular man thought was too much. She stepped out of the “appropriate gender box” and paid the
ultimate price. But as shocking and horrifying as this incident is, in the United States this is uncommon. As detailed in Chapkis’ work, street prostitutes are more at risk in the US than exotic dancers. And they are at risk not because they are prostitutes, but because they work in an employment structure where they do not have much personal agency in determining which clients to serve, and which to refuse to serve. Exotic dancers, at least the ones that I interviewed, have created a work structure that awards them significant amounts of personal agency.

Chapters Four and Five have taken a specific and detailed look at power and interactions between exotic dancers and their customers. You’ve stepped inside the clubs with me and experienced the complex world behind the flashing neon lights. You’ve listened to dancers share the intricacies of their work. In the next chapter, I will draw the detailed threads of the preceding chapters into more general conclusions grounded in these specifics.
CHAPTER SIX

TEASING MEANINGS FROM THE TALES:
CONCLUSIONS

In previous chapters, I illustrated how dancers utilize a wide range of interactional strategies to control customers' behavior. I divided these strategies into two general categories: those that are designed to generate tips, and those that dancers utilize to manage customers who are exhibiting non-compliant behavior. I demonstrated that since dancers commanded a range of interactional strategies, they could call upon a specific strategy to manage a particular situation. I postulated that because dancers utilize these interactional strategies creatively and energetically, they therefore possess personal power within the context of the strip club.

But did I really demonstrate that dancers have power?

In this concluding chapter, I will initially revisit my argument that dancers possess personal power. Next, I will talk about the contributions that I hope my research will make to sociological and feminist theory and methodology. I will conclude with a discussion of the limitations of my work, and also suggest some future directions that research on exotic dancers and their use of interactional strategies might take.

Do Exotic Dancers Have Power?

In preceding chapters, I illustrated how dancers command a wide variety of interactional strategies to get customers to tip them and to manage non-compliant customers' behaviors. In short, exotic dancers control customers by using particular strategies on them.
But did I actually illustrate that these interactional strategies are effective in creating real power for the dancers? What is “real power”, anyway? In this section, I will bring back three of the dancers you met previously to begin this discussion about my success in demonstrating that dancers have power. I will also introduce some new voices, masculine voices, to bolster further my argument that dancers do, indeed, possess power within the strip club environment. Then I will deconstruct my entire analysis of power by examining what some classical and contemporary social theorists say about power and agency.

**Dancers’ voices**

The twelve dancers that I interviewed, as well as the ones that I observed but did not get a chance to talk to, all consciously utilized sets of interactional strategies to control their customers. Mich’e called these strategies “tricks.” Kerry called them “techniques.” They used these strategies, these tricks and techniques, to create and maintain power over their customers. Let’s visit again three of the dancers, whom you met briefly in the first chapter.

Remember Sparkle? She is very young, extremely pretty, and feminine. I asked her “who holds the power?”, and she replied:

Me! [laughs] I don’t really understand why women have so much power over men. I really don’t understand why that is. But it is true. Men will just do whatever a dancer tells them to do.

Sparkle is claiming power based on her gender, her femininity. Dallis (1997) agrees that it is the “power of the feminine” (6) that gives exotic dancers their power over men.

And then there’s Lexus, who in spite of experiencing racism from customers, still maintains that exotic dancers *as a group* hold the power:

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1 Thanks to Jacqueline Litt for originally posing this question to me.
We always have the power. Because of the simple fact that if a guy comes in and he knows what he’s here to do then you have a situation where we can do whatever we want. You should never let the customer feel like he’s overpowering you. Like I said, they will always try to get over on you. You know. You always got to stand on your own two feet, keep on your toes.

In her comments, Lexus makes several important points that are vital to my argument that dancers possess the power within the context of the strip club. She emphasizes that dancers have to work at maintaining power, but that they, in Lexus’ words, “always” have it. Here Lexus also introduces the idea that customers know dancers have the power, when she says that “a guy comes in and he knows what he’s here to do.” Customers enter the club, knowing that their role as a customer is to tip the dancers, and knowing that dancers control the situation, although many will resist and try to subvert dancers’ power: “they will always try to get over on you.” But in spite of customers’ resistance, Lexus also notes that customers willingly fit themselves into the dancers’ routines, willingly accommodate themselves to the dancers, in order to receive the kinds of services they desire: “you have a situation where we can do whatever we want.”

Finally, let’s hear from Mich’e. Late in our interview, after we had established a common bond, and after we had gotten to a point where we could talk frankly with one another, I asked her whom she thought controlled the relationship between dancers and customers:

We control them. I don’t know how to put it...Like...we know how to tease them. So we have the control, you know? If we really want that money, we can go for it. We can get it. So I feel like we have the control. They might have control over their money, but we have the control over their mind.

What Mich’e is saying is some pretty heady stuff. She is saying that dancers hold the power, and control their customers, because they know the “tricks” that it takes to
control customers’ minds. It is not enough, for Mich’e, to just say that dancers have control over men’s bodies, and that they can sexually titillate them, withhold sexual favors, or exert other corporeal control over men, but that dancers know how to control men’s minds.

These three dancers all emphatically maintained that dancers control customers, that they control them because of their femininity, because of the tricks and techniques that they use, because customers are willing to be controlled, and because the strategies dancers use actually control men’s minds. What do customers say about all of this?

Customers’ voices

I interviewed three white men who answered an ad in the Iowa State Daily seeking men who were regular customers at strip clubs. These interviews took place by phone. After talking with the men about why they went to strip clubs, what they expected to get there, and why they chose to tip certain dancers and to not tip others, I asked them a point blank question: “who has the power, you or the dancer?”

All three men answered without hesitation. And all three agreed that dancers possess the interactional power that occurs in the dancer-customer relationship. But the three had different rationalizations for why the dancers have the power.

Dave, for example, a thirty-seven year old man, said he could go into a strip club having decided beforehand that he was not going to tip any dancer that night. But once inside, he could not resist. Dave would tip, and tip well, he said, in spite of his prior decision. Why? “Because of their nice breasts and beautiful figures,” Dave said. He is acknowledging that dancers own the power over his sexuality, at least while he is in the strip club. He said
that he feels that they successfully manipulate his sexual fantasies, and that they thus have power over him.

Frank, a thirty-four year old man, usually goes to the strip club with other men. He said that he often feels peer pressure from the other men he is with to conform to dancer expectations about tipping and behavior. But he stated that he feels that the dancer instigates this peer pressure: “They tease us, you know, so we will all see who can outdo the other. It’s part of her performance, to see what she can make us do.” Frank said that he feels that going to strip clubs is addictive, and that this adds to dancer power. In answer to my point blank question about who owns the power, Frank said: “Dancers have all the power.”

Mark is another regular customer of strip clubs. At forty-four, he has patronized strip clubs all over the US, largely because of being in the armed services. “Who has the power?” I queried. Mark’s answer:

In Iowa, the dancer has the power. That’s because she has the bouncer right behind her. In Iowa you don’t mess with the girl.” What Mark is saying is that the structure of the strip club works to bolster dancers’ power. According to him, the bouncer’s obvious and threatening presence is what gives dancers their power over men.

What do the bouncers say about all of this? Do they realize their role in the construction of dancer power?

**Bouncers’ voices**

Two bouncers, huge, hyper-masculine men, at the Iowa club were willing to be part of my research. Tiger is one of these men. He is head of security at the Iowa club, and has
been a bouncer in strip clubs for many years, in Iowa, Minnesota, Colorado, and Missouri. He therefore has years and years of experience witnessing the power-laden interactions that occur in strip clubs. In the Iowa club, he and all other employees call the dancers “ladies.” Thus when the DJ announces a dancer’s entrance onto the stage, he calls her a “lady.” The manager assigns the shift order and calls the dancers “ladies.” And Tiger refers to them as ladies. This has the effect, he said, of giving the dancers “their due respect.” This respect, Tiger said, is their source of power.

Tiger vigorously enforces rules in the strip club. Customers that Tiger sees touching, soliciting for prostitution, masturbating, and other “disrespectful behavior,” can expect sure and swift reprisal. “It’s all about respect,” he said to me. “Guys got to respect the ladies or they have to answer to me.”

What Tiger is saying, it seems to me, is that the strip club is creating a structured environment that consciously strives to give dancers at least the illusion of respect, and therefore claims to power over their customers. The illusion of respect, and dancers’ claims to power based on that respect, is, according to Tiger, a result of his presence as enforcer. This certainly echoes the customer, Mark, who said that dancers own the power because of the bouncers right behind her.

Mike is the other bouncer that consented to an interview. Mike is young compared to Tiger, only twenty-five. But he, too, has been around. He has worked as a bouncer in strip clubs all of his adult life, and he has been a frequent customer, too. Thus he is in a good position to reveal aspects of the power that simmers in the strip club. “Who has the power?”, I asked Mike. His reply is quite revealing:
The way it is set up, the customer, he is powerLESS. You know what I mean? He’s in here to have a good time and what not, and spend money, that’s the main thing is that he’s here to spend money. Um…that’s the only power they have is that they got the money. The customers keep us open and so in some aspects they do have power, but if we have no dancers except for one and that one is great looking, she’ll bring in a whole bunch of people here. That dancer is in control. She’s in control of a lot of things. She’s in control of how much she wants to make, how much money she wants to make the bar.

Mike is saying that the structure of the strip club is arranged so that the customer has no power, or at least the only thing that he does control is his money. Remember what the customer, Dave, said about how dancers can manipulate him into spending his money even if he had decided beforehand not to tip them? If we are to believe Dave’s testimony—and Mike’s, then the structure of the club and the power of the dancers are such that customers do not even have control over their money: they are helpless before the dancers’ wiles, tricks, techniques.

**Principal players**

All of the principal players in the strip club agree that dancers have the power over their relationships with customers, albeit different people attribute that power to different sources. Dancers say they have the power because of their tricks, their techniques, and their interactional strategies. Customers say dancers own the power because of their power over men’s sexuality, and fantasies. Bouncers, seated in the midst of the power struggle, say that dancers have the power because of the structure of the strip club environment. All agree that dancers have effective strategies for exerting control.

Still, that nagging question remains: does all of this demonstrate that dancers have power? Is demonstrating that dancers utilize powerful interactional strategies that are
effective at controlling customer behavior enough to also demonstrate that these dancers possess power? Is illustrating that the structure of the strip club is set up so that there is an illusion of dancer power and control enough to actually give her power and control? Next I will turn to two classical theorists, Marx and Weber, to examine how their ideas about power complicate my insistence that exotic dancers possess personal power.

*Classical theorists’ voices*

There are two voices from classical sociological theory who have interesting perspectives on power, even though neither of them wrote specifically about exotic dancers, or for that matter, how power may be gendered. Although both theorists, Marx and Weber, primarily examined macro-level social structures, they each acknowledged that power, though macro in origin, may be expressed on a micro level. Thus they are of particular interest to me in my examination about the power that exotic dancers may or may not hold.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) noted that power is essentially rooted in economic relations. According to his famous theory, those who control the means of production are the ones who possess the greatest amounts of social power. This theory has interesting implications for explaining how exotic dancers may possess power. Dancers control their own means of production through their ownership of their body, their sexuality, their tricks, techniques, and strategies to get men to tip them and to make men compliant. They own the make-up, the wigs, the costumes, the high heels. They own a set of interwoven and complex interactional strategies that make customers do what dancers want. They use their interactional strategies, costumes, bodies, and personalities to produce certain states in male customers who then pay them for the goods so produced. Thus in a strictly Marxian view, exotic dancers control their
means of production and thus they have power over those who do not own these means of production. However, dancers must have a stage in order to display their bodies, their sexuality, their strategies. They must have a venue, a person to charge an entrance fee, institutional support that keeps them safe and which guarantees that payment for the goods produced will occur. And who provides a way for that display to happen? The people who own and manage strip clubs. Thus ownership of the means of production might actually belong to the owners and managers of clubs. And when you factor in the detail that many strip clubs not only do not pay dancers a wage, but also actually charge dancers a fee for performing, then the power that I originally attribute as belonging to dancers seems to shift towards the owners and managers of strip clubs.

Weber (1864-1920) further complicates my analysis of power. His definition of power is one that is cited widely. According to Weber, a person possesses power if s/he is able to get her/his own way in spite of the resistance of others. Recall the male customer, Dave, who said that dancers could get him to tip in spite of his having decided before going inside the club that he would not tip a dancer that night? Dave’s story seems to be saying that dancers can get him to do things in spite of his resistance. In Chapter Five, I documented many techniques that exotic dancers utilize to get customers to do what dancers want them to do in spite of customers’ resistance. Thus Weber’s definition of power initially seems to locate it within dancers. But Weber also expands Marx’ ideas about the origins of power and insists that power can originate from within a structure other than an economic one. You will recall that customers and bouncers alike said that it is the structure of the strip club that locates the power within dancers. So perhaps Weber may be right. Maybe power is not really
located in the dancers, but in the structure of the strip club that may give the dancers apparent power, but no real personal power.

Unfortunately for my original hopeful desire to do research that would be liberatory for exotic dancers, and possibly for other women workers, what I think these theorists are saying is that there may be a more sinister answer to the question of who really holds the power in a strip club. I think that although there is the understanding that dancers control the relationship with their customers, and that this is supported by the structure of the club, the ultimate power rests beyond the dancers. Perhaps it rests with club owners and management. As clubs featuring exotic dancers proliferate, and as the power of corporations continue to grow, I predict that dancers will come under even more control by corporate interests. Thus ultimately, as Cynthia Anderson once commented to me, the power lies not with dancers, nor even customers, but with “the man.”

I think that we are already beginning to see the effects of this. In San Francisco, New York, and various other large cities, strip clubs are controlled by corporations (Dumett 1998; Simeone 1998). Some of these clubs are so large that they have multiple stages, sometimes eight or more, and a constant rotation of performers. It is not uncommon for 150 dancers to be employed at a single club. These employees must be highly routinized in order to provide the efficient and cost-effective services such a large establishment demands. Thus dancers at such clubs are pressed into a K-Mart-like worker mold, and their interactional strategies are created and controlled by the corporations, and not by the dancers.

So what does this say about dancer agency? Would a dancer working in a huge club like this have the same amount of leeway in determining which interactional strategies to
employ? Or would she be expected to react to certain situations only in the way that her corporate employer would dictate, like the most supervised of Leidner’s fast food workers? Would large corporations give her the semblance of power that the smaller, locally-owned strip clubs I studied do?

Even larger than corporate power is the social system that some socialist feminists say makes capitalism even possible: patriarchy. In this next section, I further subject my cherished ideas about dancer power to critique and interrogate my concept in the light of the words of a prominent deconstructionist feminist.

**Heteromasculinity and patriarchal power**

Bigger than personal power, bigger than corporate power, some feminist theorists would say that the patriarchy and its attendant institutions lurk in all of our social relations. Thus it seems only likely that patriarchal social relations thrive in the darkness of strip clubs and in the power-laden interactions between dancers and their customers. In this section I subject my argument that dancers have power to its most scathing critique yet.

In a provocative essay about the origin and nature of homophobia, Jacquelyn Zita (1998) sheds light on the nature of what she terms “hegemonic heteromasculinity.” I think that her thoughts may be useful here in my attempt to understand where exotic dancers and their expressions of personal power fit within the patriarchal social system. Zita explains that a primary way that hegemonic heteromasculinity, which she defines as being essentially middle class, and Euro-American white, is expressed is through dominance over women, non-white men, and gay men. Part of this dominance over women is sexual dominance through what Zita calls “an eroticism of power asymmetry, compulsory heterosexuality, and
coital sovereignty” (41). If white, middle class men are only comfortable when they are expressing their hegemonic heteromasculinity, and thus their sexual dominance over women, as Zita theorizes, then what are they doing in strip clubs? I have demonstrated that within the strip club environment, men must fit themselves into the dancers’ routines. And those routines are designed to minimize male power and to emphasize dancer power. For example, recall that men in strip clubs are subject to dancers imposing strict rules on their behavior: they are not allowed to touch dancers, they must pay for dancers to pay attention to them, and they are allowed to express their sexuality only in strictly circumscribed ways that are delineated by the dancers. In addition, club regulations and state and local laws also govern customers’ behaviors in ways that appear to squash their masculinity. If men refuse, they are subjected to a series of dancer-initiated tactics designed to bring them back into compliance, and if they fail to comply, they are ejected from the club by the bouncers. Thus there seems to be no room for the kind of expression of hegemonic heteromasculinity that Zita describes is the normative strip club environment. Or is there?

Perhaps the dancers are only colluding with the construction of their customers’ hegemonic heteromasculinity, and thus are contributing to the creation and maintenance of male domination. One way that they might be doing this is when they work hard to assure men of their masculinity (remember Lexus’s tactics for doing this?). They also strive to assure men of their heterosexuality by convincing customers that they are attracted to the female dancers. Even dancers’ appropriation of exaggerated feminine stereotypes—that Vanwesenbeeck (1997) believes is a liberatory postmodern strategy—maybe even this is only maintaining the system of male domination. So even though it might initially appear
that dancers are flipping the power structure, and that they are subverting hegemonic
heteromasculinity, in reality they may just be helping to maintain it instead. And perhaps this is the reason why men patronize strip clubs. Maybe they go to strip clubs precisely because the dancers will valorize their heteromasculinity. Perhaps the appeal of the clubs is that saavy customers know that even though they will have to pay to get the services they desire, those services are designed to have only the appearance of dancer power, and that in reality, their power as masculine, heterosexual men will be assuaged, valorized, and justified.

This argument seems to strike a fatal blow to my cherished idea that exotic dancers have power within the strip club, that they utilize specific interactional strategies to maintain that power over male customers, and that their power is institutionalized by the strip club environment. Because if I follow Zita, Marx, and Weber to their ultimate ends, it appears that the power I visualized as belonging to dancers, to women interactive service workers, instead is located otherwise: owners and managers of business, corporations, all buttressed by the patriarchal social system. Thus I am at this point tempted to conclude that the power I initially saw as owned by exotic dancers is really only a semblance of power, an illusion. And this makes exotic dancers even more like Leidner’s fast food workers. Even though the McDonald’s workers she studied employ an array of interactional strategies designed to exert control over customers and to manage customer behavior, ultimately the real power for designing those strategies lay with the huge corporate bureaucracy. In a similar way, the exotic dancers I studied also used interactional strategies and these strategies gave them the semblance of power and control over their customers. But in the end, larger systems of
domination determined what those interactional strategies might be and the mechanisms by which they work.

**Contributions This Work Makes**

Even though I was unable to create a liberatory research project for exotic dancers and for women service workers in general, I hope that my thesis makes at least modest contributions to other areas of inquiry. In this section I describe how my work might contribute to two fields: sociology and feminist theory and praxis.

**Contributions to sociological research**

As a sociologist, I hope that my research makes a contribution to sociological research. I do think that my work has added additional angles to the discussion of various perspectives by which exotic dancers have been examined.

One of the main ways I see my work contributing to sociology is in shifting the focus away from examining dancers through a perspective of deviance. Although this way of looking at exotic dancers was useful during its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, as I detailed in Chapter Two, of late, feminist sociologists have soundly criticized the deviance perspective. I believe that my work has added to this criticism by pointing out dancers’ place in the discourse on service work, showing how dancers are *not* deviant, but rather they are like most other service workers.

Another way that I see my work contributing to sociological research is through its focus on examining exotic dancers through the lens of work. This brings exotic dancers away from the shadowy margins where the deviance perspective had relegated them, and into the
discussion of other, more mundane service workers. I think that my work does this through its illustration that dancers are markedly similar to other service workers, and that they experience similar problems with their customers, and thus come up with similar solutions. I think that my work supports Leidner’s important contributions to the sociology of work through my discussion of the creative interactional strategies dancers utilize to exert power in their relationships with their customers.

I believe that my research also contributes to studies on qualitative methodology. I encountered significant challenges in the field—over-zealous gatekeepers that forbade me access, extremely smoky barrooms, loudspeakers blaring over the head of interviewees, and lack of privacy in conducting interviews. But I also was able to negotiate around these problematic issues and came up with some solutions for other researchers who might encounter these kinds of problems in their own research. Thus I hope that others might be able to either learn from my difficulties, or strategize so as to avoid the problems that I tripped over.

Contributions to feminist research

There are at least four ways that I see this work contributing to feminist research. Through my work, I have created a venue for a group of women whose voices are rarely heard. The problems that I encountered with multiple gatekeepers intent on denying me access demonstrate how difficult it is for these women’s stories to be told. In addition, feminist work on sex workers is still relatively rare. Many feminist researchers continue to be queasy about studying sex workers, which contributes further to the lack of voice that exotic dancers have traditionally had in feminist sociological research. In fact, women in general are
only in the last few years becoming legitimate topics of research. Women who are exotic dancers tend to have several other characteristics that marginalize them: they tend to be very young (18 to 21), many are single mothers with multiple children, most have little post-secondary education, and the majority possess few other jobs skills. This group of young, marginalized women is grossly understudied, or maybe even unstudied. Thus my work contributes to feminist research by giving voice to these women, and by examining their very real claims to power and agency.

Another way that my work contributes to feminist research is through my focus on exotic dancers as workers with personal agency. Like Chapkis' work, mine refocuses the discussion about dancers away from their construction as victimized pawns, and instead looks at the role of their work structure in determining their experiences. I think that this focus on dancers' agency is important because it constructs dancers as active in creating their own reality, even if that reality is created within a set of constraints.

A third way that my work contributes to feminist research is by its refutation of the feminist anti-porn viewpoint of sex workers being universally disempowered, passive, victimized pawns. My work demonstrates that dancers have a wide range of interactional strategies at their disposal. I also illustrate that dancers feel empowered because of these interactional strategies, even if that power has to be negotiated from within the patriarchal social system. Far from being the passive and weak victims portrayed by the feminist anti-porn perspective, my research highlights that dancers are energetic and creative in their application of interactional strategies that empower them as workers and as women.
Finally, I believe that my work has contributed to the on-going discussion of feminist methodology. I think that my work represents a challenge to the way that Bloom (1998) defines feminist methodology because I am confident that my work is feminist, though I deliberately avoided some of the methodological tactics that Bloom says are defining characteristics of feminist methodology. I think that my work supports Millen’s contentions (1997) that we should not focus on particular methods as defining feminist research, but instead focus on epistemology.

Several of my contributions both to feminist research and to sociological research also point out some of the limitations to my work. This is what I will next discuss.

**Limitations to My Research**

There are at least three major limitations to my research, as I will describe here. One limitation concerns the clubs that I was able to study. All of the clubs that I gained access to were small, locally owned clubs. None had multiple stages, none were twenty-four hour clubs. Furthermore, all were located in small to medium-size Midwestern towns. Overzealous gatekeepers prevented me from doing research in certain clubs. For example, I approached several large clubs in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, and was denied access. If I had been able to study larger clubs, in larger cities, how would my findings be different? For example, I postulate that dancers in large clubs, those with 150 dancers and multiple stages, for example, might use specific interactional strategies with their customers, not because they want to, but because they are told to by the corporation for which they work. What would this say, then, about dancer’s agency?
Dancers at some of the largest clubs, for example the Lusty Lady in San Francisco, are unionized. How might interactional strategies at unionized clubs be compared with those strategies used by non-union dancers? Would unionized dancers have even more agency; more power over their customers; more power over determining the structure of their work environment?

I was unable to talk to dozens of women because of gatekeepers. What stories would these other women have been able to share with me? I am fairly certain that dancers in clubs where the manager denied me access would have interesting things to tell me about power relationships between employees and employer. The fact that these women's voices are not part of my research represents a serious limitation to my work.

These limitations to my research bring up several possibilities for future directions that research on exotic dancers might take. This will be what I talk about next.

**Suggestions for Future Directions**

There are eight main ways that I would like to see research on exotic dancers be structured in future work. First, because the issue of prostitution came up in nearly every interview with the dancers, I think that the link between prostitution and exotic dancing should be explored. I am intrigued by the comment made by the female owner of the club in Iowa: “You can’t talk about exotic dancing and not talk about prostitution.” What is the real link between these two occupations? How much crossover is there? What kinds of interactional strategies might dancers use to solicit customers for prostitution? How is the power relationship between dancer and customer affected if the two negotiate a paid sexual
encounter? These would be only some of the questions that would be interesting to pursue in the future.

I am also intrigued by how dancers construct gender. In particular, Ashley, one of the dancers interviewed, told me that a male-to-female transsexual worked at a club where she used to be employed. How does this person construct her gender as an exotic dancer? What kinds of interactional strategies might she use, especially when playing to men’s expectations about gender? How would she handle customers’ non-compliance? Would she have a higher or lower rate of non-compliant customers? Is male-to-female transsexualism common among exotic dancers? I have heard anecdotal evidence, or at least rumors, that there are many female dancers who used to sport male sexual parts. Where does reality lie?

And speaking of gender construction—what about the phenomenon of lesbian strip clubs? I understand that on the East and West coasts, there are strip clubs that cater to lesbian clientele. How would the interactional strategies in these clubs be similar, and how would they differ, from clubs where heterosexuality is valorized? What are the dancers who work in these clubs like? Are they universally lesbian? Are they heterosexual? What kinds of fantasies do they play to? What is their experience with the club’s structure and their customers?

Although I was gratified to be able to include the voices of two dancers from ethnic minority communities, I would like to see much more work on this aspect of exotic dancers. For example, Hong and Duff (1997) talked about how ethnic and racial differences in the clientele of strip clubs translated into power differences for the dancers. In addition, Mich’e, one of the dancers interviewed for this study, talked about how she preferred interacting with
customers in clubs that catered to African American men because these men were more respectful of her and gave her larger tips. Would this pattern hold true across the US? Are there other significant differences in dancers’ experience that would be based on customers’ ethnicity and/or race? Likewise, more work must be done on how the race and ethnicity of dancers affect their experiences. Are Lexus’ and Holly’s experiences with racism common? How would racism and ethnocentrism be manifested in clubs located in cities with larger minority populations? Does customer racism support Zita’s theory that hegemonic heteromasculinity requires the “othering” of non-white dancers? Do such non-white dancers represent “dangerous difference?” (1998: 42).

Another suggested direction that future research might take concerns class. Simeone (1998) talked about how the class of the clientele in clubs affects dancers’ experiences. She noted that working class men tend to be more demanding of dancers than middle class men. Ashley and Sasha, both dancers in this study, also commented on this issue. They both agreed that the working class men, usually sailors, who patronize their club, are more demanding, engage in more non-compliant behavior, and tip less than middle class men. Is this an accurate portrait of class differences? I suspect that although clear differences in behavior exist that might be attributed to class, it is not as simple as it might at first appear. In fact, Katie told me:

I’ll sit with broke guys anyway, because they’re fun. They’re more fun. I’d rather sit with three broke drunk guys than some rich old guy who just thinks he can push me around because he has money. I hate that. Some of these guys, the rich ones, they think they can just wave a twenty in my face and I’ll be like, oh yeah, baby, you’re turning me on.
Clearly there is something about class that future studies might be able to tease out of interviews with dancers, and also with their customers.

I would also like to see studies that focus on international perspectives on dancers. For example, what is the status of exotic dancers in other nations? Where does the truth lie about forced prostitution and dancers? How do labor-organizing activities, like those that have taken place in Amsterdam’s Red Light District, affect the work experiences of exotic dancers? How do the large and small clubs compare with each other? How might interactional strategies that dancers utilize be tempered by culture, nationality, ethnicity?

More work is needed on the customers of exotic dancers. I would be interested in discovering factors about the efficacy of the interactional strategies that I have detailed. What do customers think about the strategies? Do they recognize them as strategies? Do they realize the subtle and not-so-subtle connections between what dancers say and what a fast food worker or insurance salesman might say to them? Why do they patronize strip clubs, anyway?

Perhaps the most important direction that I would suggest would be to involve more exotic dancers in the research on themselves. I would like to see dancers engaging in participatory research—exploring their own work lives, their own interactions with customers, their own strategies for power (Park 1993). Through dancers own self-conscious involvement in research, both sociology and feminist research will be greatly enhanced. Although there are a handful of dancers or former dancers who have written about their experience (in particular, see Ronai), I would like to see much more work by exotic dancers.
Clearly much work is yet to be done on exotic dancers, as well as their customers. My own work has revealed so many directions that future work could take. A quickening interest in research on exotic dancers, and sex workers in general seems to be awakening. I think that this interest will continue to expand exponentially in future years.

A Return to Rhetoric

I became interested in studying exotic dancers, as I mentioned in Chapter One, because of the inflammatory rhetoric that I had encountered in mainstream media. I mentioned this to the people that I interviewed, going into some detail about how the murder of Big Earl Hamilton was framed in Iowa newspapers. Nearly all of them quickly responded about the negative portrayal of dancers and strip clubs in the media, indicating that they, too, were familiar with the problems that I was detailing. For example, Mike, one of the bouncers interviewed, stated:

Yeah, the papers love that kind of thing. Anything you do that is controversy, they love to get their hands on it and make it worse than it truly is. All kinds of lies about dancers, and what they do. But you know what? These ladies are just trying to make a living just like you and me.

Sasha, one of the dancers I talked with, shared her feelings about media portrayal of dancers:

There’s not a lot of job opportunities for most people here. And I’m not the kind of person that will live off welfare. You see people in the media who put women down for taking welfare checks, yet you still get put down for taking your clothes off for money to try to stay off welfare. The way they talk about us makes me sick, it really does.

Both Sasha and Mike were quite aware of how the mainstream media portrays dancers in a negative light. Dozens of negative stereotypes about exotic dancers are played over and over in the media. These stereotypes include: dancers are prostitutes; dancers are drug-addicts;
dancers are nymphomaniacs; dancers are ignorant and uneducated; dancers engage in all kinds of illegal behavior. My interviewees told me another story. I have striven to adequately and accurately share this other reality in this work.

It is my fervent hope that my work represents a significant challenge to the negative rhetoric that has been used to frame exotic dancers. I am talking not only about mainstream media, but also the way that academic literature has talked about exotic dancers. My research has illustrated that dancers are not the perverse and rather pathetic deviants that the deviance perspective has made them out to be. Neither are they passive, victimized pawns of the patriarchy as the feminist anti-pornography perspective views them. Instead, my work demonstrates that exotic dancers are active agents who possess a great deal of interactional power. How much this interactional power translates into personal power is unclear to me even still.

So much institutional discrimination exists against women, and especially against the mostly young, undereducated, working class, and otherwise marginal women who tend to become exotic dancers that it is difficult to claim that exotic dancers are powerful women in all aspects of their lives. But one thing came very clear to me as I conducted this research: no matter how much or how little power exotic dancers may have in their personal lives, dancers have great amounts of apparent institutional and interactional power within the strip clubs, behind the flashing neon lights proclaiming “Girls! Girls! Girls.” In the larger scheme of things they may just be maintaining hegemonic heteromasculinity and corporate power, but just for this one night, they are holding a group of men spellbound with their tricks.
APPENDIX

Talking Points: Dancers

Chosen pseudonym_________________________  Club__________  Date__________

Tipping
• tactics
• eye contact
• crotch staring
• bargaining
• instructions
• how much a night here
• how much at other places

Work site
• how long here
• where else worked
• wages, other conditions

Symbols
• costumes
• music
• pole
• others?

Cultural ideas
• femininity
• breasts
• emotional labor
• customer masculinity

How learn techniques
• other dancers
• formal training
• observation
• how did you know what to do

Who holds power?
• you? customer?
• how and why?
• do customers try to take control?
• bouncers assist?
• managers or bartenders?
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