

## Uncovered: Stripping as an occupation

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### Abstract

Although there has been substantial research conducted in New Zealand over the last 20 years into prostitution, there has been no enquiry into the lives of strippers, strip clubs or the striptease industry in general. Yet, women who take their clothes off for a living are a discrete group in the sex industry with distinct motivations who occupy a different habitus to prostitutes or pornographic actresses. This paper, based on undergraduate research, is a review of international literature pertaining to strippers from the year 2000 onwards. The review revealed that, in contrast to the research conducted on the industry before 2000, current feminist scholarship has moved away from a polarised narrative of stripping work as either oppressive or emancipating. Instead, recent research has been concerned with the complexities of the occupation of stripping for young women, both in the workplace and in their wider lives. In particular, this study identified four dominant thematic areas where current research was focused: (a) othering (or the differentiation of strippers from other women); (b) sexualisation (self-worth as based on their sexuality); (c) gender performance (stripping on a spectrum of femininity), and (d) emotional work (stripping work and its emotional demands). In summary, it would seem that the strip-club is a site of both oppression and resistance, a space where women can use their sexual power for financial gain if they are willing to make compromises at work and in their personal lives.

### Key words

*strippers, othering, sexualisation, gender performance, emotional work, strip clubs*

### Introduction

Over the last twenty or so years the strip club industry has grown exponentially in most of the industrialised world (Jefferys, 2008). Strip clubs have been the setting in several American feature films such as *Showgirls* and *Striptease* as well as being a common background scene in many mainstream television programmes, films and music videos. More recently, there has also been an upsurge in the mainstreaming of stripper culture, with gyms offering 'stripperercise' programmes, exercise DVDs based on stripper moves, the popularisation of 'stripper-wear' (such as the very high heeled shoes), pole dancing classes and 'hen's nights' that often have stripper pole lessons.

As an occupation, stripping is generally defined as erotic dance for payment, which may take place either at a private club, public bar, or in the form of a 'strip-o-gram' where the dancer goes to the client/s (Jefferies & Lynch, 2007; Hanna, 2013). This is still very much a male-dominated industry, with the odd exception of a female front person who is generally just that, the public face of the company that is owned and run by men (Jefferys, 2008; Mort, 2007). Thus, in some ways it would seem that 'stripping' as a profession has become more mainstream, and the wider contemporary 'sex positive' cultural milieu is supportive of stripping as a career option for young women (Devereux, 2011). Yet, on the other hand, the world of stripping is still regarded as deviant, abnormal and inappropriate for a 'nice' girl to be involved in (Sweet & Tewksbury, 2000).

The polarised 'deviant/oppressive v. emancipatory' way in which stripping is perceived is also reflected in wider feminist theory. Radical and Marxist feminists (such as Andrea Dworkin)

are opposed to all forms of sex work, positioning it as part of male oppression and the sexual division of labour. The more liberal and pro-choice feminists (e.g. Camille Paglia) see sex work as a woman's right to autonomy over her body and/or actions. The contradictory views held amongst feminist scholars were reflected in an earlier comprehensive literature review by Wahab, Baker, Smith, Cooper and Lerum (2011) that highlights the empowerment/oppression split in feminist opinion on stripping.

The relatively bi-polar view of stripping formed the basis of a piece of research that was undertaken during my final undergraduate year into feminist perspectives and frameworks on stripping as an occupation. This report, drawing on the work undertaken for my research, is a survey of international literature to gain an understanding of stripping as an occupation. The approach I employ here contrasts with earlier feminist critiques which interrogated the moral foundations of the stripping industry. Consequently, I developed a literature review question that sought to explore how international literature frames women who are involved in the occupation of stripping as female exotic dancers. It must be noted that the focus in this review is on women in the industry. Although there are many male strippers and transgender performers, the dynamics of their participation in the occupation of stripping are entirely different from those of young 'biological' women.

## Methodology

An initial search confirmed that there were no New Zealand-based studies on stripping. Due to New Zealand's decriminalisation of prostitution there have been extensive studies into that aspect of sex work, but strippers are a discrete group that have not appeared in New Zealand academic literature. Therefore, this review predominantly constitutes research from Britain, Canada, the USA and Australia. In searching for relevant literature, a time frame of post-2000 was used in order to capture the recent social trends towards mainstreaming stripping as an occupation, as well as an emerging climate of tolerance socially and politically towards sex work, homosexuality and same sex marriages. The following keywords were used in online search engines: female exotic dancer, female stripper, stripclubs, strip clubs, female erotic dancer and strippers. Articles were then chosen first by date of publication, i.e., post-2000, then country of origin, i.e., the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and then content, i.e., whether they dealt with female exotic dancers alone or had a wider scope. An original shortlist of 40-plus articles that emerged from the initial search was culled for relevance, based on the occupational aspects of stripping.

## Emerging themes in stripper research

Emerging from the selected studies were four broad themes showing similarities to the topics of the recent research: Othering, sexualisation, gender performance and emotional work.

### Othering

A significant body of the literature explores the use of 'Othering', which considers the positioning of female exotic dancers as deviant, subversive and 'other than normal' women. These studies explore the pathologising of the performances of dancers as being outside the realm of normal occupations. The theoretical use of the concept of othering in relation to how strippers negotiate their personal identities and justify their career choice to themselves and others is led by authors such as Hanna (2013), Devereaux (2011), Barton (2007), Botts (2006) and Trautner (2005). Hanna points to othering by the moral conservatives in America as vilifying an imaginary deviant other when in fact, as her research indicates, exotic dancers come from across the social spectrum and regard their job with the same normalcy as most people.

However, for many sections of society, the idea of becoming a stripper is highly disreputable and although the occupation may have been glamourised somewhat in popular culture, it is still not viewed as a socially acceptable career choice. This disjunct is highlighted in Devereaux's 2011 article, where she refers to a weight loss advertisement that essentially promises the user a 'stripper' figure that her husband will really appreciate. As Devereaux points out, although it is desirable to want to look like a stripper, this is only acceptable in the privacy of one's own home; stripping in public as a career is the realm of the undesirable 'other'.

Many women in the industry also use othering as a means of negotiating their own identity and explaining or justifying their choice of career. In her study of strippers, Barton (2007) noted that many of the women sought to establish an identity of being a 'nice girl' by comparing themselves and their own actions favourably over other women in their industry. By doing so they appear to be able to partially resolve the dilemma in their minds about the reasons for choosing to undertake this profession. Othering is also evident in the way the clubs create hierarchal systems that are selective in their choice of women who can dance there. As argued by Trautner (2005), this system has a observable class structure to it and the women in the top strata of the system, tend to 'other' the women in the lower class clubs. Her study goes on to demonstrate that class affects perceptions of what is sexually attractive. Also applying class theory to 'othering', Botts (2006) found that working class women from Britain who had migrated overseas to work as strippers tended to 'other' or denigrate the peers they had left behind. Interestingly, they also othered the person they themselves would have been had they remained in Britain. These women indicated strongly that their life chances in Britain were extremely dismal and by migrating to work as strippers they had indeed made themselves better lives. So this internal othering of an imagined alternate self appeared to be a coping mechanism for these women, as the alternate self they left behind was always imagined to be far worse off than the actual self.

## **Sexualisation**

A second theme of the research focused on issues dealing with the sexualisation of young girls, including the effects of sexual abuse and the impact of the media on perceptions of sexuality. With the rapid rise, since the turn of the century, in the use of technology by most sections of society and, in particular, teenagers, the portrayal of women and increasingly younger women as sexual objects has become a point of concern for feminists. A section of the literature reviewed here sought to understand the effect of media on young women's choice of career as strippers. This literature revealed that most strippers become aware of their physical attraction for men at an early age, often at the onset of puberty. Realising the potential of their physical looks for emotional or financial gain, for many stripping was a natural choice of occupation (Wesely, 2002: Downs, James & Cowan, 2006). For many of the women interviewed in both these studies there was a preoccupation with their appearance and many of them had come to equate sexual attractiveness to their own sense of personal value. The media obsession with body image and sex impacts heavily on these women and in tandem with the fact that they have become used to trading on their looks, creates an even stronger sense of identity being reliant on their sexual worth (Downs, James & Cowan, 2006). Thus, the literature shows a strong correlation between a young girl identifying her physical attributes as having value and her choice as a young woman to enter into stripping as a career.

## **Gender performance**

The third theme in the surveyed literature focused on gender performance and discussed the ways in which dancers capitalised on their sexuality through the performance of enhanced

gender norms, i.e. what the patriarchal tradition had deemed feminine or womanly. Gender performance was first described by Judith Butler in 1990 as the way in which people perform their gender on a daily basis (Butler, 1990). Strippers, according to this line of research, tend to conform to an exaggerated performance of the hegemonic male ideals of femininity. Gender performance from the point of view of exotic dance also has a lot of cross-over with sexualisation and the ways in which girls are socialised to perform in gender normative ways. Indeed, some of the literature argues that dancers are both conforming to and at the same time perpetuating gender norms that are part of the patriarchal hierarchy.

As Urish (2004) points out in his longitudinal study of narrative striptease in America over the last 100 years, the clothes, the body shape, the music and the striptease acts themselves have all adapted to fit the dominant ideal of femininity at the time. Urish's argument is that striptease denies the women working in the industry any autonomy over their own bodies and individuality. In contrast, Murphy (2003) posits that women are generally required to reinforce femininity through gender performance on a daily basis and dancers are merely performing at the extreme end of the continuum. Therefore their sexual expression of their femininity should not be looked at as deviant behaviour, but as the overt performance of an expected norm.

### **Emotional work**

Finally, the fourth theme covered in the reviewed literature was emotional work. Emotional work was first explored by Arlie Hochschild (1983), to identify the emotional investment demanded by some occupations in order to fulfil the parameters of that specific job. Hochschild's initial study was in relation to how air hostesses manage to soothe frightened passengers (Hochschild, 1983). The concept has been extended to numerous occupations that demand emotional input, so it is unsurprising that there is research on dancers using this lens.

As strippers revealed in the studies, the emotional toll of working in the strip clubs is quite high – these women need to play the part of the ideal woman, who is always available for and only interested in the man's needs (Morrow, 2012). To maintain this façade many of the women develop a dancer personality that is quite different to their 'real life' persona. Interestingly, many women reported that the longer they worked in the industry the harder it was to keep a distinction between their two selves (Deshotels & Forsyth, 2006). The dancer persona also has to exude a sexual energy which in itself becomes quite draining on their emotions, particularly when in all likelihood they have no real interest in the men they are performing for (Deshotels & Forsyth 2006). The sexual energy being produced by the dancer at work is mostly faked; consequently, these women have less energy or interest in sex with their partner outside of work, which then exacts a toll on their personal relationship.

Similarly, Morrow (2012) was interested in the theme of the emotional aspect of work in regards to exotic dancing as she observed, 'Strippers are paid to strike a balance between the illusion that they are in the club for the purpose of socialising and the reality that they are there to earn money' (p.359). Overall the research seems to indicate that the emotional input of working as a dancer is an underestimated aspect of the job and requires a significant amount of energy from the dancer to sustain one persona at work, only to have to switch to another persona outside of the work environment. Also, as with other branches of the hospitality industry, just the sheer pressure to continually be nice and dealing with other people's emotions is in itself extremely draining (Dehotels & Forsyth, 2006; Morrow, 2012). This is a relatively new application of Hochschild's (1983) theory, and goes some way to explaining the transient nature of exotic dancers, as the emotional premium they pay for undertaking the work of being a stripper clearly is relatively high.

## Concluding remarks

The feminist perspectives on exotic dancers in recent research are largely concerned with the individual's wellbeing and the ways in which they cope emotionally and psychologically with the stresses of their occupation. This is in contrast to work done in the 1980s and 1990s which was more concerned with the empowerment/disempowerment dichotomy of involvement in the industry (Wahab, Baker, Smith, Cooper & Lerum 2011). Some feminist theory tends towards regarding stripping as upholding hegemonic patriarchal norms and the objectification of women, whilst other research points out that in purely financial terms it is a justifiable choice, as women can earn far more dancing than in a regular minimum wage job (Bott, 2006; Hanna, 2013).

As a research field, there is still potential for development. Current studies have moved the academic debate from the rights and wrongs of sex work as an occupation (although there are still some elements of this lens in most research) towards more praxis-oriented studies. Looking into the daily lived realities of being a stripper and the unseen consequences of taking one's clothes off for a living is becoming the focus for many academics interested in the areas of sex work and sex workers. So too are the wider social implications, both the factors that cause women to make this career choice and the effect of the presence of strip clubs and strippers on how women in general are perceived.

In conclusion, it would seem that although the women in the stripping industry are physically uncovered, the research seems to indicate that there are hidden aspects to the lives of strippers and this is an under-researched area for feminist scholars.

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