

Exotic Dance Research: A Review of the Literature from 1970 to 2008

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Abstract This article presents the process and findings of a review of the empirical research literature on exotic dance/dancers in the United States and Canada from 1970 to 2008. We present research methods represented in this sample, as well as the main purposes of these studies, the deployment of theory in exotic dance research, and the visibility of researcher subjectivities. Over time researchers have gradually moved from micro-level analysis with singular explanations toward multi-dimensional and contextual understandings of exotic dance/dancers. Contemporary researchers are less grounded in deviance, pathology, or victimization. We conclude with a discussion and a series of recommendations for future research.

Keywords Exotic dance · Literature review · Research · Theory · Subjectivity

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Introduction

The commercial sex industry incorporates many different forms of labor including, but not limited to, street-level prostitution, exotic dancing, massage, pornography, phone sex, and internet sex. In this world of mostly private activities, exotic dance is often seen as more socially acceptable (or at least less socially offensive) than other types of commercial sex work. Part of this is undoubtedly due to the way that strip clubs have become economically and socially integrated into everyday landscapes. State and city governments allow clubs to be highly visible in cities, suburbs, and residential areas. Clubs are permitted to advertise their establishments through provocative marquees on their buildings and on billboards along highways. While the exact number of exotic dance clubs in the United States is difficult to determine, a search of GoogleTM revealed anywhere from “1274 and growing” (stripclubmap.com 2008) to “3000 clubs” (Spain 2007). The annual revenues from this form of entertainment can be staggering. According to Bradley (2008), while some small clubs are independently owned, others are multimillion dollar enterprises (e.g., Larry Flint’s Hustler Clubs or Rick’s Cabarets). Culturally, strip clubs are still subjects of contested community debates over morality (Perez 2009; Blakley 2009) but they are also iconographic, with dozens of Hollywood films featuring exotic dancers and clubs.

In addition to the growing economic and cultural visibility of exotic dance clubs in North America, in the past few decades scholars within many academic disciplines have experienced an epistemological shift in research ethics and methods. Namely, strictly positivist approaches to the study of the social have been heavily critiqued by feminist, post-modern, and post-colonial theorists as a strategy of containing, “othering,” and regulating those with less socio-economic power (Denzin and Lincoln 2008); such blistering critiques have led to an increase in more reflexive research methods that recognize how researcher subjectivities impact the knowledge production process (Lerum 2001; Denzin and Lincoln 2008).

Given these cultural, economic, and academic shifts, we sought to investigate some of the empirical literature on female and male exotic dance. Over the last few decades research on exotic dance has attracted cross-disciplinary interest, most notably by scholars in the social sciences, public health, and law. As Frank (2007) noted, strippers have been studied by various professionals “using a variety of theoretical frameworks and methodologies” (p. 502). Over the course of nearly four decades the tenor of the scholarship on this topic has taken a marked turn away from constructing exotic dance as “dirty work” and a “deviant occupation” (see, for example, Skipper and McCaghy 1970; Forsyth and Deshotels 1998) towards constructing exotic dance as a legitimate form of labor or a site of continuously negotiated power relations.

Frank (2007) published a review of some of the exotic dance research in order to prove that there actually is a solid body of academic work associated with exotic dance (contrary to many researcher claims), and to explore the topics and foci of this body of research. Frank found that much of the research associated with exotic dance overwhelmingly focuses on power negotiations between men (customers) and women (dancers) in clubs and consequently reveals “how researchers are also part of the cultural milieu they study...” (p. 507). Our project adds to Frank’s (2007)

work by drawing particular attention to some of the research methods and issues associated with this body of research as this has not yet been published elsewhere. The purpose of this article is to provide a review of some of the research literature on exotic dance in the United States and Canada from 1970 to 2008.

Methods

Data Collection

In order to produce this review we first conducted a broad literature search spanning twelve databases for any articles related to exotic dance with no parameters around gender; our sample included articles on dancers with multiple gender identities. Despite the existence of articles associated with male customers, we chose to only include articles with a specific focus on the workers (typically male and female identified). Three of the databases did not go back to 1970 (see Table 1), but the references in each article were scanned for additional relevant titles. In each database, the following terms (or variations of them) were used to retrieve relevant articles: exotic dancers; erotic dancers; nude dancers; strippers; dancers; topless dancers; strip teaser dancers; strip teasers; strip tease; adult entertainment; peep shows. We acknowledge that some research articles associated with exotic dance may have been overlooked in our search because of how they were indexed in the twelve databases. Memoirs and essays written by sex workers were not included in this review, nor were unpublished dissertations, newsletters, and articles written in newspapers, magazines, blogs, or other media that were non-academic or peer reviewed. We also acknowledge that because exotic dance is interactive, the exclusion of the body of work focused on customers in this review introduces a limitation of this project. We reviewed all abstracts of the retrieved academic peer-reviewed articles and deleted all duplicate titles and non-empirical articles from the

Table 1 List of databases and years covered

Databases	Years covered
ABI Inform (business)	1970–2008
Anthropology	1993–2008
Arts & Humanities	1970–2008
CINAHL (nursing)	1982–2008
Criminal Justice Abstracts	1970–2008
InfoTracOnFile (general database)	1970–2008
Medline (medical)	1950–2008
PsycInfo	1970–2008
Social Work Abstracts	1977–2008
Sociology/Philosophy/Social Sciences	1970–2008
Web of Science (Social Science Citation Index and Science Citation Index)	1980–2008
Wilson Select (general database)	1970–2008

pool. We further narrowed our sample to articles that fit the following criteria: (1) empirical research articles (reporting qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method research approaches), (2) published in academic journals, (3) published between 1970 and 2008, (4) conducted in the United States or Canada, and (5) addressed exotic dance or exotic dancers (e.g., female and male dancers, clubs, unions, etc.). A total of 89 articles fitting these criteria are included in this review. We chose to limit our sample to research articles conducted in the United States and Canada, in part because we all live and work in the United States (currently) and are most familiar with the cultural contexts associated with exotic dance in the United States. Agustín (2005) has called for sex work researchers to turn their research gaze towards exploring the cultural contexts surrounding sex work. We support her call and chose to immerse ourselves in this study within some of the cultural contexts we are most familiar and embedded in.

Data Analysis

The data analysis occurred in four stages. For the first stage we developed a review form based on our knowledge of the literature to be applied to each article. As articles were reviewed in this phase of the study, data were captured regarding theory, purpose, and methodology of the study, as well as whatever we could glean of the subjectivities of the researchers. In her review, Frank (2007) noted that “[U]nfortunately, such discussions of positionality and researcher identity and experience are relatively scarce.” (p. 509). Egan and Frank (2005) argued that this phenomenon is largely due to structural and disciplinary structures and conventions. Some of the structural and individual constraints Egan and Frank identify include; (1) disciplinary trends around publication, (2) “institutional privilege” (p. 309) that allow some researcher to “come out”, (3) publication page limits, (4) fear/concern with “navel-gazing” or “mental masturbation” (p. 310), and (5) psychological or professional discomfort or embarrassment. We hoped to be able to add to this interesting aspect of sex work research through this review.

The second stage of the data analysis entailed coding the purpose of the research for each article using a content analysis technique (Neuendorf 2002). To determine inter-rater reliability, three of us coded the stated research purpose (in the form we created) for eight randomly selected articles (randomization was done using GraphPad Software[©] 2002–2005) with an 87.5% agreement.

The third stage involved a statistical analysis of the quantitative data using SPSS (Version 14, 2005). Eighty-nine ($n = 89$) research articles concerning exotic dance were analyzed. Because not all articles we reviewed reported information that we aimed to capture, statistical analyses presented herein reflect sample sizes of the number of articles in which data was reported by authors.

In the fourth phase of analysis we qualitatively analyzed the findings of 39 of the 89 articles. We stratified the 89 articles by decade and took a disproportionate random sample for analysis. Looking at the entire sample, four articles were published between 1970 and 1979, nine articles between 1980 and 1989, 25 articles between 1990 and 1999, and 51 articles between 2000 and 2008. We combined the 13 articles from 1970 to 1989 and then, using a random numbers table, randomly

Table 2 Disciplines of researchers

Discipline	Researchers' discipline	Frequency	Total (%) ^a	Percent of total mentions (%)
Sociology		44	49.4	48.4
Criminal Justice/Law		13	14.6	14.3
Psychology/Psychiatry		8	9.0	8.8
Anthropology		7	7.9	7.7
Communication		4	4.5	4.4
Social Work		3	3.4	3.3
Other		8	9.0	8.8

^a Total percent will add to more than 100 due to multiple mentions ($n = 89$; total mentions = 91)

selected 13 articles for further analysis from each of the two more recent decades for a total of 39 articles.

Findings

The majority of research on exotic dance over the past four decades has been conducted by researchers in the field of sociology. The remaining scholars work in the fields of criminal justice and law, communication, psychology, social work, and anthropology (see Table 2). As mentioned above, we were interested in if and how the subjectivities of the researchers who conducted the studies (i.e., discipline, standpoint, identities, sex work status), as well as their use of research methods, impacted their analysis, or the “story” that they told about sex work. In the following section we report additional researcher subjectivities, as well as the theoretical frameworks and methodologies employed by these researchers.

Researchers' Subjectivities

The historically disempowering relationship between academics/researchers and commercial sex workers as study participants (see, for example, Frank 2002) coupled with a feminist, constructivist epistemology that values the critical exploration of researchers' subjectivities and locations within research led us to explore if and how researchers addressed their relationships to sex work/workers in their articles. Slightly more than one-fifth (21.3%) of the articles were written by researchers who revealed having personal experience as exotic dancers. Another 37.1% of the authors reported not having had any personal experience as dancers, while 42.0% of them did not comment on the topic.

Because we assumed that the length of time spent in the field informs researchers' knowledge and perception of dancers, we examined the length of time researchers reported spending in the field. Of the 56 studies that reported this data, it appears that research with exotic dancers tends to have relatively lengthy field times. Nearly one-half (44.6%) of the researchers reported having been in the field for 1 year or longer; 25.0% spent 7-11 months in the field; 17.9% were in the field from 1 to 6 months; and 12.5% reported being in the field less than 1 month.

We were also interested in the researchers' perceptions of exotic dance and dancers to the extent they were detectable in the articles. We were specifically interested in whether there was a discernible difference between the perceptions of researchers who disclosed having been dancers at some point in time and those who did not self-identify as having danced. In our total sample of 89 articles, we identified 39 that contained authors(s) perceptions of exotic dance (some explicit and some not so explicit). Nineteen of these 39 articles (21.3%) were written by at least one author who self-identified as a current or ex-exotic dancer.

Given the diversity of articles and methods represented in this sample we expected to observe a broad continuum reflecting researchers' perceptions of exotic dance; however, the continuum while textured is not so broad. Most authors either expressed perceptions that exotic dance is harmful to women and/or symbolic of male dominance and sexism (Barton 2002; Pasko 2002; Thompson et al. 2003), or expressed a more nuanced and complicated perception that views exotic dance as a form of strategic and emotional labor with both positive and negative consequences (Deshotels and Forsyth 2006; Wesely 2002, 2003, 2003b in Appendix). Other nuanced perceptions include those that recognize exotic dance as a performance, where regulatory systems, policy, and management practices converge to produce a structural situation in which dancers are deeply affected (Kay 1999).

What differentiates some of these perceptions from those of the former category (that views exotic dance as universally negative and harmful) is that these authors also recognize and write to the strengths and resilience dancers express within the context of potentially oppressive working conditions (Egan 2004; Ronai 1994; Sloan and Wahab 2004; Spivey 2005; Wood 2000). These authors were also more likely to write from the position of a dancer or former dancer. For example, Egan (who identifies herself as a former dancer) (2003) argues that "dancers understand their positions within the matrix of desire, fantasy, and power and use them strategically to make money" (p. 118). Frank (2000) summarizes the perceptions of other researchers with exotic dance histories: "[m]y own experiences as a sex worker and as an ethnographer of sex workers and their customers suggest that sex work involves moments of empowerment, intimacy, and gratification alongside moments of degradation, alienation, or disenchantment..." (p. 483). These researchers (those with dance experience and/or who appear to be more politically allied with dancers' rights) have moved away from analyses which may be critiqued as pathologizing and patronizing (Egan and Frank 2005) toward analyses of organizational hierarchies and interpersonal power relations (e.g., between dancers and strip club patrons, owners, and other co-workers).

Theory, Study Purpose, and Methods Employed

Theoretical Frameworks

Theory serves both as a reflection and a reinforcement of particular interpretations of social life. Since one's theoretical framework impacts the story told about one's data, we were curious about whether and how researchers explicitly referenced

Table 3 List of theories according to discipline

Psychology	Contingency theory
	Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance
	Humanistic theory
	Jungian theories
	Social constructionism
Sociology	Acker's gendered organizational theory
	Critical theory
	Dramaturgy
	Giddens' theory of structuration
	Identity theory
	Postmodernism
	Post-structuralism
	Social constructionism
	Symbolic interactionism
	Philosophy
Postmodernism	
Post-structuralism	
Feminist theories	Feminist interactionism
	Post-Lacanian feminist theory
	Radical feminism
	Sex radical feminism
Criminology	Disorganization theory
	Social control theory

theories that may have informed the ontology, epistemology, or methodology of their studies. Forty-seven of the 89 articles (52.8%) in this sample explicitly identified one or more theories as having informed the study. While a handful of articles identified more than one theory the majority of articles identifying theory named only one. Although there was little direct evidence of the presence of theories in the remaining 42 articles (implicit or explicit), this does not mean that some of these studies were not theory informed, but rather authors may have chosen not to mention their influence or application. Of the 47 articles that did reference theories, a total of 23 different theories (see Table 3) were identified.

Purpose of the Studies

Researchers mentioned many reasons for studying female and male exotic dance. Our analysis identified 21 different purpose (of the research) categories. Some of the lesser represented reasons for conducting exotic dance research included class issues, comparisons of female exotic dancers to male exotic dancers or college students, authors' reflexive experiences as dancers, economic costs and rewards of exotic dance, labor practices and unions, and racism in exotic dance. Slightly more studies focused on male dancers, environment and culture of female and male strip clubs, health issues, and power relations. Most articles focused on individual female

dancers and/or their experiences related to dancing. In particular, attention was paid to female dancers' motivations for becoming dancers, their self-perceptions, their experiences of stripping, the influence of exotic dance on relationships outside the clubs, how they resist the negative image of exotic dance, and how they manage stigma associated with this form of labor.

Sampling Techniques

In 58 of the 89 studies, researchers described using one or more sampling techniques to recruit study participants (see Table 4). Most studies (38.4%) employed a convenience sampling method, followed by snowball (27.4%) and purposive (21.9%) sampling.

Sample sizes ranged from a low of one individual to a high of 160 participants among the 70 studies for which this information was available. Five of the 70 articles had samples of 100 or more; these five large samples were considered outliers and were removed to reduce skewing in calculated statistics. The remaining 65 studies had sample sizes ranging from one individual to 93 participants. The mean sample size of the 65 studies was 34.8 (SD = 33.1) participants; the median number of participants across the studies was 24.

Within the 70 studies reporting sample composition, only one study had a sample comprised exclusively of ex-dancers and sixteen studies included both current and former dancers. The majority of samples were comprised exclusively of individuals currently working as exotic dancers. Among these, the mean sample size was approximately 22.2 (SD = 21.2) and the median sample size was 18.

The ages of study participants ranged from 16 to 55 years. Most studies reporting participant ages show this information as age ranges. The mean low age reported was 18.7 years (SD = 1.6), and the mean high age reported was 39.1 years (SD = 7.5). Most of the studies in our sample—nearly seven in ten (69.0%)—studied female dancers. Of the 89 articles, 65 (73.0%) did not mention participants' sexual orientation. However, in the remaining 24 articles, there were 50 mentions of study participants' sexual orientation, including 18 heterosexual and 32 homosexual (that is, gay, lesbian, and bisexual) dancers. Finally, although the participants in these studies represented a diversity of ethnic identities, the majority self-identified as either White/Caucasian or African American (see Table 5).

Table 4 Sampling techniques

Sampling method	Frequency	Total (%) ^a	Percent of total mentions (%)
Convenience	28	48.3	38.4
Snowball	20	34.5	27.4
Purposive	16	27.6	21.9
Random	2	3.4	2.7
Other	7	12.1	9.6

^a Total percent will add to more than 100 due to multiple mentions ($n = 58$; total mentions = 73)

Table 5 Ethnicity of study participants

Ethnicity	Frequency	Total (%) ^a	Percent of total mentions (%)
White/Caucasian	35	100.3	34.3
African American	21	61.8	20.6
Hispanic/Latino	16	47.1	15.7
Asian American	15	44.1	14.7
Caribbean/Pacific Islander	7	20.6	6.9
Native American	5	14.7	4.9
Other	3	8.8	2.9

^a Total percent will add to more than 100 due to multiple mentions (*n* = 34; total mentions = 102)

Table 6 Data collection methods in the research

Study method	Frequency	Total (%) ^a	Percent of total mentions (%)
Qualitative	96	107.9	79.3
Ethnography	22		22.9
Autoethnography	8		8.3
Quantitative	8	9.0	6.6
Historical	5	5.6	4.1
Mixed Methods	2	2.2	1.7
Other	10	11.2	8.3

^a Total percent will add to more than 100 due to multiple mentions (*n* = 89; total mentions = 121)

Data Collection and Analysis

When exploring the data collection methods within these articles, we looked at both the overall strategy of the study as well as the specific methods used. As indicated in Table 6, the vast majority of research was qualitative. Within strategies of qualitative studies, field observations (23.4%) combined with semi-structured, face-to-face interviews (17.7%) were the primary data collection methods identified in the studies reviewed (see Table 7). Most studies utilized more than one data collection method.

Due to the qualitative nature of the majority of studies, most data was reported as being analyzed either with an analytic-inductive process or by coding and categorizing thematically. Despite knowing that these two methods were utilized we know very little about how these methods were actually operationalized. Consequently, it is unclear how researchers specifically worked with their data to find or create meaning, sense, and knowledge. What is clear is that the vast majority of data were analyzed at the individual—or micro—level, as opposed to group, organizational, community or policy levels (see Table 8). Finally, due to the mainly qualitative nature of the studies, quantitative statistical analysis was used in only a very small number of studies overall. Future researchers should strongly consider reporting in more detail what they do (step-by-step) with their data once it has been collected. This inclusion in articles will allow readers to evaluate the quality of the research more effectively and efficiently, as well as provide additional insight into the meaning making processes.

Table 7 Qualitative data collection methods

Data collection technique	Frequency	Total (%) ^a	Percent of total mentions (%)
Field Observation	37	44.6	23.4
Interview (Semi-structured)	28	33.7	17.7
Participant Observation	22	26.5	13.9
Interview (Unspecified)	22	26.5	13.9
Interview (Unstructured)	13	15.7	8.2
Interview (Structured)	12	14.5	7.6
Questionnaire	9	10.8	5.7
Life Histories	6	7.2	3.8
Field Research	4	4.8	2.5
Other	5	6.0	3.2

^a Total percent will add to more than 100 due to multiple mentions ($n = 83$; total mentions = 158)

Table 8 Level of data analysis in the research

Analysis level	Frequency	Total (%) ^a	Percent of total mentions (%)
Micro-Individuals	71	85.5	64.5
Mezo-Organizations	22	26.5	26.5
Macro-Policy	17	20.5	15.5

^a Total percent will add to more than 100 due to multiple mentions ($n = 83$; total mentions = 110)

Qualitative Findings by Decade

From the 89 articles included in our study, the findings of 39 articles (13 from 1970–1989; 13 from 1990–1999; and 13 from 2000–2008) were analyzed using content analysis, wherein words and/or phrases were organized into relevant categories (Weber 1990). In addition to presenting the findings by decade, we have organized them according to common themes present in the findings across the decades.

1970–1989

The questions asked and stories told by researchers during this early period reveal an assumption by researchers that stripping is a problematic (“deviant”) occupational category; researchers were particularly concerned with how dancers managed to hide or neutralize their deviant lifestyle, how and why they came to this lifestyle, and how their work required dancers to be inauthentic in their emotional displays. The tone and methodologies of this literature serve to simultaneously understand, exoticize, and pathologize dancers.

Dancers as Deviant

During the 1970s and 1980s researchers largely focused on individual dancers, perhaps because this was a new area of research. All four articles we analyzed from

the 1970s framed exotic dance as a deviant occupation. Despite this framing, no clear definition of deviant work was provided in any of the articles. According to a later article by Thompson and Harred (1992) who cite Ritzer (1997), an occupation can be considered deviant by society “if it is illegal, if it is considered immoral, and if it is considered improper” (p. 297). In their study of the process of becoming a stripper, Skipper and McCaghy (1970) commented that, according to American society, women were not expected to expose their naked bodies to anyone but their spouses and physicians—and to the latter only “under highly structured circumstances involving health reasons” (p. 392). While acknowledging the “liberal” changes over the “past 20 years” in the amount of skin that a woman can reveal (p. 392), the authors maintained that “stripping remains a deviant or at best marginal occupation” (p. 392) because society considers women who remove their clothing “for no other purpose than to allow others to stare and ogle an unusual and low status, if not outright promiscuous, occupation” (p. 392). Boles and Garbin (1974b) and Carey et al. (1974) also discuss the deviance of exotic dance. Boles and Garbin note: “There is little doubt that stripping is considered a deviant occupation by a substantial proportion of the population” (p. 122). Carey et al. (1974) state the purpose of their study was to “investigate similarities between the occupations of stripper and go-go girls...to provide information which may be helpful in the investigation of general patterns of deviant, female career development” (p. 18).

Questioning Dancers’ Motivations

Researchers examined women’s physical, psychological, and social characteristics, as well as their reasons for entering the occupation (Skipper and McCaghy 1970; Boles and Garbin 1974b; Carey et al. 1974). Women’s primary motivation for becoming an exotic dancer was purposive and typically rooted in financial crises that required them to find a quick and easy way to earn money. Skipper and McCaghy (1970) wrote “stripping would provide rapid access to relatively high earning with little preparation or sacrifice” (p. 402). Women were “recruited” into dancing by friends, family members, agents, or club managers. Men were “recruited” into exotic dancing through similar informal networks and saw it as a way to be in the entertainment business, meet women, earn easy money, and overcome shyness. Unlike female dancers, the men justified stripping as a commercial form of entertainment that people would find enjoyable, in addition to providing a secure sexual outlet for women where they are permitted to “act out” (Dressel and Petersen 1982).

Counterfeit Intimacy (Dancers as Trickster)

The concept of counterfeit intimacy permeates the literature on exotic dance from the 1970s to the present day. Enck and James (1988) provide a detailed description of counterfeit intimacy wherein dancers (typically female) give a customer the impression that he (note the heteronormative assumption) is special and can do special things (i.e., increased touching or the possibility of sexual intercourse)

forbidden to other customers. It is quite likely that the ultimate goal of counterfeit intimacy, however, is only to increase customer spending.

The underlying stimulus for this behavior appears to be feelings of objectification. For example, Boles and Garbin (1974a) note that many customers believe the female dancers are prostitutes and deny them “courting behavior,” (p. 141) thereby contributing to the women’s feeling of being objectified. In his study of male dancers, Clark (1985) acknowledges that the female customers see the male dancers as “objects for their entertainment and as a vehicle for doing the things that men have always done” (p. 54). These authors also note that both male and female dancers objectify and exploit the customers creating an atmosphere of “mutually exploitative interactions masked by an aura of intimacy—counterfeit intimacy” (Boles and Garbin 1974a, p. 141). Enck and James (1988) conclude that “all forms of the *counterfeit intimacy* illustrate the common theme of ‘legitimate’ institutions failing to meet the expectations of many of their patrons” (p. 379).

The concept of counterfeit intimacy to describe or understand stripping is an interesting (and troubling) one in that it serves the purpose to uphold heteronormativity. There are so many ways to think about, frame, and describe stripping (for instance, performance, entertainment, acting out, legitimate work, etc.) and the one evoked by counterfeit intimacy is one that both upholds normative gender roles and rules forcibly linked with heterosexual, romantic intimacy between men and women. Counterfeit intimacy seems to assume there is such a thing as legitimate intimacy (between men and women), intimacy that is “real” rather than faked or performed and that stripping is a fake intimacy. The concept of counterfeit intimacy raises questions for future research on the place (or lack thereof) of intimacy in exotic dance.

1990–1999

Many of the same topics (e.g., counterfeit intimacy, stigma, and power of dancers) continued to surface throughout the 1990s; however some researchers broadened their foci beyond individual dancers to include socio-cultural analyses of clubs (Forsyth and Deshotels 1997; Kay 1999; Thompson and Harred 1992). As is evident below, researchers who broadened the level of analysis from the individual to the organizational were also less likely to assume a pathologizing stance vis a vis dancers.

Dancers Aren’t the Problem, Clubs Are

Kay (1999) noted that the introduction of private booths in San Francisco’s adult entertainment theaters, as well as police enforcement of anti-street level prostitution, encouraged prostitution in the clubs. Prostitution was responsible for both “greatly increasing the competition between dancers” (p. 45) and driving away good customers who were not interested in that type of contact. These factors contributed to dancers having a harder time earning tips. Forsyth and Deshotels (1997) describe the culture of gentlemen’s clubs and discuss the norms, rules,

power, and hierarchy in the clubs. Drugs were found to be an “integral part of the occupation” and access to them was seen by dancers as a “positive aspect” of the occupation (p. 137). The authors found that dancers used drugs (e.g., alcohol, cocaine, marijuana, MDMA or ecstasy) in order to do their job because it “aided in the disassociation of self from the manipulative work of the nude dancer” (p. 137). While dancers used drugs to “make the job possible,” they also have “to work harder at the job to support their habits” (p. 137). The theme of these studies points to specific organizational and cultural elements of clubs (e.g., private booths; hierarchical working conditions) which create stressful working conditions, occasionally leading to the use of alcohol and illicit drugs as a coping strategy.

Managing Stigma

Thompson and Harred (1992) studied elite gentlemen’s clubs to determine how dancers manage stigma while working in a deviant occupation. Although they found that dancers used a variety of techniques, the authors created two broad categories: “dividing the social world” and rationalizing and neutralizing their behavior (p. 301). Although dancers were not ashamed of their work, they understood that others did find it shameful so they managed this stigma by dividing their world into insiders and outsiders. The authors, acknowledging Goffman’s 1963 work on stigma and borrowing terms from Sykes and Matza (1957), found that dancers employed the technique of information control. In other words, they controlled the amount of information they gave to members of these groups. Dancers could freely discuss their jobs with insiders (i.e., other dancers, people they dealt with on a regular basis, and boyfriends or spouses) who knew they were dancers and accepted their occupation. Outsiders were people (such as parents) from whom the dancers wanted to hide their dancer role. To these people, dancers “passed” as waitresses or entertainers (p. 302).

Thompson and Harred stated that dancers rationalized and neutralized their “deviant behavior” (p. 304) using three of the five techniques outlined by Sykes and Matza (1957): denying injury, condemning the people who condemn them, and appealing to “higher loyalties” (p. 304). Denying injury served the purpose of upholding the construction of dancers as “legitimate entertainers” and as such, they “protect society” by “keeping pervert[s] off the streets” (p. 305). Condemning the condemners was found to be the most often-cited rationalization/neutralization technique employed by the dancers who resented the way they were treated and condemned people who condemned them. They used counterfeit intimacy to hide their resentment of the stigma. Other dancers managed stigma by flaunting their occupation by using “stigma-laden” terms for what they did, such as “tittle dancer.” (p. 307). The third way dancers rationalized/neutralized their behavior was by appealing to higher loyalties, that is, couching their work in an altruistic framework. For example, although most dancers in the Thompson and Harred study “openly admitted they danced for money” (p. 307), they also proffered reasons for dancing such as helping family members, paying for school so that parents would be spared the cost of their education, or not being on welfare.

Debut of the Dancer–Researcher

Finally, three of the 13 articles in this decade were written by Carol Rambo Ronai, who at the time was a graduate student in sociology and an exotic dancer. From her insider's perspective, Ronai (1994) discussed the empowered/helplessness of dancers and stated that they use narrative resistance “to resist the ubiquitous imputations of deviance that they confront in their everyday lives” (p. 197). She defined narrative resistance as “the narrative strategies subjects used to create and manage their own identities and defy the power of discursive constraint” (Cordell and Ronai 1999, p. 31). Ronai (1992) also studied how dancers manage the process of aging. Because of the money, gifts, and flexible hours, Ronai observed that many dancers prolong their exit from this work. While some dancers seek a promotion, others save money to buy a business or support themselves while they get their education. Ronai admits that older dancers may be forced to quit if they cannot find a place for themselves in the club or may end their careers working in lower status clubs. In addition to Ronai's contributions to understanding exotic dance from an insider's perspective, her debut as an “out” dancer/researcher paved the way for a new generation of dancer/researchers in the following decade.

2000–2008

The literature trends in the most recent timeframe continue to move away from individual-level pathologizing toward understanding dancers within organizational and cultural frameworks. The term “sexualization” enters the discourse, with dancers seen as operating within larger cultural trends of both sexualization and abuse of women. Strip clubs are also seen as a site of cultural research. Agustin (2005) encourages researchers to move away from a focus on individual dancers towards a focus on the cultural contexts and issues associated with sex work. Schweitzer (2000) looks at exotic dancing as a postmodern spectacle—the “anticipation of the ideal versus apprehension of the real” (p. 66), wherein “strippers symbolize freedom from social control” (p. 69). Stripping is popular because people want to engage in the fantasy that exotic dance and dancers provide.

Dancers Breaking and Making the Rules

Deshotels and Forsyth (2008) and Egan (2004) contribute to the literature on the club environment, wherein dancers were found to use different and creative methods to bend, break, or ignore the rules of the management. Deshotels and Forsyth noted that dancers selectively enforced the club's rules to their own advantage and stated “the ability to use organizational rules to gain power in interactions with customers shows how the mezo/organizational level impacts dancers' power” (p. 496). Furthermore, the stricter the rules, the freer dancers were “to benefit from breaking” them (p. 496). For example, dancers violated the “no touch rule” in the secluded, private rooms of the club where they permitted not only more touching but also intimate contact in order to earn more money (p. 491). Egan (2004) focused on

power and resistance strategies of dancers who work in clubs where owners have installed surveillance cameras. Egan argues that managers who observe dancers through surveillance cameras contribute more to their objectification than does the audience because the former are using the dancers strictly for profit. However, she noted that dancers in these clubs are as adept at employing resistance strategies, as are their colleagues in clubs where cameras do not exist. In addition, as is pointed out in many of the articles on clubs, dancers use the rules of the clubs or, in this case, the camera to their advantage when “customers get out of hand” (p. 314).

Dancers on a Continuum of Sexualization, Victimization and Abuse

The focus on individual dancers continued throughout this decade and included research on how they survive stigma (Israel 2002), as well as on the victimization of dancers and their experiences of abuse and exploitation (Wesely 2002, 2006). Wesely (2002) described a “continuum of sexualization” (p. 1191) that dancers experienced as children. At one end of the continuum is the objectification of a girl’s body (i.e., using their bodies “provocatively” (p. 1190) to get what they wanted or manipulate or control a man), with rape at the other end. As Wesely (2006) explained, the messages these women received as young girls always led back to the body “[a]s the locus of both powerful and powerless feelings, the sexualized body became the only clear point of identity for the developing sense of self” (p. 1195). In her later study, Wesely (2006) noted that the violence perpetrated by dancers has to be studied within the context of the violence they experienced earlier in life. She found that ten of the twenty dancers she studied used violence (e.g., lobbying glass bottles, punching or kicking the men, slamming their heads into walls) in reaction to customers’ derogatory comments or physical abuse. Some dancers carry mace or guns to protect themselves and “to refuse further victimization” (p. 325).

Bouclin (2006) studied the Dancers’ Equal Rights Association (DERA) in Ottawa, Canada. According to the dancers in her study, lap dancing is seen as “economic exploitation” because they feel “pressured to ‘do more’ in order to earn a living wage as dancers” (Para 3). As a resistance measure, the dancers formed the DERA in 2000 in response to a decision by the Supreme Court of Canada that lap dancing was not offensive to the community’s “standards of decency” (Part 3, Para 3). However, what Bouclin found was that although the DERA was organized to educate and help dancers, it also has “unwittingly” (Part 3, Para 6) created a dichotomy between good girls (white, educated women who do not want to provide lap dances) and bad girls (often women of color who will do lap dances for the extra income). The author argued that the DERA pits dancers against each other instead of working for the benefits of all dancers.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that the themes of exotic dance research can be clearly identified, while the methods and motivations of researchers remain somewhat

murky. We can identify with significant clarity which topics and questions have captivated the interests of researchers studying exotic dance over the course of nearly 40 years, such as the motivations for becoming dancers, dancers' self-perceptions, individual experiences of stripping, deviance, and gendered power differences.

Frank (2007) clearly argues that “Perhaps the most ubiquitous question in the strip club literature to date concerns gendered power—whether dancers are exploited or exploiters, subjects or objects, empowered or oppressed. Researchers have obviously not ignored other aspects of exotic dance, and most of the academic work on stripping does not treat gendered power as the central problematic. However, this issue is discussed so repetitively that it is worth exploring in more depth” (p. 504). Less clear are the specifics associated with the research methods of these studies. While many researchers report their research methods in broad terms, the majority of researchers did not specify their strategies for sampling, data collection and analysis. We know even less about the researchers themselves and their multiple subjectivities, politics, and agendas for conducting exotic dance research.

Our review of the literature reveals the progression of research on exotic dance. The 2000–2008 articles represent the broadest range of levels (micro, meso, macro) associated with exotic dance research with articles focused on individual dancers (micro), clubs (meso), and to a much more limited degree, culture and policy (macro). These articles present a stark comparison to those produced in the 1970s and 1980s that were almost uniquely focused on individual dancers, and the 1980s–1990s where research focused on individual dancers in addition to clubs (norms, rules, culture, and power). It appears as though the narrow scope of exotic dance research expanded in breadth and level of nuance over the decades.

While many unexplored spaces for exotic dance research remain (Frank 2007), we noticed that over time more complicated explorations and theorizing of exotic dance/dancers emerged; researchers gradually moved beyond a single explanation, experience, or reality (e.g., exotic dance is exploitive or all female exotic dancers hate men etc.), and began presenting more nuanced understandings or portrayals of exotic dance/dancers whereas dancers negotiate identity, feel powerful and powerless sometimes simultaneously. For example, contemporary researchers are more likely to conclude that although dancers' bodies are controlled by club managers, dancers may experience a lack of control and simultaneously resist the control they experience through various strategies. Contemporary researchers are also less grounded in deviance, pathology, or victimization (dancers as victims) as depicted in the research of 1970s and 1980s. The more nuanced and complicated explorations and representations of exotic dance may be linked to the increased involvement of current or past sex workers doing exotic dance research; however, a more targeted research project would need to be engaged to validate this claim.

As is often the case with science, information and knowledge about the actual researchers conducting the exotic dance research is limited (to discipline, degree(s), perhaps gender) and largely absent in this sample. While some (positivist) scientists argue that this type of information is irrelevant to the reader as “rigorous” and

“valid” research is supposed to be objective and largely free of bias, other (interpretive and critical, for example) scientists argue that because objectivity is impossible in social science, and that because the purpose of research is to construct knowledge rather than discover truth, it is quite relevant to glimpse, perhaps even know the subjectivity(ies) of the researchers as they are seen as co-constructors of knowledge in research.

While the argument to reveal researcher subjectivity in exotic dance research may have little to no place in positivist and quantitative arenas, the absence of information pertaining to researcher subjectivities is starkly and curiously absent from this overwhelmingly qualitative (though not necessarily constructivist) sample. What we do know is that most of the articles in this sample were written by sociologists and legal scholars. Also present but less common are psychologists, anthropologists, and social workers. We also know that less than one-quarter of the articles were written by at least one researcher who revealed having personal experience as an exotic dancer. Thus, we were not able to make sound claims about how a researcher’s own experiences or lack thereof in the sex industry informed their overall research. We did however notice that articles presenting and discussing nuanced perceptions of exotic dance/dancers appeared to be more likely authored or co-authored by an academic who disclosed having engaged in sex work at some time than an academic who either did not disclose or did not engage in sex work previously.

Concluding Remarks

The attitudes and approaches of North American exotic dance researchers have undergone an ostensible shift over the past four decades as Frank (2007) and Egan and Frank (2005) have previously argued: from viewing women who strip as deviant and victimized to seeing them as multidimensional, with many factors impacting their approaches to work and life. Gaining insights into experiences of people working as exotic dancers is crucial to our understanding not just of the social process by which one becomes an exotic dancer, but also for potentially understanding a wide range of other socio-cultural dynamics related to sexuality, work, gender, and power. Because of the highly political and relational nature of this type of research, we join Egan and Frank (2005) in challenging and inviting exotic dance/strip club researchers to further articulate and interrogate their own multiple subjectivities and positionalities. As researchers continue to delve into the politics and practices of exotic dance and dancers (as well as of their customers, families, partners, communities, etc.), we call for researchers to provide more detailed accounts of their methods and data analysis processes. In addition to increased researcher reflexivity, this will provide additional context and meaning to the research and ultimately build a clearer picture of the ways in which exotic dance and dancers are integrated into larger social, cultural, and political fabrics.

Appendix: List of articles included in the study (n = 89)

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