



“Precarious Situations” in a Strip Club: Exotic Dancers and the Problem of Reality Maintenance

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In her classic article, “Behavior in Private Places: Sustaining Definitions of Reality in Gynecological Examinations” (1970), Joan Emerson uses the example of a gynecological exam to demonstrate how social order can prevail even when a social situation is rife with contradictions. In this article, I use Emerson’s work as a reference point for another contradictory social situation: a contemporary strip club. The point of this comparison is to examine some similarities and differences in how “reality” is created, threatened, and maintained in each setting, and to gain insight into how specific social conditions impact the process of reality maintenance.

Defining Reality in a Precarious Situation

Emerson explains that the process of undergoing a gynecological exam can bring about two diametrically opposed messages: (1) the gynecological exam is sexual **and/or** intimate because it involves the (female) patient’s

genitals being touched by a (male) physician, and (2) the gynecological exam is merely a *routine, scientific procedure*; therefore the exam is completely free of sexual or emotional meaning. Such contradictory messages create what Emerson calls “the problem of reality maintenance”; a problem that is particularly acute for the people most invested in maintaining a certain understanding of reality. In Emerson’s case, those people are the gynecologists—since they (as well as most medical experts) base their professional legitimacy upon behaving in a scientific, professional manner, they have tremendous incentive to project an objective, detached image, while extinguishing any threats to this image.

For gynecologists, a contradictory image takes root when their client considers the following question: “Is this truly just a professional routine, or is it a sexual and/or intimate act?” Interestingly, in my research of the commercial sex industry, including field work as a waitress in a strip club,⁷ I have seen the reverse question arise among clients of sex workers; that is, “Is this *truly* a sexual and/or intimate act, or is it just a professional routine?” In both cases these questions cast doubt on the definition of reality projected by the worker, thus jeopardizing their control over clients.

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It is within these questioning moments, suspended between contradictory definitions of what is “really” going on, that Emerson sees a “precarious situation.” The situation is precarious because the pendulum of meaning could easily swing either way; if it swings in favor of the worker’s definition, the worker succeeds in performing her or his transaction with professional and personal integrity intact. If, however, the pendulum swings in favor of any contradictory definition, the routine is disrupted and the worker’s grip on the situation is loosened.

To some extent, this problem is embedded everywhere; all social situations contain symbols or messages that people may interpret in numerous ways. However, this only becomes a problem when new perceptions of reality conflict with institutionalized ones. If people perceive an institution to have meaning contradictory to its “purpose,” people are left with no established pattern, or guide, for behavior. Lacking any clear definition of what is “really” going on, the situation becomes one of confusion; people may get nervous and perplexed, and their behavior becomes unpredictable.

This is an unsettling possibility for anyone engaged in an activity requiring the full cooperation of others such as performing a gynecological exam or performing a private “lap dance”² at a strip club. While at first glance these two actions may seem to have little in common—the first being an unpleasant but necessary medical procedure performed on a woman for “her own good”; the second being an unnecessary act performed primarily on men simply because it “feels good”—workers in both situations face strikingly similar problems of reality maintenance.

In both cases, the medical worker and the sex worker perform actions that their clients may interpret in contradictory ways. Due to the precarious situation that this brings, a considerable amount of effort on the part of workers is needed to ensure client coopera-

tion. Initially, the desired definitions of reality appear as opposites—medical workers want their actions understood as *standardized* and *non-intimate* while sex workers want their actions understood as intimate and *non-standardized*. However, in both cases workers also occasionally find it useful to intentionally project contradictory messages, or counterthemes. For example, the gynecologist occasionally includes a few personal (non-standardized) touches to keep the patient from feeling humiliated and dehumanized; the sex worker occasionally reminds the customer of his customer (standardized) role as a way to squelch any expectations that their relationship will carry on outside of work boundaries. As a result, skillful workers in both fields alternate between themes of standardized professionalism and personalized intimacy as it suits their immediate needs.

The point of these maneuvers is to get clients to succumb to the worker’s definition of reality, thus allowing the worker to complete a successful transaction. However, since both transactions involve objects or behaviors with deeply symbolic meanings (for the gynecological exam, exposure to genitals = sexual intimacy; for the lap dance, sexual intimacy = a “real” relationship), convincing people to think otherwise is not an easy task. Reality maintenance in these circumstances requires considerable skill and collective effort; it is a process that works best when it is invisible to the client. As Emerson (1970) writes, successful reality maintenance creates the feeling that “reality seems to be out there before we arrive on the scene.”

Due to the symbolic and contradictory meanings found in both gynecological exams and lap dancing, many of the ways that the medical worker’s definition of reality is maintained in a gynecological exam also work toward maintaining the sex worker’s definition of reality in a strip club. However, a number of structural and interactional factors make the process of reality maintenance in the strip club more precarious.



Factors That Exacerbate Precarious Situations

Perhaps the most important factor that impacts the management of a precarious situation is that of institutional legitimacy. Unlike the gynecological business, whose legitimacy is protected by massive institutions like the American Medical Association and the U.S. government, the social and legal legitimacy of exotic dancing is far shakier and subject to regional, state, and local variation.

This lack of institutional legitimacy in many strip club settings leads to a number of related problems, including the likelihood of intrusive troublemakers. Namely, a strip club's projection of reality is subject to constant and serious threat from troublemakers such as police officers, jealous lovers, and misguided customers (imagine a jealous husband or a police officer busting up a gynecological exam). All of these intrusions interfere with normal business, sometimes requiring workers to halt operations.

In addition to serious troublemakers, clients in strip clubs are generally less predictable and cooperative than clients in gynecological exams. In part, this lack of customer predictability is due to the nature of the business: One-on-one interactions with customers require the worker to individually tailor her approach. However, workers who provide other intimate, individually tailored services (such as hair styling, massage, counseling, or even gynecological exams) do not generally face uncooperative customers, so it is clear that the problem again stems from a lack of social legitimacy. In other words, customers might simply not see the worker as "legitimate"; thus an internalized **sense** of respect for the worker is lacking.

Additionally, the stigmatized work of selling and performing exotic dances may pose unique emotional requirements. As opposed to working within an arena built on emotional detachment (such as medicine), sex work requires the simultaneous *encouragement* of and *containment* of highly charged emotions. This, in addition to managing the

stigma of sex work, may require more emotional labor for the sex practitioner in both managing her own and her customers' emotions. This in turn may make the process of reality maintenance more precarious.

Finally, the gendered, service-oriented nature of female erotic dancing might give customers the idea that control and power is in their hands rather than in the workers'. Since the broader culture still deems men more legitimately powerful than women, women in many occupations face problems of establishing interactional legitimacy. This combined with a culture of customer service (where the customer is allegedly "always right"), makes for a situation where worker control is not guaranteed.

In sum, with a lack of institutional, social, and interactional legitimacy, erotic dancers (and sex workers in general) cannot take their control for granted. Not only is their work itself often precarious legally, but on an interactional level, control over the definition of the situation must be continuously negotiated. Thus, in these settings, workers are more challenged in maintaining their definition of the situation.

Maintaining Reality in a Strip Club

Despite differences in legitimacy, in both the gynecological examining room and the strip club, a successful reality maintenance campaign involves a practiced performance using several techniques. These techniques fall into two steps of reality maintenance: (1) *setting the mood* (setting and maintaining an overall message or atmosphere), and (2) *enforcing the rules* (enacting and enforcing that message with individual clients). When both levels of reality maintenance are employed, the likelihood of client cooperation increases.

Setting the Mood

The creation of an overall "mood" or atmosphere is accomplished through the use of several techniques, images, and props, all of

which work in concert. In gynecological exams, an atmosphere of objectivity, *rationality*, and *standardization* is projected by normalizing and routinizing the exam, donning medical uniforms, and downplaying any emotional content. In the strip club where I worked (referred to here as “Club X”), an atmosphere of excitement, intrigue, and exclusivity was accomplished by heightening clients’ emotions, making them believe that the experience was fun, sexy, exclusive, and slightly taboo, although also legitimate and professional. In both settings, workers intentionally influence the content and tone of clients’ emotions. In one setting, the worker maintains control by making sure the client does not blush; in another setting, the worker maintains control by making sure the client *does*.

At Club X, the goal of making clients both emotionally “charged up” and compliant to workers’ wishes was first accomplished by routinizing and standardizing the club’s “mood.” This was achieved by manipulating the appearance, language, and behavior of staff members, the images projected, the music and lighting, and the DJ’s announcements.

On a typical night at Club X, the DJ had the greatest immediate influence over the mood; thus this person’s routine was key for reality maintenance. The DJ was responsible for controlling the television channel (linked to five TV monitors in the club), as well as the light level of the club and, of course, the music. Each DJ had their unique style (one favored loud music, another kept the light level low), but all DJs had to ultimately comply with the company CEO’s standards—the club could not be “too” dark, “too” loud, and the music had to stay fairly upbeat.

The DJ was also the official “voice” of the club; his or her words and tone influenced the mood and acted as a vocal tour guide for customers, encouraging them to see the experience from the club’s point of view. One such viewpoint was that the experience was exciting and fun, similar to a sporting event. This message was made most explicit once

an hour, when the DJ announced that it was time for the “Texas Teaser.” All the dancers (sometimes numbering over thirty) gathered on the front stage, smiling, posing, and flirting with the customers on the floor, while the DJ goaded the crowd:

Just *look* at all those gorgeous ladies! Guys, what do you say?! Take your hands out of your pockets and show some appreciation! *On* the count of three I want you to all shout as loud as you can, and the guy who makes the most noise will get a free pass to the club!! One . . . Two . . . Threeeee!!!!
[The crowd goes wild, some young men standing on their seats, yelling, and pumping their arms in the air.]

These exuberant displays of concentrated emotion might have resulted in a loss of control for the workers, but interestingly, it rarely did. Rather, customers seemed to clearly understand that this game was not serious and that the workers controlled the rules. This understanding was reinforced immediately after the contest—the dancers would descend from the stage, flood the floor, and choose a customer for a “free” dance (while the DJ explained that they must buy a second dance). Since not every customer could get chosen for this free dance, and since the choosing process was up to the dancer, in a matter of moments the customers’ demeanor shifted from noisy swaggering to humble anticipation (or dread). If a customer was overlooked this would sometimes turn to embarrassment; as one young man said to me, laughing and pointing to his friend, “Look at him, he was sitting there waiting on the couch, but no one wanted to give him a dance!”

In addition to the vulnerability that comes with waiting to be chosen, customers were also put in their place by the DJ, who routinely teased them by questioning both their heterosexual virility (“What are ya, a bunch of wussies?! What’s wrong with you, don’t ya like naked chicks?!”) and their manners (“Didn’t your mother teach you any manners?! Show some appreciation and buy

a dance. And buy that lady a drink while you're at it.”).

During all this excitement and teasing, an implicit message of professionalism and customer service was also projected by workers. One way this was demonstrated was in the standardized dress of staff members. Just as medical professionals and staff wear specific and unique clothing to both distinguish themselves from their patients and to project a certain (detached) message, the dancers and staff of Club X also used clothing as a method of intentional reality maintenance. One obvious use of this method was found in the rule that all staff members—including waitresses, doormen, bartenders, DJs, floor managers, and the parking lot attendant—wear the same uniform: a white tuxedo shirt, black slacks, and black shoes. The one variation in this uniform was that male staff members (essentially, everyone except the waitresses) were additionally required to wear a bow tie. As a fellow waitress explained to me, this dress code was established because “some of the waitresses were wearing really short skirts . . . but they [the management] wanted us to, look classier.”

This “professional” and sexually de-emphasized dress code for staff members also created a distinct contrast to the dancers—all of whom wore costumes meant to symbolize and create a sexually alluring image. None of the dancers wore identical outfits, and these outfits often changed by the night (and sometimes two or three times on the same night), but most of them fell within a narrow range of variability, ranging from short tight dresses to lingerie and g-string panties. These differences between the dancers’ and staff members’ costumes are not unlike the costume differences found within medical staff ranks where each variation symbolizes a difference in the person’s status and role. However, in the strip club setting, costume variety between dancers and staff members also served to simultaneously portray a seemingly contradictory mixture of messages.

Another mood-shaping tool in Club X were the TV monitors. When I first began working at this club, every night brought a variety of soundless video images. Many of these images were of male sporting events, but sometimes the DJ would decide to watch the news, cartoons, or the Nature channel. Scrolling across these images were club advertisements such as “Welcome to Club X!,” “\$5 table dances; \$12 couch dances, and \$20 VIP dances!” and “If you’ve been overcharged, contact a manager.” While these messages seemed congruent with images of football, race cars, and wrestling, the image of Dan Rather discussing Middle East politics made for a comically ironic fit. Eventually, these contradictory video messages stirred higher management to create new rules about acceptable video images. At one employee meeting, the general manager of Club X was particularly upset about the showing of cartoons, inspiring him to instigate a “no cartoon” rule.

Absolutely no cartoons! That drives me crazy! No more cartoons! You wanna know why? Cuz cartoons make you think of kids. When I see cartoons, I think of my kids. It makes me miss my kids, I wish I could see them more often. So if you’ve got some pervert in here, spending three, four hundred dollars, and he sees cartoons up on the TV, he’s going to think of his kids, feel like shit, and he’s going to leave. So no more cartoons!

In other words, the point of these televised images was to encourage a specific mood as well as to sustain customers’ attention by keeping them entranced and undistracted by their external emotional ties³

The language of the staff also shaped the club’s mood. Just as the use of clinical terms in a gynecological office creates an atmosphere of emotional and sexual detachment, the language at Club X was used to create an atmosphere that was sexually exciting as well as professional and polite. The DJ would routinely describe a dancer as a “beautiful showgirl” or a “hottie,” but the language in

this club was generally not sexually explicit. Rather, body parts were euphemized or avoided altogether. As a result, the club could be distinguished as a “gentlemen’s club” rather than as “pornographic” or “raunchy.”

The language of waitresses and doormen also served to create an atmosphere of exclusivity and politeness to both customers and dancers. Club X advertised that it gave every customer “VIP” treatment, and staff members were instructed to treat dancers with old-fashioned respect (at least in front of customers). For instance, when a dancer was found sitting with a customer, waitresses were trained to formally ask the customer, “Would you like to buy the lady a drink?” As Emerson puts it, such scripted language serves to “embody intentional themes.” In other words, by routinizing worker behavior, specific messages can be reliably portrayed to customers. Thus, by consistently referring to dancers as “ladies,” the message was sent that—although this was a place where one could get rowdy and receive good service—this was a place where one had to be polite to dancers.

In both the gynecological examining room and in the strip club, the work routine also includes similar specialized work areas—a table in the examining room; a couch in the strip club. Both also have “chaperones” (either a floor manager or a nurse) whose presence serves to discourage deviations from the intended reality.

Although the DJ was a heavyweight in creating the initial “mood,” Club X’s reality relied on the cooperation of all employees. Management was aware of this need for cooperation, judging by the messages staff members received such as a sign in the break-room which read: “T.E.A.M.—together everyone achieves more.” Here the point of working together was to create a reality that was “respectable,” service-oriented, and profitable. This emphasis on professional customer service is evident from the following quote from the general manager of Club X:

Our competitors turned up the music, turned down the lights, and let the hand jobs fly. . . but that’s not the kind of operation I’m running here . . . we need to stress service and entertainment. . . . When people go to a restaurant, they don’t go there for the service, but it is what brings them back. So when customers come in, take care of them. . . be friendly, say, “Hey how’s it going? „If you see a girl ybu’d like, just let me know, and I’ll get her for you.” You know, take care of them.

From the worker’s point of view, the ideal result of all these images, routines, and props is to prevent situations from becoming precarious—to barrage the client with consistent implicit (and sometimes explicit) messages, asserting that “this is how it’s done here,” and hoping for client cooperation.

Enforcing the Rules

Once the mood is set, a secondary process of enforcement is sometimes necessary. In both Emerson’s observations of the gynecological exam and my own at Club X, rule enforcement was typically accomplished by simply instructing uninitiated clients (as well as co-workers) about their expected roles. In both settings, workers expect obedience and passivity from clients. And just as the physician guides the patient through the precarious scene by taking the initiative, controlling the encounter, and carefully monitoring the patient’s reactions, so does the exotic dancer.

At Club X, once a dancer got a customer to agree to a dance, she was responsible for guiding the client into his or her proper role. While some role expectations were basic and mandatory (e.g., “no touching” and “keep your hands by your sides”), other role expectations were subtler—requiring the dancer to strategically combine her messages.

For instance, when an ambivalent customer conceded to a dance, dancers often found it useful to interact with the customer in a way that made him (or her) feel special and “really” cared for, yet also aware that the feeling came with a price. After getting paid,

a dancer sometimes gave her customer a friendly hug and kiss on the cheek, reinforcing the message that she really did care about him. With younger male customers (who were notoriously “cheap” and who might have been embarrassed about paying for a temporary girlfriend), dancers would frequently walk with them hand-in-hand, leading them to the cash machine, but looking like high school kids going steady. With such shy, young, “cheap,” emotionally sensitive, or uninitiated customers, subtle emotional management was often required.

For the hostile or uncooperative customer, rule enforcement relied upon the threat of physical force from male employee “chaperones.” The primary chaperone at Club X was the floor manager, but all employees (especially male employees) were expected to jump in if trouble started. This club also had an informal enforcement team, composed of a few men who were allegedly not employees, but who were frequent visitors and known as “friends of the club.” As one veteran waitress explained to me, these “friends” “watch out for the girls and pitch in if they’re needed.”

Fortunately, the majority of customers accepted the reality of Club X and played along with the expected rules: that is, they applauded the dancers on stage, stood up and yelled when the DJ told them to do so, accepted all “free” dances, sat passively while a private dance was performed on them, and then graciously paid the previously negotiated price (mostly ranging from ten to forty dollars, with the average being twenty dollars a dance). However, some customers remained mystified or shy observers, some were arrogantly skeptical of the rules, and others became aggressive or hostile. *

In one case, Nicki had just finished two lap dances and had successfully collected her fee, but as she turned to leave the customer reached his hand up inside of her underwear and squeezed her buttock. Nicki became very upset and immediately told Aaron, who

was working as the doorman. As Aaron later told me the story, he “told the guy to get the fuck out of here” before he “beat the shit out of him.” The threat worked, and the deviant customer departed.

Other, perhaps even more troublesome intruders were jealous lovers of dancers, delusional customers who refused to accept that they could not have a “real” relationship with their favorite dancer, as well as customers who were simply belligerent and looking for a fight. Due to the highly explosive nature of these situations, staff members had to stay alert and immediately call for help if needed—even if this involved asking for help from another set of troublesome intruders, the police.

Despite their role as potential protectors, the most precarious situations often arose with the entrance of the police. Since this club was in a suburban area where strip clubs were a highly contentious political issue, police officers occasionally stopped by to make their presence known and to monitor the club’s activities. When this happened, Club X’s reality was severely interrupted. Word would quickly spread throughout the club that the police were there. If there was enough lead time, special red lights would flash behind the bar to warn workers that the police were coming. The manager would then put on a friendly face, greet the officers at the door, and give them a tour of the facility. While business appeared to continue, with waitresses serving drinks, the music continuing, and the DJ introducing each dancer as she appeared on stage, the money exchange would essentially halt; dancers would quit performing lap dances and sit quietly next to their customers or with each other. Sometimes, if a dancer was not notified quickly enough of the threat, she would get caught in the middle of an illegal lap dance⁵ and be ticketed. The heart-of the entire business (lap dances) would not resume until the departure of the police.

Although far less frequent, precarious situations also rose from the actions of dancers. Often coming from dancers who had previously worked in more sexually lenient clubs, their deviations came in the form of intimacy transgressions—in other words, they went “too far” with their customers. In my six months of work at Club X, there were several cases of dancers who were chastised and sanctioned by other dancers for such transgressions.

For example, Tasha, a dancer at Club X who routinely grabbed at men’s genitals through their trousers, was overwhelmingly disliked by the other dancers and staff. As one waitress told me, ‘You know who I really don’t like? Tasha. She’s really not classy; that’s when I hate working here, when it feels like a whorehouse.’ It probably was no coincidence that Tasha did not last long as a Club X dancer; without the respect of the other dancers and staff members, negotiation of precarious situations becomes far more difficult.

In some cases, the initiation of a new dancer or the sanctioning of an established dancer simply involved a cold shoulder. But many times the punishment of inappropriate behavior was more direct. In one case, Janessa—a dancer with experience at several other clubs around the United States—was surrounded by several dancers in the dressing room and scolded for putting her crotch in a customer’s face. Janessa left her shift early, crying.

In another case, a veteran Club X dancer lashed out at a newer dancer who she felt had gone “too far.” The verbal explosion (below) was witnessed by several other dancers and staff:

I’m fucking old school! Remember how much shit you gave me when I started working here?! [directed at another veteran dancer, who nods her head.] That Regina girl’s letting people grab her and shit and only charging twelve dollars! If she wants to do that she should put her ass on the street!! I’m fucking old school. She needs to be taught.

The newer dancer also took a verbal shot or two, but the veteran had publicly and definitively made her point. The manager then quickly intervened, taking both dancers into her office for a private “consultation.”

If a manager directly witnessed an intimacy transgression, the dancer would risk harsher penalties. Officially, each dancer was allowed two warnings about such behavior, and on the third offense they would get “termed” (i.e., their independent business contract with the club would be terminated). In one case, a new dancer, Cyndi, performed stage shows that *were* more sexually graphic than the norm (which other dancers described as “gross”). *She* was also observed on a number of occasions physically groping the genitals of her customers (through their clothing)—which is against both the club’s rules and the state’s laws. In her short time at the club, Cyndi had already received two warnings. I observed Cyndi’s third offense: She was on a female customer’s lap, fondling her breast, and kissing her on the lips. It was the kissing more than anything that shocked the rest of the dancers and staff, since kissing in these circumstances was seen as outrageously intimate. The floor manager was notified and Cyndi was immediately termed.

In all of these examples, it is clear that when a dancer heightened her sexual intimacy with customers, the club’s (as well as the dancers’) definition of reality was threatened. These actions made the club more at risk of legal sanctions, increased customers’ expectations (which subsequently created more competition between dancers), and threatened the “high class” aim of Club X. In an atmosphere where workers were greatly invested in distancing themselves from prostitutes, most dancers and staff members were personally offended by such behavior.

Conclusions

Comparing Emerson’s observations on gynecological exams with my own observations of

Club X leads to a number of insights about reality maintenance. One is simply that the process of creating and -maintaining reality in both situations is strikingly similar. However, by examining the contrasting points of each case, one also finds that different settings create the need for different techniques. The most relevant contrasts are the level of *institutionalized legitimacy* and the *required amount of client management*. It seems that the higher the social legitimacy of an industry, and the lower the need to constantly monitor and manage one's customers, the lower the threat of a precarious situation. In such a situation, the worker's power is assured and automatic client compliance is likely. In contrast, lower social legitimacy combined with a "high maintenance" customer results in a more precarious situation that needs constant monitoring, manipulation, and rule enforcement.

While rule enforcement at Club X occasionally required the threat of physical force, the vast majority of this enforcement was enacted through the skillful manipulation of messages. Emerson claims that if one pays better attention to the interplay between implicit and explicit messages, then a richer understanding of reality maintenance will emerge. Unlike gynecological exams, contradictory *explicit* messages are the key to reality maintenance at Club X. In other words, in order for the sex workers in this context to "pull it off," a simultaneous explicit expression of both professionalism and intimacy was not only possible, but necessary to maintain control.

In sum, strip clubs and gynecological exam rooms are both infused with contradictory messages, which can result in precarious

definitions of the situation. In a sense, both are getting away with highly "intimate" acts in a commercial setting. However, Club X is doing so with a lack of social and legal legitimacy, making it more dependent on the efforts of individual workers to create a reality where business can be done.

Notes

1. As part of my dissertation research, during 1998-1999 I spent six months working as a strip club waitress.

2. In contrast to a stage dance, where dancers perform for the entire audience and sometimes collect tips, lap dances are performed for the enjoyment of one customer and must be individually paid for. For most exotic dancers, the lap dance is the primary source of income.

3. Interestingly, pornography was rarely shown at Club X. During my six months of work, I only saw it shown twice. On both occasions, dancers complained loudly, calling these images lewd and disgusting.

4. All names have been changed.

5. Strip clubs within this police jurisdiction are subject to a "four-foot" rule; that is, erotic dances performed closer than four feet away from the patron are against the law. The problem is, it is virtually impossible for a dancer to make any money unless she dances closer than four feet.

Reference

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