NEIGHBORLY STRIPPING: EXOTIC DANCE IN A RURAL CLUB

A Thesis in
Rural Sociology
by
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ABSTRACT

Exotic dance research focuses almost exclusively on the working conditions of urban strip clubs and largely overlooks exotic dance in rural areas. This ethnographic thesis examined the work culture and structure of a rural exotic dance club in the northeastern United States. I reflexively analyzed data from 22 in-depth interviews and 120 hours of participant observation to answer two research questions: (1) What occupational culture do rural exotic show club dancers share?, and (2) How does the job of rural show club dancing influence dancers’ relationships with people outside and inside the club? I found that the structure of this club fostered a generally positive occupational culture by emphasizing equality among dancers and by not allowing club patrons to touch dancers. Dancers’ interactions with co-workers were mostly friendly and comfortable, especially when workers were willing to closely adhere to the club’s cultural norms. Dancers’ interactions with people outside the club were strained by negative stereotypes associated with exotic dance. The study found that many dancers wanted to hide their stripper status from outsiders, but had trouble remaining anonymous within a socially dense rural context.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Legal! Lucrative! Legitimate?

Exotic dance is a legal form of labor within the commercial sex industry. More than 500,000 people work either directly or indirectly for the exotic dance industry, and a single club in a major city may gross $10 to 20 million per year (Hanna 2012). Overall, the exotic dance industry earns an estimated 2 billion dollars in gross revenue each year (Ropelato 2010). The top 30 strip clubs in the U.S. are worth between $700 million and $1 billion to investors (W. Sherman 2007) and there are an estimated 3500 to 4000 strip clubs in the U.S. (VCG Holding Corp. 2011; Weitzer 2000; Hanna 2012). The industry has grown substantially over the past two decades and stakeholders in the adult entertainment industry expect continued growth (W. Sherman 2007; Rick’s Cabaret International, Inc. 2011). The largest strip club companies have been publicly traded on the NASDAQ, and they operate dozens of well-known clubs in cities across the U.S. such as Dallas, TX; Denver, CO; Las Vegas; Miami; New Orleans; New York City; Philadelphia; and St. Louis, MO; under names such as Larry Flint’s Hustler Clubs, PT’s Show Clubs, Rick’s Cabarets, and Spearmint Rhino Gentlemen’s Clubs. In 2010, Rick’s Cabaret’s twenty-two exotic dance clubs took in seventy thousand patrons a month (Hanna 2012). “A brand-name club attracts a substantial customer base of travelers who know what to expect by the name,” (Hanna 2012, 186). But note that substantial club-level variation characterizes this industry, as not all clubs are brand-name “gentlemen’s” clubs located in major metropolitan areas.

1 Published revenue figures are estimates—members of the industry vary in how they define their market and revenues.
2 The highly fragmented nature of the adult nightclub industry makes it difficult to know the exact number of operating facilities.
Despite the exotic dance industry’s impressive size, earnings, growth, and popularity, stripping is not seen as a socially legitimate job. According to a nationwide poll, almost half of the American public believes nude dancing in bars or clubs should be illegal (Gallup Poll Aug. 29-03 ’91). Yet, American mainstream culture seems to revere the female exotic dancer as the ideal representative of hyper-sexualized femininity. Strippers are popular characters in television, movie and music media; though they are not always cast in favorable lights. Recent academic work on exotic dance recognizes Americans’ simultaneous repulsion and attraction to the exotic dancer, but concludes that the mainstream uptick in “stripper chic” narratives has not been enough to validate exotic dancers as morally legitimate workers (Fensterstock 2006; Roach 2011). For example, in 2012, a young female journalist became the subject of headlines herself when the Houston Chronicle allegedly fired her for not disclosing on her job application that she also worked as a part-time stripper (IBTimes Staff Reporter 2012). Her informal work as an exotic dancer was lawful, but apparently it was not perceived as legitimate by her formal employer. 

Becoming Class Acts

Although exotic dance is legal, many people think of strip clubs as the site of nefarious activities such as prostitution, drug use, and organized crime (Weitzer 2000). In response to this negative public perception, the strip club industry has been striving to create “upscale” venues where customers feel safe and comfortable. These establishments are commonly referred to as

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3 The cast of The Sopranos (TV series 1999–2007) meets at a strip club called “Bada Bing” in numerous episodes. Several famous movie actresses have played stripper characters: Jessica Alba, Jamie Lee Curtis, Salma Hayek, Lindsay Lohan, Demi Moore and Marisa Tomei—to name only a few. Strippers are frequently the eye candy in many music videos, but probably the best example of musical adoration is T-Pain’s “I’m in Luv (Wit a Stripper) which peaked at 5th on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 chart in 2006: http://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/#charts/hot-100?chartDate=2006-02-18.

4 The former journalist, Sarah Tressler, is suing the Houston Chronicle. Ms. Tressler, represented by high-profile attorney Gloria Alfred, claims the dismal was an act of gender discrimination.
“gentleman's clubs,” and they are structured as nightclubs or bars. According to information provided on Rick’s Cabaret’s Securities and Exchange Commission form:

Prior to the opening of the first Rick’s Cabaret in 1983 in Houston, Texas, the topless nightclub business was characterized by small establishments generally managed by their owner. Operating policies of these establishments were often lax, the sites were generally dimly lit, standards for performers’ personal appearance and personality were not maintained … men felt uncomfortable in such environments. Recognizing a void in the market for a first-class adult nightclub, we designed Rick’s Cabaret to target the more affluent customer by providing a unique quality entertainment environment. (2011)

Anthropologist Katherine Frank explains, “The fairly recent advent of upscale gentlemen’s clubs has led to a highly stratified and normalized hierarchical arrangement of strip clubs in terms of classiness” (1998, 179). Upscale adult nightclubs are subdivided into tiers (VCG Holding Corp. 2011). The largest, highest tier clubs offer not only a variety of entertainment and performers, but also provide valet parking and gourmet meal options prepared by on-site chefs, in addition to other ritzy services (VCG Holding Corp. 2011; Rick’s Cabaret International, Inc. 2011; Hanna 2012). Smaller upscale clubs provide only limited or no food service, but sell alcohol and typically feature topless dancers. Establishments that do not sell alcohol tend to feature all-nude dancers as the main attraction (Bradley-Engen 2009). Strip clubs make money through drink sales, entrance cover charges, stage-use fees and private dances.

Industry promoters insist female exotic dancers are “adult entertainers”—rather than “strippers”—in an effort to distinguish their clubs as “classy.” To further distance themselves from “sleazy” hustle clubs (clubs that emphasize deception and sexual gratification), upscale clubs hold their employees to zero tolerance policies regarding prostitution and illegal drug use in their facilities (Rick’s Cabaret International, Inc. 2011; VCG Holding Corp. 2011). Club operators ensure entertainers, employees, and customers meet strict standards of “proper” behavior through continuous monitoring (VCG Holding Corp. 2011; Rick’s Cabaret International, Inc. 2011).
So-called classy gentlemen’s clubs play up the “entertainment” aspect of their venues. Clubs that emphasize theatrical stage performances, e.g. glitzy costumes and stunning stage acrobatics, often refer to themselves as “show clubs.” Those in the adult entertainment industry refer to clubs that do not emphasize stage performances as “hustle clubs” (Bradley-Engen 2009). As the exotic dance industry continues to refine its image, show clubs can be expected to become the leading business model. Sociologist Mindy S. Bradley-Engen notes, “As show clubs become dominant, how this prevailing definition of exotic dance may influence social acceptance has yet to be fully understood” (2009, 120). Acceptance of exotic dance as a “classy” form of “adult entertainment,” i.e. morally legitimate work, has implications for dancers who later enter the formal work world—will selective disclosure on future job applications continue to be necessary? The distinction of clubs becoming “classier,” and therefore more widely accepted, does not necessarily mean the role of being a show club dancer will receive a similar social upgrade.

The changing composition of the adult entertainment industry over the past 30 years may be linked to broader U.S. economic restructuring toward service sector jobs. As multimillion-dollar adult entertainment firms seek to enhance their brand images and expand profitable show club chains, it is expected these corporations will continue to strategically buyout small, owner-operated strip clubs. In 2011, VCG Holding Corporation stated,

> We believe maximum profitability and sustained growth in the industry is obtained by owning and operating upscale adult nightclubs. Our current strategy is to acquire upscale adult nightclubs in areas that are not market saturated and where the public is open to these types of establishments.

This strategy suggests that the exotic dance industry is paying attention not only to its image, but also to the location of its clubs.
Academic Spotlight

Sociologists and feminists have engaged in many conversations about female exotic dancers, as have researchers from other disciplines. Among these micro-level analyses (e.g. regarding dancers’ self-identities, motivations for dancing, and strategies for making money), the interactions between exotic dancers and their patrons have been a popular focal point. In 1974, Boles and Garbin were among the first sociologists to look at exotic dance as an occupation, albeit a deviant one. They found that stripper and customer interactions “are characterized by a counterfeiting of intimacy based upon inauthentic relations” (Boles and Garbin 1974a, 136). “The concept of counterfeit intimacy permeates the literature on exotic dance from the 1970s to the present day” (Wahab et al. 2011, 66). In 1998, Frank pointed out that the notion of “counterfeit intimacy” belies a too-simplistic assumption of one “true” form of intimacy in human relations.

Reflecting on her experiences as an exotic dancer, she observed,

Certainly, as dancers, we performed during these exchanges. … The men, though, performed as well. … While we were always performing, however, we were not always pretending. After all, I cannot say that the intimacy I developed with my regulars [customers] in the strip club was really false, for sometimes our mutual performances were also authentic. (Frank 1998, 197–8)

In fact, Frank argues, the relationships between dancers and their regular customers “generate a high degree of emotional involvement,” noting that the mere exchange of money does not necessarily render their interactions as “inauthentic” (1998, 175). In 2005, sociologist R. Danielle Egan found that dancers generally viewed customers as being innocuously annoying, or at times fun, but their interactions “become more complex as men move from being an occasional customer to a regular customer” (2005:87). The level of interaction the dancers have with ‘regulars’ can vary as a result of the structural organization of the clubs in which they work. Clubs that rely on repeat customer bases, such as clubs located in less densely populated areas, are likely to rely more heavily on “regulars” than clubs where greater population density enables

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5 For reviews, see Frank 2007 and Wahab et al. 2011.
6 A “regular” customer visits the club frequently—about once per week.
higher customer turnover. Population density, which varies by club location, creates conditions for more or less anonymity among dancers and patrons, and this club-level variation has not yet been well explored in exotic dance literature.

Bradley-Engen (2009) calls for more research on club-level variations, and offers a starting-point typology of exotic dance club structures—hustle clubs, social clubs, and show clubs. Her “show” club type broadens the industry’s formulation (i.e. “proper” behavioral standards). Her conceptualization includes select work order features, normative orders, sentiment orders and dancer commitment contingencies across club type (Bradley-Engen 2009). Bradley-Engen identifies sentiment orders as themes among dancers’ “interpersonal relations, attitudes, and experiences” within each club type (2009, 90).

In this context, sentiment refers to the feelings about work that dancers share regarding their club’s atmosphere, their attitudes toward customers, and their attachment to each other (or lack thereof). Of particular interest to this study are the attitudes and interactions between dancers, given the relative lack of research regarding dancer to dancer interactions. This study will invoke Bradley-Engen’s (2009) meso-level club typology when examining a “show” club, paying special attention to the potential influence of club structure on dancers’ intrapersonal relationships, attitudes and work experiences.

**Behind the Curtain**

Over the past 30 years, an abundance of research regards an “unrelenting” focus on one theme, according to Frank (2007): Which gender exercises power in strip clubs and how? Although she acknowledges the importance of carefully examining gendered power complexities,

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7 Barton 2006 and Spivey 2005 discuss findings of dancer “solidarity,” but only Bradley-Engen (2009) explicitly links the formation of micro-level intra-dancer friendships to meso-level structural club forces.
in her review of the literature, she urges researchers to expand their inquiries to areas less explored (Frank 2007). In particular, she calls for exotic dance researchers to discuss their own positionalities, identities and experiences in relation to their studies (Frank 2007). Similarly, in a more recent review of exotic dance literature, Stephanie Wahab et al. echo Frank’s call for reflexivity adding,

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. (2011, 71)

Interestingly, these authors note, among the articles they reviewed⁸, 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” (Wahab et al. 2011, 72). In the present study, I plan to emulate these “nuanced” accounts and will reveal my subjectivities as an academic researcher, an exotic dancer, and as a rural worker.

**The Fabric of Everyday Life**

“Strip clubs have become economically and socially integrated into everyday landscapes” (Wahab et al. 2011, 57), but the individual threads that connect exotic dance to a larger social, cultural and political tapestry remain largely obscured. I intend to trace at least some of the connections among micro-, meso- and macro-level forces shaping exotic dancers’ experiences as commercial sex workers. Laura Maria Agustin, a sociologist and cultural studies researcher, argues against treating commercial sex as only a micro-moral issue, i.e. focusing on the transactions and personal motivations of individuals (2005). Rather, commercial sex ought to be considered in its widest sense—as a shared cultural phenomenon—and researchers should “try to

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⁸ Wahab et al. (2011) used content analysis methods to examine 89 articles published between 1970-2008.
reveal how our societies distinguish between activities considered normatively ‘social’ and activities denounced as morally wrong” (Agustín 2005, 619). Further, she says,

Issues that arise for research and analysis range from economic (links with other industries and role of the informal sector); class and ethnic segmentation; sexual subcultures; gender performance; homosociality; the accumulation of social and cultural capital; and the shaping of urban, suburban and rural spaces. (Agustín 2005, 626)

This study addresses at least two elements in Agustín’s call for culturally-contextualized research: the economic role of the informal sector and the social influence of rural place on exotic dancers. In rural places, economic and social conditions are macro-level forces that may be linked together in important ways shaping club structure (meso-level) and dancer experiences (micro-level). For example, the prevailing moral attitudes held by people in a rural place potentially link the economic choices and social influences governing rural people’s livelihood strategies (J. Sherman 2009). More broadly, because U.S. society sees exotic dance as a “tainted” occupation, I will use the sociological lens of “dirty work” to bring the association between morality and work into clearer focus (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999).

Academic literature on exotic dance largely overlooks strip clubs located in rural areas, but rural places have characteristics unlike urban and suburban settings in terms of lower population density, differing job availability, and more conservative culture. Thus, exotic dancers in rural communities likely face different economic and social circumstances than urban dancers. I contextualize my study by situating the club and its workers as being embedded within multiple levels and layers of structural influences.

**The Purpose of the Study**

This study examines the intrapersonal relationships, attitudes and work experiences of women who work in a rural exotic show club in the northeastern United States. The purpose of this ethnographic study is to fill micro-, meso-, and macro-level gaps in exotic dance literature.
This study reveals, from the dancers’ perspectives and my own reflexive position, as a dancer-academic, how show club structure (meso-level) and the culture in the rural community where the club is located (macro-level) influence dancers’ job-related experiences (micro-level). Economically, rural exotic dancers are positioned in a larger network of informal work opportunities. Socially, their experiences living in small communities as sex workers have implications for how conservative moral values influence people’s work choices in rural places. Together, economic and social linkages can be expected to shape a club’s structure and its dancers’ work-related experiences.

**Research Questions**

Two questions motivate this study to better understand the connections between micro-, meso-, and macro-level forces at a rural exotic dance club.

(1) What occupational culture do rural exotic show club dancers share?

(2) How does the job of rural show club dancing influence dancers’ relationships with people outside and inside the club?

**Chapter Summary**

In order to understand the complexity of erotic labor in a rural exotic show club, this research is organized into six chapters, including this introduction. Chapter 2 reviews relevant exotic dance and rural work literature and provides a theoretical framework for analysis. Concepts such as dirty work, emotion work and informal work will be explained. Chapter 3 details the ethnographic techniques used in conducting this study. Chapter 4 presents one of two findings chapters. This chapter answers my first research question regarding occupational culture.
Relying on observations and interview data, I will present rich details about the research setting including the design of the club facility, the typical work shift experienced by the dancers of this club, and the variation in dancers’ backgrounds. Chapter 5 addresses the second research question regarding show club worker interactions. I use questionnaire, interview and observational data to analyze the experiences of exotic dancers at a rural show club, focusing especially on dancers’ social interactions with “outsiders” and interactions with each other. The last chapter builds on the conclusions of each previous chapter to interpret the meanings of dancers’ experiences with people inside and outside their rural show club as enabled and constrained by an overarching occupational culture.

**Conclusion**

Bradley-Engen, a sociologist and former exotic dancer, outlined a typology of exotic dance club organizations, and argued that each type of organization conditions the experiences of the dancers who work in them. Viewed as social worlds, clubs organized as “hustle,” “show,” and “social” environments influence the dancers’ perceptions of their work in a patterned way (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009). As the large-scale entertainment industry takes control of its public brand image, more “show” style clubs can be expected. Building upon Bradley-Engen’s typology, this in-depth ethnographic study of a rural show club will highlight place-based variation in a single case to illuminate how organizational structure shapes this sexualized form of informal work from dancers’ perspectives.
Chapter 2 : Literature Review

Introduction – The Line Up

This review will address three areas of research necessary for contextualizing the experiences of women who work in a rural exotic show club. In the first section, I will discuss the corpus of literature related to exotic dance and establish my conceptual stance within a sociological-feminist framework. I will also highlight exotic dance research that understands erotic labor as a form of work. Secondly, in order to learn how show club structure can condition dancers’ experiences, the next section will address research on club-level variations. The last section will focus on the relationship of rural place and women with respect to two domains: economic and social contexts.

Section One – Prior Research and Conceptualization

Erotic Labor Literature

During the past 40 years, scholars from many disciplines have built a substantial foundation of exotic dance literature. The architects most influential to me include former exotic dancers-academics such as Mindy Bradley-Engen, Chris Bruckert, Danielle Egan, Katherine Frank, Merri Johnson, Carol Ronai-Rambo and others. Their nuanced accounts of exotic dance and methodological commitment to sound qualitative research bolstered my ambition for this project.

The recent work by these dancer-academics stands in marked contrast to early sociological studies which dissected dancers’ backgrounds and motivations for entry into a “deviant” occupation (McCaghy and Skipper 1969; Skipper and McCaghy 1970; Salutin 1971;
Boles and Garbin 1974b; Carey, Peterson, and Sharpe 1974). A reason identified for choosing to strip was “a history of using exhibitionist behavior for personal gain” (Skipper and McCaghy 1970, 391) although the researchers concede, “In an age of micro-mini skirts, ‘see through’ blouses and ‘teeny weeny’ bikinis, it is difficult to formulate a specific definition of what now constitutes ‘exhibitionist’ behavior for women” (1970, 402). These seemingly judgmental and moralistic analyses, by Skipper and McCaghy and others from the 1970s, of women’s economic motivations are not surprising given the historical context during which they were produced—a period when women’s “equal” participation in the workforce was a relatively recent phenomenon and ideological views of women’s primary caretaking role in the home were still common place (Gornick and Meyers 2005).

What is surprising is that some researchers in the 21st century have maintained a similar interest—and less-than-flattering interpretation—about the kind of woman who takes up exotic dance for a living. One such study claims, “A stripper does not make a carefully thought-out decision to enter a world in which she will be bombarded by negative attitudes, shame, disgrace, and stereotypes” (Sweet and Tewksbury 2000, 341). Not only does this pair of researchers characterize strippers as unthinking, desperate women, their analysis also omits reference to contemporary studies which describe a broader range of dancer experiences—not just negative ones (Queen 2002; Scott 2003; Frank 1998; Nagle 1997). In Sweet and Tewksbury’s study, the reader learns that the first author solicited interviews for their study “through the course of her work dancing in strip clubs throughout the continental United States” (Sweet and Tewksbury 2000, 329). Not considered in their methodological address is how Sweet affected the data collection process or how her dancer perspective influenced her interpretations.

In light of studies lacking positionality, several dancer-academics and other sex work researchers have issued a call for future studies that make researcher subjectivity more visible (Bradley-Engen 2009; Bruckert 2002; Egan, Frank, and Johnson 2006; Frank 2007; Roach 2011;
Wahab et al. 2011; Weitzer 2000; Egan and Frank 2005; Agustín 2005). To satisfy one of the
goals of this study, I reflexively situate my experiences as a dancer, my connection to the research
site, and my relationships with the study’s participants.

**Pole Position**

Some scholars refer to the polemic feminist debate about gendered power in the sex
industry as part of the “sex wars” (Barton 2001; Barton 2002; Chapkis 1997; Weitzer 2000;
Rubin 1993). My study is most influenced by Ronald Weitzer, a sex work researcher, who
presents a middle-ground position between two opposed perspectives, a new perspective which
he calls the *polymorphous paradigm*. Radical feminists who shaped the sex wars view any kind of
sex work within a patriarchal society as inherently exploitative (Barry 1995; Dworkin 1997;
Dworkin 1989; MacKinnon 1989; MacKinnon 1987). Weitzer frames this perspective as the
*oppression paradigm*. Its supporters claim “exploitation, subjugation, and violence against
women are intrinsic to and ineradicable from sex work … these indictments apply equally to
pornography, prostitution, stripping, and other commercial sex. The only solution [in their view]
is the elimination of the entire sex industry” (Weitzer 2000, 5). But telephone sex operators and
porn stars hardly work within the same occupational milieu. Reductionist treatments of
commercial sex and its workers ignore the many variations that constitute the industry.

Generalizing, one-dimensional depictions of erotic labor concern me as both a researcher and
former exotic dancer.⁹ On the other extreme of the sex war discourse, sex radical feminists
strongly support sex workers’ right to perform erotic labor and reject what they see as radical
feminists’ vilification of male sexuality (Bright 1997; Califia 1994; Chapkis 1997; Sprinkle 1998;
Queen 2002; Paglia 1992; Rubin 1993). According to Weitzer, the sex-positive position, or the

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⁹ I will explain my position as both current and former dancer in the methods section.
*empowerment paradigm*, focuses “on the ways in which sexual services qualify as work, involve human agency, and may be potentially validating or empowering for workers” (2000, 5). Weitzer acknowledges that “this kind of work may enhance a person’s socioeconomic status and provide greater control over one’s working condition than many traditional jobs” (2000, 6).

**Working It**

Researchers have been interested in the impact of stripping on dancers’ lives, particularly regarding stigma. Thompson and Harred (2003) replicated a study they did 10 years earlier, in the same location, and found remarkable consistency in the dancers’ stigma management strategies between the earlier and later cohorts (Thompson and Harred 1992). Some of these strategies include denying the negative impact of dancing on their lives and “condemning the condemners” as a way to delegitimize sources of stigma. Bradley (2007) found that job-related stigma interferes with dancers’ ability to maintain high quality romantic partnerships, and dancers will often accept lesser-quality partners in order to avoid stigma. Other research suggests that the stigmas associated with exotic dance may persist after dancers terminate their careers (Barton 2002; Egan 2006; Deshotels and Forsyth 2006). The longer a woman works in informal work, particularly stigmatized work, the harder it may be for her to rejoin the formal work world.

Existent literature has documented the interactional patterns between dancers and customers (Boles and Garbin 1974a; Ronai and Ellis 1989; Salutin 1971). In particular, Ronai and Ellis (1989) describe dancers’ use of speech, body language, and costumes as ways to influence customer spending, i.e. feigning interest in customers, flirting, or role playing stereotypical feminized ideals. Pasko (2002) made a connection between these kinds of skills—i.e. emotion work (Hochschild 1979)—and described the interactions between dancers and patrons as a
dramaturgical confidence game (Goffman 1959). Although a few researchers have touched on the relationships between dancers in their findings, these studies did not set out to understand dancers’ work relationships as an explicit goal of their research (Barton 2002; Barton 2006; Spivey 2005; Bradley-Engen 2009). The present study does.

Above all, this study is grounded by a perspective of exotic dance as legitimate work. Chris Bruckert, a former dancer-academic, supports framing exotic dance as legitimate work. She says, “Focusing on the labor of strippers allows us to see them as agents and to explore their subjectivity without obscuring the fact that they are engaging in economically marginal, culturally stigmatized, ‘immoral work’ that blurs the boundaries between private and public, presentation and identity, work and leisure” (Bruckert 2002: 16).

**Beyond Casual – Informal Work**

This study also frames exotic dance as a form or informal work. Unlike other adult entertainers who are paid by firms for their labor, not all strippers are formally paid by the clubs in which they work. In fact, most exotic dancers pay a fee to the club each night for having the opportunity to work there. This fee is known as “tipout.” Club operators keep track of how many private dances each stripper sells per night, then they subtract both the tipout fee and whatever percentage of the private dance sum that the club feels entitled to keep. Some clubs do not take any portion of private dance money, but clubs that do typically take up to 50 percent. (Taking a greater percentage than half would discourage the sale of dances.) Tipout fees are usually between $20 to $200 (or more) per night, depending on the opportunity structure of each club. (Small owner-operated clubs charge on the low end; large corporate chains charge on the high end.) Dancers are also expected to tip their non-dancing co-workers each night: deejays, bartenders, bouncers, etc.
Many clubs do not collect social security numbers nor submit W-2 forms for dancers—it is the dancer’s responsibility to report her tips as income for tax purposes. Some clubs may have little information about their dancers apart from their names and phone numbers. In clubs that do not schedule dancers, the club management may have no information about the women who work there. In the exotic dance world, unpaid exotic dancers are known as “independent contractors” (Hanna 2012), but this term implies more formal protection than they actually have. Unpaid exotic dancers work as part of the informal economy.

By focusing on the informal work of exotic dance in a rural area, this study reports on the work opportunities available to women in rural areas. Rural people often rely on informal work to make ends meet (McLaughlin and Coleman-Jensen 2008; Jensen, Cornwell, and Findeis 1995), but choosing exotic dance as a livelihood strategy may place burden on women for having chosen it. Even though her work is legal, she may be cast in the same light as someone who participates in informal work illegally, such as by selling drugs (J. Sherman 2009).

Moving Entertainers

Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) concept of “emotional labor” is exceedingly applicable to the stripper’s toil. Dancers must employ their bodies and minds to elicit certain feelings from their audience, such as arousal or interest, but dancers are only acting. Some researchers have applied the label “counterfeit intimacy” to the stripper’s particular form of emotion work (Enck and Preston 1988; Ronai and Ellis 1989; Deshotels and Forsyth 2006), while other research compares and contrasts exotic dance with performance generally (Liepe-Levinson 1998; Liepe-Levinson 2002).
Emotion work is the main way exotic dancers “put on a show,” or produce sexual entertainment. There are several aspects involved in their job-related performances, summarized in the following list by Roach (2007:49). Strippers must:

1. Hustle all night long to forge individual connections with men through one sales pitch after another.
2. Act self-confident in the face of rejection and never take it personally.
3. Perform desire and interest in men who may in fact repel them.
4. Be empathetic, good listeners.
5. Never give in to anger when harassed by boors.

Dancers who fail to successfully perform emotion work don’t make money (Bremer 2006).

Depending on the dictates of the club structure, dancers balance their time working between performing on stage, and selling and giving lap dances. Dancers routinely use their bodies to communicate emotion they do not feel; many also participate in creating imaginative fantasy for their customers (Egan, Frank, and Johnson 2006). Though this activity is called a lap dance, what she is primarily doing is performing intense emotional labor. The “acting” nature of interactions between dancers and customers sets up a potentially stark contrast when dancers interact with each other and no longer have to pretend or feign emotions. “The importance of understanding the labor of women who work as exotic dancers is crucial to a further enumeration of women’s work and emotional labor in multiple settings” (Egan 2004:301). The emotional nature of exotic dance has been well-explored—this study will fill a gap in the literature about exotic dancers’ relationships with each other in the unexplored context of stripping from a rural perspective.

**Strippers are Dirty (Workers)**

Contemporary researchers construct exotic dance as a legitimate form of labor. I, too, adopt the position that exotic dance is legitimate work and I wonder: What would exotic dance be
like if dancers were able to demand standard labor practices at work, and hold club owners to enforcing these standards? A prominent obstacle to exotic dancers gaining these kinds of formal protections is that their job qualifies as “dirty work,” though plenty of dirty jobs are formal e.g. garbage men, personal care assistants.

The concept of “dirtiness,” as a social construction, more often signifies moral disgust than a literally soiled physical state, although neither aspect is necessarily mutually exclusive (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). One can be morally dirty and physically dirty at the same time, e.g. the stereotyped notion of a street beggar. In the world of work, three different kinds of dirtiness have been theorized by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999): physical, social and moral taint. Hughes (1962) developed these categories and observed the stigmatizing effects of dirty work in society. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) expanded upon Hughes’ insights, and transformed the concept of “dirty work” into a substantial occupational theory.

According to Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), in order for a job to rate as “dirty work,” it must impose at least one of the three kinds of taint. For example, a garbage man is subject to physical taint from being in close contact with noxious materials, and a public defender is subject to social taint from close contact with potential (or actual) criminals. The authors list the exotic dancer specifically, when they describe workers affected by moral taint.

Moral taint occurs when an occupation is generally regarded as somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue (e.g., exotic dancer, pawnbroker, tattoo artist, psychic, casino manager) or where the worker is thought to employ methods that are deceptive, intrusive, confrontational, or that otherwise defy norms of civility. (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999, 415)

The latter part of the definition of moral taint overlaps with sociological theories of deviance.

Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) note that the boundaries between types of occupational taint are blurry for many workers, and some workers may qualify for more than one category. Strippers exemplify all three forms of occupational taint. (1) Morally, strippers are cast as “bad girls” for revealing their nude bodies in the public sphere. (2) Stripping is thought of as disgusting
work because women will inevitably have to reveal their bodies to men on the lowest end of respectability—unkempt, surly, drunk men who will undoubtedly view them as nothing more than objects. Thus, work in strip clubs also qualifies as a source of social taint. (3) A point that may not be as obvious, however, is that stripping is also physically dirty. Stripping “can be grueling at times, dirty (literally, not figuratively), exhausting, and downright boring” (Frank 2006:211).

The concept of dirtiness in exotic dance appears in Roach’s 2007 work; as well as the work of and Egan, Frank and Johnson 2006; and Bruckert 2002. Roach detects the club-level structural variation that other exotic dance scholars have recognized as being so important to shaping the experience of dancers (Bradley-Engen 2009; Frank 2007). Roach writes:

Clubs vary as well on how strictly they police the women to enforce these codes of behavior. Some employ bouncers, DJs, and security cameras to monitor closely clients’ interactions with the dancers, and pride themselves on running a ‘clean’ or ‘high-class’ establishment; other places are known as ‘dirty’ clubs where anything goes and where nothing short of a police raid will uphold the law” (Roach 2007:28).

In the words of one dancer about her club, “I like the Stag, because it’s clean. Sometimes there are dirty dancers but either the managers get rid of them or the girls run them out” (qtd. in (Bruckert 2002:130). This analysis of dancers’ levels of cleanliness transfers to clubs. A clean club is a “classy” club, and as we saw in the introduction, the adult nightclub industry has been cleaning up its image.

**Section Two – Club-level Variations**

A theme that should be added to the literature in light of new trends in exotic dance is the influence of place (Bradley 2008). Included in club-level variation is the notion of a club’s embedded social and economic circumstance within a place-based context. In this section, I will discuss Bradley-Engen’s club-level typology.
**Hustle, Show and Social Clubs**

The degree to which women must perform emotion work, the degree to which they are objectified and degraded, the strictness to which they are held to beauty standards, and the amount of stigma they are likely to endure, among other attributes, vary by club type. Bradley-Engen (2009) identifies three organizational structures of clubs: (1) Hustle, (2) Show, and (3) Social. She substantiated these labels by observing “consistent patterns that increase the likelihood of dancers feeling particular types of constraint or agency across clubs” (2009, 18). In other words, what it means to be an individual dancer at a particular club varies by the generic structural organization of each club type.

**Hustle**

The key characteristic of the hustle club, from a dancer’s perspective, is a “relative lack of power and individual identity in negotiations with management” (M. S Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009:43). A woman’s value as a hustle club dancer is based on her ability to produce male sexual gratification. The “objectification and degradation of women is permissible, if not encouraged” (Bradley-Engen 2009, 42). The reason Bradley-Engen suggests women can be devalued in this manner is due to the “constant inflow and outflow of dancers and customers,” which make any one dancer “expendable” (Bradley-Engen 2009, 40). Under these circumstances, management has little incentive to protect dancers’ safety or regulate their working conditions.

The focus on competition, in conjunction with a disinterested, hands-off management style, characterized by lack of policy creation or enforcement regarding touching, promotes hostility among dancers. Dancers are essentially left to themselves to fight over resources. In this world, they feel that they are on their own, defending their bodies and scrambling for money. (Bradley-Engen 2009, 40)

Hustle clubs have high levels of dancer turnover and emphasize physical sexual gratification. There are very few protections against inappropriate touching by customers, drug
use by dancers, and “this context produces a culture in which women experience little agency and personal satisfaction in their work” (Bradley-Engen 2009, 91–92). Women are not likely to form positive attachments to other dancers.

Show

In show clubs, the experience for both dancers and their patrons is elevated to what is popularly known as a “gentleman’s club.” This type of club attracts clientele from middle-and-upper classes, and presents a beauty-pageant-like atmosphere. Rules are strictly enforced regarding clients’ and dancers’ behavior in order to project an “upscale,” mainstream image, which prohibits outright sexual gratification and drug use.

According to Bradley-Engen’s observations (2009), show clubs try to keep a regular set of dancers, known as “house girls” as opposed to permitting women’s unrestricted, identity-less access to stage work.

There are often more than enough women, and circulating the scheduling of the same dancers acts to ensure that the rules are consistently followed and the dancer expectations are predictably maintained. Alternating among a steady supply of well-known dancers is compatible with a business plan of quality control. (Bradley-Engen 2009, 120)

In order to be a dancer favored in the club’s scheduled rotation of house girls, it is likely she will attempt to conform her looks to accepted assumptions of beauty, and that she will focus on developing an impressive, crowd-pleasing stage routine.

“The social organization features of the show club, including highly restrictive selection criteria, detached management style, ‘showcasing’ of performers, and an emphasis on professional performance produces a culture that encourages self-improvement” (Bradley-Engen 2009, 105). In the show club, dancers are not likely to experience the same level of hostility among each other as hustle club dancers, but they have little incentive to invest in each other given the importance of “self-improvement” and high performance standards.
In contrast to the formal feeling of show clubs, social clubs project the image of a “local neighborhood bar” and emphasize relationship-building between customers and dancers within the club (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009, 45). Bradley-Engen identifies social clubs as having “small, stable, and relatively isolated,” structural organizations (2009, 73). She notes that this isolation is a contributing factor for customers, dancers, and owners having to interact on a “regular, long-term basis” (Bradley-Engen 2009, 73). She does not make explicit the association of social clubs with rural locations and hustle clubs with urban areas, though this configuration is implied.

Bradley-Engen suggests long-term interaction between social club workers fosters friendships between them and builds commitment to the organization in which they work. About organizational structure of social clubs, Bradley-Engen explains that, “Symmetrical power relationships, lack of competition, network recruitment, and positive initiation and mentoring processes produce a culture that discourages hostility and promotes reciprocity norms” (2009, 115). This kind of work environment has implications for how exotic dancers at my research study site bond with each other, given its relatively isolated non-urban location. See a summary table of Bradley-Engen’s typology on the next page.
## Typology Summary

Table 2-1. This table presents an adapted version of Bradley-Engen’s (2009) strip club typology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hustle Club</th>
<th>Show Club</th>
<th>Social Club</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Club Attendance</strong></td>
<td>50–100 customers on weekdays &amp; weekends</td>
<td>25-50 customers weekdays, 50-100 on weekends</td>
<td>&lt;50 customers on weekdays &amp; weekends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Dancers</strong></td>
<td>&gt;30 dancers/night; high turnover</td>
<td>~10-15 dancers/night; moderate - limited turnover</td>
<td>~5 dancers/night; highly stable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Customer Turnover</strong></td>
<td>High turnover—few regulars</td>
<td>Few regulars</td>
<td>Primarily regulars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Earning Method</strong></td>
<td>Primarily private lap dances/champagne rooms</td>
<td>Stage performances &amp; private lap dances</td>
<td>Drinks/stage/informal tipping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage Emphasis</strong></td>
<td>Few opportunities on stage; multiple dancers on stage simultaneously</td>
<td>Approximately 20 minutes; individual featuring of dancers</td>
<td>Stage deemphasized in favor of mingling with customers and encouraging them to buy drinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Booking Practice</strong></td>
<td>Hustle clubs do not schedule dancers</td>
<td>Scheduled by management at management discretion</td>
<td>Negotiated by management &amp; dancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Management Style</strong></td>
<td>Minimal, hostile/detached; little monitoring of sexual activity, drug use, conflicts</td>
<td>Extensive, formal monitoring; limited to auditions, scheduling, and other business-related interactions</td>
<td>Informal, frequent negotiation and interaction; self-regulation among dancers, management involved in social/non-business interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alcohol Emphasis</strong></td>
<td>Customer consumption heavily emphasized; liquor limited to champagne rooms to increase sales; dancers must meet sales quotas</td>
<td>Occasional sales quotas; de-emphasis on customer consumption; drunk patrons are removed</td>
<td>No sales quotas; regular alcohol consumption among dancers and customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beauty Standards</strong></td>
<td>Competitive standards due to high volume of dancers</td>
<td>High beauty standards; strictly enforced</td>
<td>Lenient standards of attractiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Atmosphere</strong></td>
<td>Frequent referral to genitalia of dancers/sexual motivations for men; deejay refers to women’s breasts, vaginas, etc.</td>
<td>Frequent referral to dancer performance, beauty; deejay refers to dancers as ladies, sexy, seductive</td>
<td>Frequent referral to dancers by name only; deejays refer to friendly atmosphere, encourages applause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dancers’ Roles</strong></td>
<td>Sex-focused; dancers as objects for sexual gratification</td>
<td>Show-focused; dancers as performers</td>
<td>Social-focused; dancers as “girls next door”; barnmates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dancers’ Relationships</strong></td>
<td>Negative: “bitches”</td>
<td>Indifferent or negative</td>
<td>Friendship cliques; generally positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dancers’ Interactions</strong></td>
<td>Competitive/hostile</td>
<td>Competitive/detached</td>
<td>Cooperative, friendship networks, much peer regulation, peer initiation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section Three – Rural Women and Place

Rural places have characteristics that are different from those of urban and suburban settings with denser populations. Thus, exotic dancers in rural communities face different social and economic conditions than more urban dancers.

The close social ties associated with rural residency are likely factors complicating an exotic dancer’s ability to maintain anonymity. The sparse population in rural areas, and closer-knit community ties of rural people (Beggs, Haines, and Hurlbert 1996), may make concealing one’s occupation challenging, if not impossible. Further, the stigma associated with exotic dance in rural areas may be particularly burdensome, given the prevalence among rural people of conservative social values and patriarchal family structures and views (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2009; Glenna 2003; Van Hightower and Gorton 2002; Websdale 1998).

Jennifer Sherman’s rural-based ethnography, *Those Who Work and Those Who Don’t*, supports the idea that rural social contexts complicate individual work choices. She reports,

> My findings from Golden Valley suggest that the small size, cultural homogeneity, and lack of anonymity in a small rural community together can create greater social pressure on the poor to be culturally acceptable according to the existing standards. For those whose coping strategies are not morally adequate according to local norms, the result is often community-level censure that further affects their quality of life and chances for eventually escaping poverty. (2009, 65–66)

Nevertheless, women may find the pull toward exotic dance hard to resist in light of limited job opportunities in rural areas—particularly the dearth of jobs that pay above minimum wage (C. M. Duncan 2000; G. J. Duncan and Aber 2000; Jensen, McLaughlin, and Slack 2003; Lichter and Parisi 2008; J. Sherman 2009). Low-paying jobs are especially problematic for rural women because these jobs seldom justify the cost of driving long distances to and from work (Tigges and Fuguitt 2003). Additionally, lack of public transportation, lack of child care services, and other deficiencies characteristic of rural areas, “have profound impacts on the lives of rural women who struggle to make ends meet” (Tickamyer and Henderson 2003, 112). These conditions create a surplus of women potentially drawn to work in rural strip clubs.
Women’s Work in Rural Places

Global restructuring has changed the composition of both “good” and “bad” jobs in both rural and urban U.S. (Acker 1992; Acker 2004; Kalleberg, Reskin, and Hudson 2000). While restructuring has created a pool of “good” jobs that are more complex and interesting than bad jobs—jobs that rely on routine work at very low wages—at the same time, this means workers must be much better skilled in order to obtain these jobs. Raising the bar for good jobs means reducing opportunities for lesser skilled people.

Globalization has changed the composition of American jobs over the past 40 years. This restructuring has reduced opportunities in some industries, such as manufacturing, while expanding opportunities in the service sector, which is a source of both good and bad jobs (Kalleberg, Reskin, and Hudson 2000). The U.S. opportunity structure offers predominantly service jobs. While the service sector offers high pay for some workers—doctors, lawyers, etc.—the vast majority of service jobs are low-paying and “contingent” i.e. part-time, contract and temporary (Smith and Tickamyer 2011). People are increasingly relying on informal work to make ends meet, and “women workers are more likely than their male counterparts to be in contingent work arrangements” (Smith and Tickamyer 2011, 46).

Service workers tend to feel stuck in “dead-end” jobs, work for low wages and few benefits, if any, and face significant job instability, e.g. retail clerks and restaurant workers. Under these conditions, many people rely on informal work to survive, especially in rural areas (McLaughlin and Coleman-Jensen 2008; Jensen, Cornwell, and Findeis 1995). A goal of this study was to understand how exotic dance is positioned as an informal job in a larger network of gendered work opportunities. Reliance on informal work for survival may strengthen bonds between dancers, particularly in a conservative cultural context that devalues their work.
Socially, working as an exotic dancer holds little positive status. Strippers are likely to be considered dirty workers regardless of the location of their work site. However, women working as exotic dancers in, or from, rural areas may face additional burdens due the challenge of keeping anonymity among tight-knit social ties. Additionally, the social sanctions in rural areas may be harsher and more difficult to escape, as rural women have limited diversity in their social networks and often rely heavily on their social networks for economic survival (Ward and Turner 2007). Previous exotic dance research shows that club structures greatly influence dancer experiences based on the regulated formality of the job (Bradley-Engen 2009; Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009; Egan, Frank, and Johnson 2006; Frank 1998). Even if rural women choose to dance in clubs that are legal and well-regulated, dancers connected with rural places may jeopardize their moral capital, potentially impacting their future job opportunities in the communities where they reside (J. Sherman 2009).

In rural areas, contingent work is a significant family survival strategy (McLaughlin and Coleman-Jensen 2008). Opportunity structure is different for rural women than rural men. Furthermore, women are more likely to accept low-wage employment and become the working poor (Jensen, McLaughlin, and Slack 2003). “The comparison between men and women in nonmetro areas suggests that working poverty is a far greater problem among rural women than men” (Smith and Tickamyer 2011, 29). One way that exotic dance is a “better” bad job is that at least it provides a living wage. Higher earnings may not lessen the stigma associated with exotic dance, but greater income may help to solve a dancer’s more pragmatic problems.

Women have relied on the job of stripping as a buffer for financial hard times, but it is a precarious one. “If you sprain an ankle, you throw out a knee, that’s it. You’re out until you heal. There’s no health insurance, there’s no paid vacation, there’s no sick leave... the stress on the knees, on the back, the hands, the pole work. It’s just really really hard on the body” (dancer qtd. in Roach 2007:37). This quote highlights one of the “bad” aspects of exotic dance as informal
work—there are no health insurance benefits. As so-called “independent contractors,” strippers are also precluded from vacation pay and retirement benefits (Chapkis 1997).

Perhaps one of the most negative aspects of exotic dance is the difficulty dancers face when trying to re-enter the formal work world. Dancers may be reluctant to accept low-paying, low-prestige jobs, after having a low-prestige, high-paying job. Moonlighting (working more than one job) is the best strategy for spending any great length of time in dancing, so as to avoid large resume gaps. Going to college also provides good cover. Nevertheless, the threat of being found out is ever-present, even after terminating a dancing stint (Barton 2002; Egan 2006; Deshotels and Forsyth 2006). This bad reputation can hinder future work opportunities for women, especially in rural areas. Again, using Sherman’s ethnography for support, “Perceptions of moral worth often play a significant role in deciding who gets jobs in Golden Valley, particularly among the low- and semi-skilled. . .For those with low moral capital, the stigma of their pasts and presents became barriers to their futures” (2009, 74).

Conclusion

In reviewing this literature, I have provided a context for understanding exotic dance as an occupation and as a research issue. Women who work in a rural exotic show club face circumstances that have been relatively unexplored and may differ from findings based on urban studies. I have shown that I work within a polymorphous paradigm (Weitzer 2000) that casts exotic dance as neither wholly liberating nor exploitive. I understand exotic dance as form of legitimate work. Conceptually, the work of stripping is informed by two theories—emotional labor and dirty work. Club structures impact dancers’ experiences relating to how much emotional labor they perform and how “dirty” their work is. Additionally, club structure provides varying conditions that relate to the level of bonding between dancers that may be present. Lastly,
I show how rural work opportunity structures limit women’s choices. While providing them with much needed earning potential, rural exotic dance may also saddle women with socially-hindering moral disrepute.
Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

The organizational structure governing dancers’ work experiences, combined with rural economic and social conditions in which they dance, creates a context in which we may better understand potential solidarity or riffs between marginalized workers, and it allows us to see how “show” dancing, as opposed to “hustling” may influence levels of stigmatization experience by dancers. Therefore, this ethnography examined the interactions between exotic dancers and those outside the club, and also the relationships between exotic dancers. This study relies on my own “insider” position among the dancers at one exotic dance “show” club.

The following research questions motivated the study:

1. What occupational culture do rural exotic show club dancers share?

2. How does the job of rural show club dancing influence dancers’ relationships with those outside and inside the club?

Interviews, participant observation, and a questionnaire were used to collect data in the areas of dancers’ comparative work experiences, their experiences regarding anonymity, and their behind-the-scenes experiences on the job, with the primary goals of revealing the relationships between dancers and their shared values, beliefs and assumptions. The narrative data were transcribed, coded, and categorized into several themes related to the research questions. Data analysis and collection often occurred simultaneously.
Setting

This study took place in an American exotic dance show club located in the rural northeast United States. Researchers commonly encounter methodological issues in studying rural places and populations, not the least of which is defining what rural means. Various federal government agencies use more than two dozen distinct definitions for rural (Cromartie and Bucholtz 2008). The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as any population, housing, or territory not classified as urban (Geography Division 2011); and stated as simply as possible, that means open countryside and settlements of fewer than 2,500 inhabitants qualify as rural. Depending on the definition used, 17 to 49 percent of the U.S. population is rural (Cromartie and Bucholtz 2008).

According to the USDA Economic Research Service (2003) urban-rural continuum classification scheme, Titans is located in a metro area of fewer than 250,000 people. The population of the county was approximately 154,000 in 2010 (U.S. Census). While this federal designation and county population may seem rather large to qualify Titans as a “rural” club, as noted in the introduction, definitions of rural vary widely. I will use the Census Bureau’s definition of a settlement less than 2,500 people, and rely on the Bureau’s county subdivision data to situate my club.

The Census Bureau ranks each state’s county-level subdivisions by 2009 population size estimates, from largest to smallest. Titans is located in a subdivision that ranks approximately 2000th out of slightly more than 2500 subdivisions, in terms of population size (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). The rural community surrounding Titans has approximately 650 residents and can be characterized as primarily white, middle-aged, low income, and dominated by service employment (36%) and production, transportation, and material moving occupations (23%) (ACS 2011). Per capita income is about $17,000, and median household income is approximately $34,000 (ACS 2011). This community has a considerable amount of poverty; 23 percent live
below the poverty line in this county subdivision compared with 14.3 percent living below the poverty line nationwide. These demographic statistics mirror rural trends.

One factor that potentially influences the clientele-base and dancer composition at Titans is its relative proximity to a large college town, with more diverse populations in terms of socioeconomic status, race, and educational attainment. People from areas outside Titans’ immediate geographic area may have higher incomes than the locals. Women who come to work at Titans may have already attained higher levels of education than other dancers, or may currently live as students in the nearby college town. The availability of these other women may increase competition for jobs that would otherwise be filled by potentially less formally educated women who live in more remote locations.

In rural clubs, it is likely that clients whom a dancer encounters may also know the dancer’s real identity and that of her family members. These “knowing others” could potentially compromise the dancer’s confidentiality in other jobs (with bosses or co-employees); in her close personal relationships (with her partner, friends, parents, siblings, children, other relatives); at school (with classmates and instructors); and in her everyday interactions with members of her community (with local grocery store clerks, postal service workers, health care providers, her children’s teachers, school administrators, and church members, et cetera).

**Access and Rapport**

An important reason I have selected Titans is my access to it and deep familiarity with its culture. I have been a dancer there for several years. Although I have worked other part time jobs while dancing at Titans, I have maintained at least weekly contact with the club continuously—working at least once a week without any breaks in service (during some years, I worked there most days of the week). I am familiar with all of the staff and dancers; I am well-liked and trusted
by dozens of people who have worked at this club. Because exotic dancers are aware of the stigma associated with their occupation, they may be reluctant to talk to “outsiders.” As a consistent member of their culture, I am uniquely positioned to elicit candid responses, know which questions are important to ask, understand what participants are saying when they answer, and I am able to check my understandings of their words by frequent contact with them. As someone with a long history in the field, my own interpretations and understandings also give value to my research findings.

Participants

I purposively selected participants for this study. My participants were Titan employees only, not patrons. I conducted 22 interviews total; 10 with actively dancing workers, 6 with ex-dancers, and 6 staff members.

Active Dancers

During the data collection phase of this study, from November 2011 to March 2012, there were 15 total dancers actively working at Titans. According to Bradley-Engen and Ulmer (2009), clubs with small, stable dancer populations rely on interdependency between dancers in order to operate—i.e. a certain number have to appear for work in order for the club to open thus enabling everyone to make money. Titans follows this organizational pattern. Club management negotiates and posts (via texts and online) a weekly schedule. This practice is called “booking.”

Dancers are expected to fill their scheduled shifts. Weeknight shifts are 8 hours long. Weekend shifts are from 7 to 12 hours long. Dancers are expected to fulfill an entire shift, regardless of how many customers actually attend on any one night. On “slow” nights, there may
be more dancers than customers in the club for several hours during a shift. On “busy” nights, there may be more than one hundred customers over the course of a night. Five to seven dancers are booked on weeknights. Eleven to fifteen are scheduled on weekends. If “traveling” dancers are available to work, they are usually booked on weekends—especially for weekends during peak seasons of patron attendance (such as “bachelor season” in the spring, or “football season” in the fall). As travelling dancers are a random phenomenon at Titans, this study focuses on the dancers who routinely fill the schedule, which I distinguish as “active dancers.”

I interviewed ten of the 15 active dancers, which I refer to as “current dancers.” Of the five active dancers not interviewed, three dancers worked at Titans less than a month, so I did not pursue interviews with them in order to concentrate resources on dancers possessing longer work histories. Two dancers declined formal interviews; however, both of these dancers spoke casually to me during the course of our working together. They did not reveal through these conversations anything which suggested to me that their backgrounds, attitudes, or experiences working at Titans differed dramatically from others whom I formally interviewed. Background data from all 15 active dancers were captured via the paper-and-pencil survey I distributed; however, I focus my report of the data on the ten dancers interviewed for the sake of clarity.

Table 3-1. This table presents current dancers’ education levels, ages, lengths of time spent working at Titans, career statuses, and number of other clubs in which they have danced.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Duration at Titans</th>
<th>Career Status</th>
<th>No. Other Clubs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 In college</td>
<td>21-23</td>
<td>&lt;1 yr</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 H.S.</td>
<td>21-23</td>
<td>&lt;1 yr</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 In college</td>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>&lt;1 yr</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 In college</td>
<td>24-26+</td>
<td>3+ yrs</td>
<td>Seasoned</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Degree</td>
<td>24-26+</td>
<td>3+ yrs</td>
<td>Seasoned</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 H.S.</td>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>1 yr</td>
<td>Seasoned</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 H.S.</td>
<td>21-23</td>
<td>3 yr</td>
<td>Seasoned</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 H.S.</td>
<td>24-26+</td>
<td>2 yr</td>
<td>Seasoned</td>
<td>100+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 H.S.</td>
<td>21-23</td>
<td>2 yr</td>
<td>Seasoned</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Degree</td>
<td>21-23</td>
<td>&lt;1 yr</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Education Level and Age**

Current dancers possess a range of education levels. Four dancers were high school graduates or less; one had some college; two had already obtained degrees; and three were actively dancing while still in college. Their range of ages includes 19-27, as of their interview date. Age is an important factor for interpreting dancers’ experiences. Entering the club as an 18 year old woman, directly after high school, is a significantly different life experience than joining the club as a 25 year old college graduate, which is why I provide these age distinctions for both active dancers and previous dancers.

**Duration at Titans, Career Status, and Number of Other Clubs**

Distinguishing the length of time a dancer has worked at this club may assist our understanding of her responses and help us to gauge her opportunity for cultural integration. A dancer just entering an occupational culture may have significantly different impressions of it compared to someone who has worked there for years.

I have categorized levels of work experience by duration. The assigned career status of a woman who has worked at Titans for less than one year is “new.” A woman who has danced from one to three years’ experience or more is “seasoned.” These nominal labels have grounding in the everyday vernacular of Titans dancers. I interviewed four new dancers, and six seasoned dancers. This relatively evenly distributed mix of experience levels is typical of any one time period at Titans.

Another consideration that may bear on a dancer’s perception of Titans work culture is her range of experience working in other clubs. Most Titans dancers have at least some experience working in another clubs, but three have worked only at Titans. Two dancers worked
at one other club each, but both dancers worked in these clubs for less than a month. In stark contrast, one current dancer reported having experience in more than 100 other clubs across the United States while she worked as a “feature entertainer.” More typical of dancers who have considerable experience working outside Titans is to have worked at several clubs within a particular state or among certain urban locations. Dancers who have experience dancing in other clubs may be particularly able to articulate both cultural and structural differences between those clubs and Titans.

**Family Status and Alternate Work Identity**

Family and work are two important domains of social interaction. Because one of the aims of this study is to understand how a dancer’s interactions with people outside the club may be affected by her job working as a dancer, it is important to know with whom she frequently interacts and in what roles.

The category Family Status reports on a dancer’s relationship status—i.e. whether she is single, dating, engaged, married, or divorced—and how many dependents she may have. Family status may affect how a dancer feels about her job because work-family conflict can be expected to exist not only in relation to formal jobs, but also to informal ones. In fact, the non-normativity of dancing may especially affect dancers’ close relationships. Six dancers reported being in romantic relationships.

A dancer’s potential alternate work identity (whether she has another job or not) may filter or diffuse some of the negative social pressure outsiders direct toward her for being a “stripper.” Included in this study’s alternate work identity category is whether or not she is attending college while dancing, as this is a widely recognized route toward legitimate work. It may be easier for some dancers to hide their dancer status by deferring to an alternate (and more
socially acceptable) identity; whereas dancers who don’t possess these alternate identities may have to bear negative social pressure head-on. A dancer who is also attending college may have different interpretations of her time at work than dancers who may have fewer future occupational choices. In this study, three dancers worked as students, two dancers kept low-status service jobs, two dancers kept career-oriented jobs, and three dancers possessed no alternative work identity.

Former Dancers

Dancers who no longer work at Titans are considered “former dancers,” and their interviews provide a comparative check against information provided by current dancers (Cho and Trent 2006; Creswell 2007; Maxwell 2005; Weiss 1995). I purposively selected six former dancers out of population of more than 100 possible candidates, primarily on the basis of their career length and their ability to represent each year of Titans operation over the past several years. These six dancers have overlapping career lengths, so for each year from 2004 to 2012 at least two or more of these dancers can represent any particular time period in Titans’ history. In an occupation known for worker turnover, their combined continuity significantly contributes to determining which elements of Titans occupational structure or culture remain stable or shift.

Additionally, former dancers may provide unique data compared to current dancers. They may feel greater latitude in expressing negative experiences because they are no longer affiliated with the club and thus have fewer or less intense incentives to “protect” the club’s image. Similarly, because former dancers are no longer immersed in the day-to-day culture of the club, they may be less emotionally invested in the club and better able to articulate their experiences. I additionally report on the length of time that has elapsed since they left dancing, as this too may have a bearing on their club reflections. While temporal separation may afford them time to more fully reflect on their careers, they may also forget many of the nuanced details about what it’s like
to work there, and thus their reports may instead reflect what stood out most to them, perhaps in a particularly editorializing fashion. The continuity of my work experience across all interviewed dancers experience can help to interpret former dancers’ interviews.

Table 3-2. This table presents former dancer participants’ education levels, ages, lengths of time dancing at Titans, lengths of time elapsed since leaving Titans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Age Then</th>
<th>Duration at Titans (yrs)</th>
<th>Years Since Titans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Degree</td>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 H.S.</td>
<td>21-23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 H.S.</td>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Degree</td>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Degree</td>
<td>24-26+</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 H.S.</td>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among former dancers, the range of education levels was less than high school diploma to Bachelor’s degree. The category Age Then in Table 3-2 refers to the age they started dancing. Only one former dancer started at a club other than Titans. Titans dancers typically start dancing between the ages of 18 to 21. The range of their durations working at Titans spans one to five years. The category Years Since Titans in Table 3-2 reflect the period of time that has elapsed since each former dancer was a member of the occupational culture. The dancer with the least temporal separation from the club has been gone for less than one year. Six years is the longest temporal separation from the club.

**Staff and Owner**

One reason for interviewing staff members is to provide a comparative check against the data given by both current dancers and former dancers (Cho and Trent 2006; Creswell 2007; Maxwell 2005; Weiss 1995). Because the staff has such lengthy and stable work histories, they are able to report on the majority of the time period during which all interviewed dancers worked. I interviewed staff to ask about their role in supporting club policies and their general perceptions
of the operational and cultural aspects of the club. Their input is important because I am interested in the organizational structure affecting dancers—staff members have immense influence over a dancer’s nightly experience.

The staff and the owner’s education levels, family statuses, ages and durations of time spent working at Titans not only provides information useful for understanding their interpretations but also provides a contrast to the dancers’ demographic data. For example, the only staff member to have more than a high school education is Shep, the owner. This means most dancers have higher levels of education than staff. The staff is an even smaller and more stable pool than the dancers (eight staff versus 15 dancers). Staff members have relatively long career durations, with the exception of bouncers. I chose Owen because he had the longest history at Titans among two other bouncers. The doorman, deejays, and manager positions had no other possible candidates. Staff members are older than most dancers.

Interviewing staff members and the owner at Titans helps to answer my second research question—this study explores dancers’ interactions and relationships with those inside the club, which includes their non-dancing counterparts. Most staff members are male, while the dancing population is exclusively female. In this study, staff members provide feedback about working for the manager-owner of the club, from male perspectives, which may importantly differ from the female dancer’s impressions of the owner. I have also collected the owner’s perspective through an in-depth interview regarding his background with the club and how he interprets his role as an owner of a show club. He is the person who sets the rules and takes responsibility for the reputation of the club, so his insights are important.
Titans Occupational Culture

The following table summarizes current dancer, former dancer, and staff attributes, showing the number of people representing each category. Dancers have more education and are younger than staff. There are more employees in relationships or marriages than employees who are single. Dancers have differing levels of experience at Titans (new and seasoned), while the majority of staff members are seasoned.

Table 3-3. This table presents summary counts of dancer, owner and staff attributes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employee Attributes in numbers</th>
<th>All Active Dancers N=15</th>
<th>Current Dancers N=10</th>
<th>Former Dancers N=6</th>
<th>Owner &amp; Staff N=6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GED or HS only</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College in progress</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree obtained</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has kids</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committed, no kids</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating, no kids</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-26+</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time at Club</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 month</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New: 1 mo – &lt;1 yr</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seasoned: 1 – 3+ yrs</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the ways that my perspective greatly contributes to this study is that I have been present for all historical “time periods” and cohorts of dancers. While I may take for granted many things because of this close-up perspective, I am also deeply attuned to this culture and its multiple perspectives—I can pick up on things that other researchers may not be able to receive.
Data Collection

This ethnographic study draws on in-depth interviews, field observations, a questionnaire, and my own personal experiences. The start date of my dancing career precedes my entry to graduate school by several years. I was able to give this project a sociological, academic perspective in October 2011, when I made my first observation for a qualitative methods class. I continued collecting data collection through March 2012, when I conducted my last interview. Transcription, coding, and analytical memo writing occurred in an iterative manner through the end of April 2012. I spent the next six months creating and revising this manuscript.

Interviews

I interviewed all participants in person, at the location of their choice. Most interviews were conducted in a private employees-only room at the club; the remaining interviews were conducted at my apartment or in restaurants where we could not be overheard. The average interview was about an hour long and all interviews were semi-structured. Some interviews, such as with staff members, were shorter (about 30-40 minutes). The owner interview was the longest (more than 3 hours). I will go into more detail about each group in the following sections.

Most of my interviews were conducted in the private room on the second floor of the club. This room has a three-cushion, pink, fake-leather couch, and numerous cafeteria-variety vinyl-padded metal chairs lining the wall next to the couch. I gave each interviewee first choice in where to sit. The staff seemed to hesitate before sitting down, and did not assume they could, or should, sit on the couch (with the exception of Shep, who sat with his arm thrown over the back of the couch like he owned it, and he in fact does). The staff chose to sit in the hard-back chairs lining the wall next to the couch—even Janet. It felt awkward to me to be the only one on the
couch, but I didn’t voice this to the staff—the point was for them to feel comfortable. Dancers did not go through any such debate. It was invariably as if we thought, “Oh, there’s the couch,” and we sat on it without conscious struggle about who should go where, or how far apart we should be, and of course we sat facing each other. All of them chose to stay in their stripper costumes, and sometimes they sat cross-legged, leaving their (very minimal) belly rolls, breasts, and crotch unselfconsciously unprotected from my view. I often mimicked their postures, I realized in hindsight, and many times I was wearing a bikini or short, slinky dress, too. It was only after giving a staff interview that it dawned on me how differently the dancers and I reacted in each other’s presence, and how invisible our bodies were to our consciousness perception.

I audio recorded interviews with participants’ permission. Audio files and their related transcripts were stored on a university password protect server. I transferred and stored each observation’s field notes from my laptop to the same password protected server. My laptop is protected by a password, and only I have access to this password. I analyzed this qualitative data using QSR International’s NVivo 9.2 software program. I employed a transcriptionist for the majority of my interviews, though I transcribed three dancer interviews and half of the owner interview myself (about 4 ½ hours of recorded audio). I checked my data and interpretations with participants through April and September 2012, as I coded and wrote my analysis.

Observations

In addition to interviewing, I performed multiple periods of participant observation during the same months that interviews were conducted. I was present for more than 10 full shifts, which are 12 hours long, for a total of at least 120 hours. Making observations during the same time period I conducted interviews provided a check against information revealed by the interviews, in the case of current dancers (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995).
When observing, I recorded my notes on a laptop in the dressing room. Because I was a dancer whom all of the women in the dressing room routinely saw, my presence was mostly unobtrusive, though I did not perform the study covertly. According to Berg, this kind of “fitting in” is possible as through an “erosion of visibility over time” (2001, 147). My laptop was also unobtrusive because they knew I am a student, and they expected to see me working on school work. Furthermore, club management offers free wireless service to employees, so I am not the only dancer who routinely brings a laptop to work. Student-dancers are common to Titans, so the practice of doing homework between sets is common, which may have served to further minimize the visibility of my observational activities. Berg calls this kind of invisibility “disattending” as opposed to “misrepresentation” (2001, 148).

I protected my computer from access by others with a password. The wireless network is secure as well. Given the necessarily open access of the dressing room, I developed a technique for visibly taking notes on my laptop while ensuring curious onlookers could not easily distinguish what I typed. In my word processing program, I used white letters on a white background. I could not see what I was typing, but neither could any of the dancers who may have wanted to see my notes.

I had some difficulty in making observations due to the complexity of the environment (many individuals, large space, and long shifts). Further, in order to maintain my status as “one of them,” it required that I actually do the job of dancing. Berg calls this version of becoming invisible a “display of symbolic attachment” to the group. While participation as a dancer helped maintain my invisibility to the work culture, it took time and energy away from the reflective thought required of a researcher. Participating added to my ability to relate to what I observed through later reflection on my personal experiences.
Background Questionnaire

I collected basic demographic and employment information about the current dancer population through a questionnaire. I distributed the questionnaire during multiple visits to the club because the dancers’ work schedules vary such that it was impossible to encounter all of the dancers on any particular day. I gave the entire population of dancers at Titans an opportunity to fill out a 17 question IRB-approved paper and pencil form, included in Appendix C.

I collected data regarding their ages, employment durations, the number of other clubs where they may have danced, levels of educational attainment, and relationship statuses. The paper and pencil questionnaire permitted privacy among respondents. No names appeared on the forms, only an alphabetized code, which further enhanced dancer confidentiality. Although dancers were free to select a more private area of the club to complete the form, they all elected to fill it out while in the dressing room. I was present in the dressing room and available to answer their questions regarding the form.

The most common question I received pertained to educational attainment. Some dancers wanted to have a way to indicate future plans, while the question as written asked only about their current levels of completion. I had one non-response on this question and three non-solicited write-ins: “Master’s,” “I’m enrolled to go to Beauty School in April,” and “Beauty School.”

Previous Experience

Although this study is inductive and aims to uncover emergent and open-ended themes in the data, it is important to take into account my extensive personal history with this occupational culture because my own circumstances and interests affect what I see and how I portray it. Throughout this study I frame myself as an “insider,” which is somewhat methodologically
problematic. In the simplest sense, I define an insider as someone who works at the club, and an outsider is someone who doesn’t. However, there are varying degrees of insider-or-outsider-ness. In fact, locating anyone as a “true” insider or outsider is problematic, as such positions are always shifting (Naples 2003). For example, former dancers may not seem to be complete insiders relative to current dancers, as they no longer work at the club, but they may be considered more “insider” than women who have never danced at Titans at all. Is a dancer who has only ever danced at Titans more insider than a Titans’ dancer who has worked in another club at one point? What if the Titan’s dancer with “outside” experience has worked three years longer than the Titans-only dancer with whom she is being compared? Regarding my own insider status, I am the dancer in this study with the longest work history at Titans, but during that time period I concurrently worked multiple other jobs, so was I ever a true insider? Further complicating my insider status is my role as a researcher which further separates me from whatever notion of “complete insider” that we may entertain.

**Positionality**

I report my positionality with a substantive purpose in mind—to enhance this study’s trustworthiness by making visible my own subjectivity in the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation. This disclosure allows the reader to better understand why I have selected this study and how I have studied it. “Including some indication of why researchers have undertaken a particular project along with the methodological procedure provides a means for making the research come alive, to become interesting to the reading audience” (Berg 2001, 143). By doing so, the research becomes a valuable contribution to sociological literature.

As a researcher, I closely align with “sex-positive” studies that encourage sex work to be seen as a legitimate form of labor, so that worker conditions can be safeguarded by formal work
protections. I believe greater visibility of commercial sex (and all socially complex issues) necessitates greater accountability of those in power, as opposed to having those at the lowest level of control shouldering the brunt of responsibility. As things stand today, sex work producers carry stigma that sex work consumers do not.

In this study, I do not uncritically defend exotic dance as unilaterally liberating nor oppressive. Instead, I act as a conduit in describing the experiences of exotic dancers, myself included, who work at a rural show club adding their words to my own. We have experienced positive, negative, mixed and ambiguous events on the job.

My Education Level, Age, Career Status, and Family Status

I relate to all of the dancers in this study through my lengthy career at Titans. I have been a “new girl,” and I have been “seasoned.” My educational status and age coming into Titans distinguishes me from most dancers, as I gained my “stripper status” later in life (age 25 versus 18-21) and after having already completed a bachelor’s degree. Unlike most dancers, I had “career-track” formal work experience. Further, I had experienced high levels of success in formal education—i.e. I was a “star” student. These life experiences enabled me to attach at least part of my identity to positive aspects completely unrelated to the club. Nevertheless, having spent more time at Titans than other dancers in continuous contact with the job contributes to my significant internalization of a dancer identity. Further, I did spend several months working as “only” a dancer, during a particularly difficult period in my life, which helps to make me sensitive to the experiences of dancers who have had fewer opportunities to experience formal “success” than me. In terms of family status, I have worked as both a single and dating woman. I have never worked as a married or engaged dancer and I do not have any kids. I have never worked at any other strip club.
Ethnographer’s Dilemmas

Throughout this study I’ve been “working in my own backyard” (Creswell 2007). Over time, I have distanced myself from what were once major sources of social support for me. My club people have “been there” for me, during my ups and downs for several years. In the course of doing this study, I have felt a lot of pressure to “get it right” which means that I have been concerned with “accurately” reporting their experiences, both for their sakes and for my own as I straddle the dancer world and the world of academia. I have wondered if I will regret choosing this topic. Sometimes it seems like there is no way to win. Scholars may think I’m navel-gazing and strippers may think I’m using them so I can get a degree. Even more likely, no one will ever care about this study more than I do. I know that I am the only one who can determine the study’s “rightness” and its “doneness.” I’m willing to go forth with a study with limitations rather than not produce anything at all.

Curiously, what disturbs me most about doing this study is not what I have elected to write about it, rather what I have elected to omit. While I can’t reasonably include every detail, and part of my job is to be selective in order to maximize clarity, I can’t shake the feeling that it’s dishonest to put some things in and leave other things out. I’m the one who gets to make that call and no one else will ever know what I didn’t report. I’m not thinking of any particular, specific thing that I’m hiding or avoiding. I simply know that anything I write is subject to having been misremembered, miscommunicated, and misinterpreted by numerous agents along the way. I feel sensitive to the power that I have in being the “author” of this study—ultimately, what I say goes.
Reflexivity: From Dancing to Research

The word “former” exotic dancer isn’t quite right, because I am still connected to the exotic dance field through writing this study. Yet, in one sense I became a “former” exotic dancer when I started collecting data; I took on a new identity as a researcher. So, throughout my reflexive accounts and memos, I contradict myself by saying “we” in the present tense identification with them, and use past tense “they” as if I am no longer one of them. This thesis signals a significant transition in my life; I am finally able to see myself in a new career, which is, perhaps, the only way I feel like I would have been able to stop dancing (apart from “aging out”). I took more than three months off from dancing to write this thesis, which was the longest period I had been away from the club, ever. Although I had been emotionally attached to the job, I feel justified in saying that I “chose” to work at a rural strip club, because I did work other jobs while dancing, and I was not always entirely dependent on the income. Even if I didn’t want to leave, I could have. This may distinguish me from other dancers in this study who have had less formal education and work experience.

In addition to the fact that I had the benefit of being able to leave the job, if necessary, I experienced considerable enjoyment from the work friendships I developed over time. So, although the job was certainly challenging in a negative way—at times it was almost unbearably difficult—at other times it was the easiest, most fun job in the world. Overall I have had a positive experience as a dancer in a rural exotic show club. It is likely that other “seasoned” dancers share this optimistic viewpoint, as they too have had a long period of time over which to counterbalance negative experiences with positive ones, as well to develop rewarding work friendships. In contrast, a new dancer may be much more sensitive to customers’ criticisms than a dancer who has “heard it all” and no longer takes such criticisms as personally. Similarly, new dancers may not feel as fully integrated in the culture.
Ethics

Confidentiality is one of the most important ethical concerns when studying this group of people. Dancers already go by pseudonyms known as “stage names”; nevertheless, I have assigned new pseudonyms for the purposes of the study. Each staff member and the owner have also been assigned a pseudonym.

All parties understood the necessity for me to deflect any questions they asked about the content of each other’s interviews, although these circumstances were few and minor. I have kept and will keep each participant’s information confidential during the course of this study and indefinitely. My standing and reputation—as perceived by the dancers, staff, and owner—that I am trustworthy and reliable—is part of what made this ethnography possible. Maintaining my good-standing in this social world is part of my personal motivation to cause no harm to this occupational culture. Equally important is my credibility in the scholarly world. If my study is not trustworthy, then it was a wasted endeavor that benefits no one.

I am relieved that I decided early on to make my research project known to the entire occupational culture, which quelled some of my fears about ethics. I was as forthcoming as I could be with them about what I was doing. I didn’t want to tell them exactly what I was looking for, as I did not want to inspire them “to try to help me out” and give me “good” answers during our interviews.

My extensive time in the field was an asset to the validity of this study (Creswell 2007; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). There are other academic researchers who have also been

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10 Individually identifying content has not and will not be shared with anyone else in the study. Only members of my committee and my transcriptionist had access to transcripts. All printed field-notes used pseudonyms and/or black outs of any identifying names or locations. I am the only person who knows which person is linked with which pseudonym. The use of pseudonyms will be used for all reporting. The data collected was labeled with non-identifying file names, using pseudonyms where applicable.

11 For example, to the question, “What does the word ‘normal’ mean to you?” a respondent gave her answer and asked, “What did everybody else say?” because I inadvertently had primed her—“I ask everybody this next question.”
dancers, but few academics have such an extended period of time in rural clubs. None of them report having spent as many years as me dancing at a single club. My deep cultural familiarity allowed me access but also posed special challenges. The most pressing concern to me as I wrote my findings was wondering how the dancers, staff and owner will feel about my interpretations. Although I have involved them to some degree, in checking if I understood what they have said or in asking follow up questions, I have worried that the ultimate write-up will reveal too much about individual dancers, and thus any negative findings may hurt their feelings. This situation is especially likely regarding the owner, who may have negative things said about him by dancers, including me. Whereas there will be some ambiguity about which dancers said what, the same ambiguity will not apply to the owner because there is only one of him.

Data Analysis

Because I studied an occupational work culture, ethnography was a suitable research method (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Creswell 2007; Maxwell 2005). Interviews with both dancers and staff and observations of them in their occupational setting have provided multiple data sources, and thus enhance the credibility of this study (Creswell 2007; Maxwell 2005; Cho and Trent 2006). Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection. I formulated analytic categories early in the research process and engaged in analytic writing throughout.

Coding

I assessed my narrative data’s thematic content and essence in three coding cycles as suggested by Saldaña (2009). The first two cycles, in my case, happened interactively. In the First Cycle, I selected data in various magnitudes (sometimes a phrase, other times whole sentences)
and tagged it with an amalgam of Saldaña’s Initial, Description, and Values codes. The Second Cycle coding process involved using those same units and reconfiguring the codes previously applied while adding new ones. In the last cycle, several major categories and themes emerged in the coding. I kept a separate list of all emerging codes throughout my analysis to help me visualize the work in progress.

In the First Cycle, I used an open-ended approach to coding my interview transcripts called Initial Coding (Saldaña 2009). I broke the data down into parts and examined these parts’ similarities and differences. According to Saldaña, Initial Coding is appropriate particularly for beginning qualitative researchers and it is also appropriate for ethnographies. It is a method intended to provide a starting point and give the researcher analytic leads for further exploration—to open possible avenues of study. All codes I applied during this phase were tentative and provisional, and were often reworded as my analysis progressed. I used detailed line-by-line Initial Coding which is also called data “splitting” (Saldaña 2009, 84). The combination of these coding orientations helped me develop major categories and themes from the data. But the categories did not have distinct boundaries. Often one sub-code fell within multiple major categories.

While Descriptive Coding is a straightforward method, Values Coding involves the application of codes onto data that reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview (Saldaña 2009). I elected Values Coding because I was exploring cultural values of participants and trying to make sense of their intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences. I kept these value codes in mind as I evaluated my field notes. Using both sources in this way corroborated my coding and enhanced the trustworthiness of my findings because “what a participant states are his values, attitudes, and beliefs may not always be truthful or harmonize with his observed actions and interactions” (Saldaña 2009, 90).
As my coding process became more focused, I was able to categorize and compare lines of data with more analytic control and precision. Some codes came forward more frequently and the accumulation of certain groups of codes allowed me to meaningfully reassess emergent categories. Writing memos during the coding process allowed me to avoid losing slippery moments of insight later used in this report.

I grouped codes under main themes labeled (1) Heterosexual-Conservative-Normality, (2) Financial Incentives, (3) Occupational Culture, (4) Rurality, (5) Relationships, and (6) Emotions. Additionally, for organizational clarity, I made a set of codes indicating situations or perceptions which could belong to the exotic dance industry generally, and which situations or perceptions may belong primarily to the particular dancer. For example the code “Dancing is a Performance” is a value associated with exotic dance generally, not necessarily applying to Titans only, while the code “My Parents are Powerful” is an individual-level assessment that may not apply to anyone else. I found considerable overlap among the six broad themes, which seemed to be linked by cultural cohesion and insider/outsider sentiments.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed the methods of this study as they pertain to answering two research questions: (1) What occupational culture do rural exotic show club dancers share? and (2) How does the job of rural show club dancing influence dancers’ relationships with those outside and inside the club? It is necessary to understand the macro-level context potentially influencing the club-level and individual-level data upon which this study relies. Therefore, I discussed the rural setting of this club in terms of population density, economic and demographic characteristics, and the possibility of local community members’ close social ties. These factors may contribute to the incentives and outcomes of exotic dancing in a rural area.
The ethnographic nature of this study required a discussion of my access, rapport and other elements of my own positionality in order to understand the ways in which the data collection and analysis process have been affected by me. I discussed the characteristics of this study’s participants and how they contribute to answering its research questions—my sampling was purposeful around the goal of developing ideas such as the influence of time. For example, taking into consideration dancers’ opportunities for repeated and prolonged exposure to the culture, and the temporal distance gained after leaving it (in the case of former dancers) helps to explain similarities and differences in their perception of the occupational culture.

I provided details about how the data for this study were collected: through interviews, observations, and a questionnaire. I reflexively discuss my positionality as a dancer, researcher, and rural worker, including the dilemmas of ethnographic fieldwork and other ethical concerns. Finally, I discussed the process I used to code and analyze the data, which often occurred during the same period that I was collecting the data.
Chapter 4: What occupational culture do rural exotic show club dancers share?

Introduction

This chapter will discuss several structural and cultural features that define Titans as a “show” club. The first attribute I examine is the physical layout of the club. In addition to devoting considerable floor area to prominent stages, the club also uses a “show case” display of professionally-taken dancer photographs to emphasize its dancers’ beauty and individuality. Next I discuss the routine operations of the club which reveal the orderly and structured nature of work at Titans. Most important to maintaining this routine structure is a set of detailed rules; these will be discussed in terms of how they are followed and enforced. One of the most distinguishing features of Titans as a show club is that it does not allow customers to touch dancers, therefore this chapter will examine both dancers’ and staff’s feelings about the no-touch rule. Another distinguishing feature of Titans as a show club is its emphasis on beauty and image. Functioning as a harmonious and safe strip club culture is always in tension with the opportunity to make (more) money by yielding to pressure to be less stable and less safe. This tension, too, will be explored.

For Show

The “show” club designation, in part, means that Titans’ structure is designed to provide a safe and enjoyable environment for both its workers and its clientele. Rules about dancer and customer conduct are strictly enforced. So, for example, dancers are required to perform on stage at a set time and cannot deviate from that schedule. Customers are required to keep their hands to themselves. They are not permitted to touch dancers in any way at any time. Illegal drug-use is
not tolerated anywhere inside the club by dancers or customers. Titans exemplifies show club classification by being so strictly regulated.

Another notable meaning to the “show” designation of the club is its focus on theatrical, technically challenging exotic dance work as part of the club’s enticement—the club draws customers interested in “entertainment” over pure sexual gratification, and though the club is a place for male socialization and repeat customers, the club is not merely the local neighborhood watering-hole of a “social” club. Bradley-Engen (2009) explains a likely reason behind such variation: “Whereas some clubs have large and constantly changing populations in terms of dancers, customers, and staff, other clubs tend to have roughly the same smaller group of customers, dancers and other employees time after time” (Bradley-Engen 2009, 71). Titans is a club with both stable and dynamic patron populations, given the club’s proximity to people who live in surrounding rural communities and its accessibility those travelling through a nearby college town. The club offers customers both an upscale sexualized spectacle and a relaxed social atmosphere for “partying.” The club offers rural women, and women attending the nearby college, the opportunity for relatively high-wage, stable work, though it lacks the protections of formal work such as regular pay, sick time, or worker compensation.

**Physical Set-Up**

The club itself is a 8,500 square-foot, two-story building, which from the outside looks like a well-kept, though otherwise unremarkable warehouse. The club has its own private lane and is not visible from the main highway, although a lighted sign at the end of the club’s lane announces its presence—“Titans Showclub”—to passing motorists. A paved parking lot surrounds the facility, and wooded acreage surrounds the parking lot. There are no other
businesses within sight of the club. This relatively remote location stands in marked contrast to the club settings which make up the bulk of existent exotic dance literature. See Figure 4-1.

Figure 4-1. Larry Flynt’s Hustler “Barely Legal Club” is one of many businesses vying for pedestrians’ attention on a heavily travelled thoroughfare in New Orleans. The club represented in this study is situated on a remote wooded lot with no other businesses around it, no public transportation to it, and it is certainly not within a reasonable walking distance of anywhere else.

Titans’ parking lot is internally monitored via a live camera feed. The main entrance explains the rules of the club on the exterior door, including the stipulation that each patron must be at least age 18 to enter. Dancers use a side entrance which is monitored by a two-way radio system. Dancers make radio calls in order to have permission to enter and exit the building. This arrangement helps ensure dancer safety by controlling access to sensitive areas of the club—i.e. preventing customers from gaining access to employee-only areas.
Just inside the customer entrance, a 4’ x 16’ glass “showcase” mounted to the wall displays photographs of costumed dancers. Although the club occasionally books transient dancers, the majority of its dancers are “house girls” meaning the same women are routinely scheduled to work. Bradley-Engen’s observations indicate that show clubs favor keeping a group of house girls.

There are often more than enough women [available to dance], and circulating the scheduling of the same dancers acts to ensure that rules are consistently followed and the dancer expectations are predictably maintained. Alternating among a steady supply of well-known dancers is compatible with a business plan of quality control. (Bradley-Engen 2009, 120)

At Titans’ rural location, there is not “more than enough” women to work, and so for a woman who would like to become a “house girl,” it means gaining a stable, “full-time” informal job, with very little competition. Women audition for dancer positions at a typical rate of less than 4 per month, yet very few who are hired actually “stick”—despite a welcoming and friendly current dancer population. Early initial turnover could be accounted for by a myriad of reasons, such as a woman’s mismatch of expectations and experience, i.e. maybe the job simply isn’t like what she thought it would be like. Or perhaps there were not enough immediate earnings to keep her interested, as “slow” nights do occur with routine frequency. If a woman is willing and able to accept the nature of the work generally, most dancers do not leave because they are dissatisfied with unacceptable working conditions. This finding suggests the management of a club located in a less densely populated area may have to provide a satisfying work environment in order to retain dancers.

At Titans, house dancers make up the bulk of its dancing population. They each have individual lockers in the dressing room, and the opportunity to have their photo put in the showcase. This display is important for passive selection of lap dances because customers can

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12 The dancers are not forced to have a photo in the showcase, but it is advantageous to do so in order to sell more private dances—about half the dancers do put photos in the case. Similarly, the club has a web presence and the dancers may choose to post their images on the club’s website, but most do not.
point to the image of the woman with whom they would like to have a private dance. A door attendant, usually a male staff member, greets patrons as they enter. The doorman informs incoming customers of “the rules” via a list posted near the doorman’s cash register. The doorman checks customers’ ages by examining their photo ID’s, stamps their hands, takes their cover charges, issues one dollar bills for tipping, and makes note of the rules by pointing to the list and by stating the abbreviated version, “No touching and no cameras.” After inputting the appropriate attendance information into the touch-screen cash register, the doorman directs patrons to proceed to the stage area. The stage is not visible from the entrance area.

Most of the club’s ground-level is devoted to a large stage, which is subdivided into four connected smaller stages each with its own 22 ft. vertical brass pole. An impressively industrial-looking lighting system hangs from a metal structure along the ceiling and includes multi-colored, moving canister lights, strobe lights, black lights, and other “lighting show” effects including a smoke machine. The stage area is elevated and lined by a polished natural wood countertop-like platform around the entire perimeter of the stage. Metal chairs with vinyl padded seats line the stage and accommodate about 100 people, with standing room for many more behind the chairs. The rest of the ground floor consists of two public bathrooms (men’s and women’s), an entrance to an adjoining bar, a “deejay booth,” and the private dance room.

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13 By contrast, active selection of a private dance would be for a customer to negotiate with a dancer in person for a private dance. When dancers negotiate their own dances it is known as “hustling.” Titans dancers are not permitted to hustle—all sale of dances go through the computerized database at the same rate for every dance.

14 The staff sometimes rotate door duties, or the deejay may be responsible for the door and deejaying simultaneously during off-peak hours. There was one female deejay during the course of this study, but employees still referred to her as the “doorman.” The phrase “working door” means standing post at the cash register in order to take cover charges, order dances and answer the multiline telephone.

15 In this way, the club conforms to public nudity laws.

16 There is no alcohol permitted inside the club at any time by anyone. Dancers who are older than 21 are permitted to go to the adjoining bar to have no more than one drink per hour when they are not on stage or performing lap dances. When dancers are in the bar, they are not permitted to talk to the customers. Katey says, “[The job] is going to work every day. Still [a] fun atmosphere, but just different. I don’t drink anymore [at work], I don’t feel the need, you know, I don’t want the calories.” Work is more than a party scene to Katey. According to Bradley-Engen (2009), hustle club dancers often take drugs while at work or
Ironically, the “private room” is immediately visible to incoming patrons from the entrance to ground-level stage area, and also can be seen from other areas of the floor (the area surrounding the stage). The private room is continuously monitored from the deejay booth via cameras. During peak hours, the room is monitored directly by the standing presence of a bouncer. Five couches inside the private room line three walls of the room. Because one of these three walls is mirrored, each dancer can observe every other dancer while giving lap dances. This highly-visible “private” area makes breaking the rules very difficult for customers and dancers.

Figure 4-2. This diagram shows the first floor of the 8,500 sq. ft. show club. Shaded areas are accessible to only employees.

The deejay booth, also on an elevated platform, is located at the end of the lap dance room, giving the deejay a direct line of sight to both the dance room and the stage area. The deejay is responsible for adjusting the lights, selecting music, starting and ending private dances, drink in order to get through the night, and social club dancers are encouraged to drink with customers. At Titans, even though any 21 or older dancer may drink—for free—if she wishes, most dancers do not.
controlling the dancers’ access door, knowing where all other employees are at any given time—while simultaneously rousing the crowd and calling dancers on and off the stage. A typical deejay announcement (at minimum) goes like this: “Put your hands together for the amazing Nova now leaving Titans’ show stage, and welcome next the gorgeous Simone!” The deejay may issue additional directions to the customers about how to get a lap dance, alert customers to a spectacular pole trick about to be performed, or implore the customers to tip and buy raffles to win private dances.

The majority of the ground-floor is devoted to stage operations. The private dance room takes up less than a quarter of the space that the stage does. This configuration speaks to the “show” club focus of this exotic dance establishment. Although private dance sales are an important source of earnings for both the club and the dancers (they split private dance profit evenly), the culture at Titans insists that they are a “no-hustle” club. Instead, they employ other strategies to encourage sales, the foremost of which is simple suggestion, but key also is denying customer access to dancers except through the purchase of private dances. (The deejay may announce that “Madeline is all out of time on stage, but if you’d like to see more of her, go to the doorman and get a private dance with her!”) If this club were a “social” type of club, as outlined by Bradley-Engen (2009), the separation of customers and dancers would not exist—dancers in “social” clubs must become “drinking mates” with the customers.

The owner makes the following distinction regarding his club versus other clubs.

Shep: Other strip clubs are just a bunch of girls hustling—hustling to buy drinks, dances, and they don’t really care about entertainment. Where I try to make this [club] all-in-one is I have sports [on tv], we have entertainment, with the girls entertaining on stage, we do have the private dances

17 By contrast, Bradley-Engen (2009) observed that in hustle clubs, the deejay and other staff members emphasize dancers as objects, not individual people—certainly not “amazing” or “beautiful” people. Rather, “as a dancer steps on to the stage, the deejay will announce, ‘Hey guys, take a look at the tits on this gal.’ Similarly, dancers are often referred to with phrases such as ‘hot piece of ass’ ” (Bradley-Engen 2009, 36). Titans emphasizes dancer individuality and encourages its dancers to cultivate a unique stage presence.

18 Dancers and patrons may initially negotiate the purchase of a private dance while she is on stage, rather than after a dancer’s stage set when she would then go around to each customer to solicit dances.
that are entertainment plus conversation, then we also have the bar that’s completely separate that
gives you the atmosphere of a bar. See, the atmosphere of a bar nightclub along with the
atmosphere of a strip club—without a lot of the negatives with a strip club.

This finding aligns with exotic dance literature which predicts strip clubs will continue to favor
and implement the “upscale” business model (Bradley-Engen 2009). If Titans’ owner can achieve
a business climate that is reputed for being safe and comfortable, he will face less oppositional
pressure from community members who would not permit a strip club to operate near them, much
less actually patronize it. He also must bear personal responsibility in his community for being
“the guy” who owns “the” strip club—the reputation of the club is his reputation. In the
communities surrounding Titans, people are watching. Shep is sensitive to the way he is perceived in the community:

**Shep:** There are a lot of people that say a lot of things in this world. I actually take actions to
prove what I say—my actions speak louder than my words. So when people try to degrade me,
categorize me as just another strip club owner—girls’ parents and everyone else, the girls I
dated—I would tell my girlfriends, “Please don’t tell your parents what I do until later so they get
a chance to actually know me.” Not just categorize me and say, “Well, he’s just saying that.” No, I
just don’t just say that. [emphasis his]

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 4-3.** This diagram shows the second floor of the 8,500 sq. ft. show club. The entire second floor
level is an employee’s-only access space.
The second floor of the club is an employee’s-only area and contains the dancer’s dressing room, a shower and toilet area, a smoking room, a private room used as a dancer lounge, a gym and an office. A balcony area overhangs two sides of the stage area. Dancers walk along this balcony to move from the dressing room to the ground floor via a staircase near the north end of the club. Dancers also descend from the balcony to the stage area via a staircase on the south end of the club. Dancers must remain upstairs unless they are performing on stage, selling raffle tickets, or giving private dances. If there are few customers in the club and many dancers in the lineup, the time spent downstairs is many times less than the time spent upstairs. That is to say that dancers have ample time to interact with each other under this no-hustle stipulation. With systematic, timed, ordered intervals on stage, each dancer has roughly equal opportunities to make money on stage as every other dancer. In other types of clubs, there is very little “down time” for intra-dancer socialization and much greater chance for differential earning through varied sales opportunities. This structured equality among dancers has implications for how they interact with each other.

Clearly, this club site is designed as a “show” facility as outlined by Bradley-Engen (2009) in terms of its size, emphasis on theatrical entertainment, and goddess-like presentation of dancers. Also fitting with show typology is the strict rules of conduct for both patrons and dancers, which are enforced directly in person and indirectly aided by technology. Exogenous forces, such as the visibility of the club in a less densely populated and more socially integrated area, help to make actors inside the club accountable for their behavior.

19 The private room used to be the dancers’ lounge, but during the course of this study, it was transformed into a “private party” room. The dancers see this transformation as a punishment, as the new room is rarely used for its intended purpose and instead rests as an empty “forbidden” zone. It used to be a vibrant area of dancer interaction.
**Routine Practices**

**Time is Money**

The period of time that a dancer takes stage tips is called a *set*. A set is at least two songs in length, but varies by the number of customers in the club. More customers mean more songs. A set on an unusually busy night can be as many as 10 songs in length (approximately 40 minutes) during peak hours, but a more typical set is about four songs (12-16 minutes). A shift can last as long as 12 hours and is usually no less than eight hours. On a slow night, a dancer may appear on stage for two songs (6-8 minutes) per hour. If no one buys a lap dance with her, during one shift she will have actually worked one hour out of eight. While these are not especially lucrative evenings, they do provide the opportunity for non-monetary perks related to the job. A dancer will have had the opportunity to spend *seven hours* of leisure time in the dressing room. Three dressing room activities that predominate during slow times are 1) socializing with the other dancers, 2) doing homework, and 3) playing on laptops. Even if a student dancer has to actually work—dancing on stage and giving lap dances—from the hours of 11 o’clock to 2 a.m., that leaves between four and five hours to socialize or study *whilst* collecting at least $100 that shift. The importance of getting along with co-workers is paramount in a setting where so much time can be spent not doing work.

**Behind the Scenes Operations**

The *lineup* refers to the order that each dancer takes a set on stage. Sometimes dancers are “pulled out” of the lineup (they miss their set) in order to have time to do long private dances (20 minutes or more). Sometimes the terms *lineup* and *rotation* are used as synonyms, e.g. if a dancer is pulled out of the *lineup*, she might ask the deejay when she going back into the *rotation*,
meaning who she should follow on stage. A rotation is the length of time it takes a dancer to complete a circuit of stage work.

The deejay determines the lineup and posts it electronically to monitors located in the bar (where the customers can see it) and dressing room (where the dancers can see it). Requests for private dances are also reflected on these monitors, which function much like the monitors at an airport terminal—they visually track when each dancer is due to arrive at which part of the club and how long she will be there before she returns to the dressing room. This information is available to customers to assist them in making decisions about when they might like to go inside to see a particular dancer’s stage set, or with whom a customer may want to purchase a dance—a dancer who has accumulated 20 minutes worth of dances may be a patron’s second choice if he can have a dance with another dancer immediately.

A radio intercom system assists the deejay in alerting dancers to alterations in the lineup, and is also used to keep the bartender and doorman situationally aware of activity in parts of the club that they cannot directly see. Via camera feeds, the deejay can see all interior parts of the club except for the dancers’ bathroom and public women’s bathroom (yes, he can see in the men’s bathroom, primarily to prevent vandalism, but also to prevent drug use or interrupt fights), and he can see around the entire exterior perimeter of the club. Because the deejay’s attention is divided between the oversight of multiple club areas, he is not expected to be the sole watchful eye of the lap dance room during busy times. Instead, the room is hawked by the highly visible physical presence of a bouncer. He reminds customers of the rules, and insists that they follow them—often just by standing there.

Bouncers are distinguishable from other men in the club because they wear white button-up shirts with pink ties and black pants. The owner wears the same thing, but he is distinguishable from just another bouncer because he is free to circulate his presence around all club spaces, whereas the deejay, bouncers and doormen all have specific places they are permitted to stand
and when. They even have their own “rotation” on busy nights. The owner spends time chatting with customers in the bar, and he spends time upstairs in the dressing room casually chatting with dancers. He addresses their grievances regarding operations, staff members and each other.

Culture of Detailed Rules

“We’re not a Hustle Club”

A nuanced and extensive reliance on rules—a defining element of the show club culture—passes orally from established and seasoned dancers to those who have just been hired. The adjustment to Titans show club culture can be particularly difficult for dancers whose previous experience occurred in hustle clubs, where rules are scarce or unenforced. According to Titans’ manager,

Roger: Eighty percent of the dancers that [have] worked here, that’s the first time they ever danced. You gotta teach them everything, which is good because they only know your rules and nobody else’s. Where if girls come from other clubs then they’re used to other rules and it takes them a while to try to get your rules.

Regarding this phenomenon of difficult adjustment, I asked a seasoned urban dancer, Simone:

AG: Did you have trouble adjusting to the rules here since it’s really strict?

Simone: Oh my gosh, yeah. You know, when I first got here, I had no idea like—I made no money when I first got here. I mean, I made money, but—it was different. I was used to the hustle—talking to people—and that’s how you got dances. Not so much because you’re on stage because they see you for like five minutes, but talking to people—you’re like playing to what they want you to be, and I’m really good at that. I’m really good at bullshitting people and—I don’t know if that’s bad or good but—and then like—I still don’t mind if a guy touches my leg, you know—be like that will get you another dance, go ahead, brush my leg. But for them to get kicked out of here [for that] I was like ‘Whoa!’ That was kind of crazy, but now I wouldn’t want it any other way. It’s going to be real hard for me to go back to a normal club.

Among other dancers who have worked in a variety of clubs, they said the following of Titans:

Kimberly: You won’t find another club like Titans. Like I said I’ve worked like ten different clubs. It’s the classiest club. They have no tolerance for touching, no tolerance for men getting off. It’s, you know, ‘You touch and you’re out!’ The rules are written [for the customers], you can see them clearly [at the door], they’re verbally expressed, you know—so you can’t get them wrong.
People get them wrong but they get kicked out for it. So—[it’s] very classy and you can make good money there too. And then one [club] that I danced at in Philadelphia and [one club in] Delaware. They were pretty nice—on the classier side but still sleazy stuff happened.

The seasoned hustling dancer quoted earlier had the following to say about the differing style of clubs:

**AG**: Do you think there are other clubs like this club?

**Simone**: I looked at Hustler in Baltimore, which is really strict. So like lap dances they couldn’t touch. I mean, there was a bouncer for every lap dance chair. They were like hawks. But in the VIP rooms you were constantly being contacted and talked to or pursued—but it was—I would probably do that again, because it’s so strict and it’s big money and it’s the same thing [as Titans] when you’re on stage and people tip you while you’re on stage but—[sigh]. You gotta seek them out, it’s not everywhere. I think you have to find those—those little gems.

After Janet, a deejay, explained to me the details of the case surrounding the firing of a particular dancer, I wanted to know if this sort of firing was a typical event.

**AG**: Is that the rule or is that something—

**Janet**: That’s a rule—you can’t give out [phone] numbers, meet customers after work.

**AG**: Does it happen very often, I mean?

**Janet**: No. And it’s like everybody up here, I notice you can’t walk into Wal-Mart or anyplace or go out to Eat n Park you know, or a place like that, without running into somebody so if you’re out with somebody—if you’re out with somebody that’s a customer—somebody [from the club] is going to see you. Or now, with facebook, everybody’s connected and if you’re caught talking—you know.

**AG**: So the management takes it seriously?

**Janet**: Yeah.

Not only does the management take it seriously, so do the dancers. “Somebody” from the club includes not only the boss and manager, but also other dancers. They police each other to maintain their culture as “not a hustler club.” Again, speaking with Janet:

**AG**: You mentioned girls from Supreme and the other place, I can’t remember its name—

**Janet**: The Ranch

**AG**: The Ranch—so that’s an example of girls who come to dance at Titans from places [clubs] that are different than we are here?

**Janet**: Yeah. They have different rules and there are set rules that are hard to break [dancers] from, you know.
**AG:** So you say those dancers are the ones who don’t last [working at Titans]. Why do you think that?

**Janet:** Because I think um—they probably—I don’t want to say they made more money, but they made more money in other ways than what they shouldn’t have been. Like doing other things on the side, you know, couch rooms, you can—here you can only go so far. Down there, they’re more enclosed where they can’t see in them so you can like—where a customer, for an extra you know, ‘You can touch my boobs.’ Or you know—I don’t want to get too involved—stick your finger up my ass—I don’t know. {laugh} And they’re making more money that way ’cause they’re letting them do it and they realize they get more money and they’re like, ‘Hey.[Why not?]’ Uh, and drug policy is really tight up here. No drugs allowed on the premises or using. Where some clubs don’t care.

Some dancers reject the work environment offered at Titans, and instead choose to work where they can make more money. The following quotation from my study involves Katey recounting the circumstances the night a dancer quit. That dancer was used to working in a “hustle” environment. She was frustrated that she was confined to the dressing room, and expressly forbidden to make any money by circulating in the crowd i.e. “hustling.” Her only option was to wait for a stage set.

**Katey:** It was really, really dead that night, remember? And we had a bunch of girls there. And we’re all sittin’ in the dressing room; it’s two hours between sets. She says, ‘Hey I’ve been working at [a club in a city], we could go out to the floor, we don’t wait between sets. I’m pissed off, I wanna go home.’ …what [the manager] Roger said [to her] was, ‘Well, don’t you think every other girl wants to go home too? You think anybody else wants to wait two hours in between sets?’ She says, ‘No, but I guess they have that option if they want to or not.’ And he says, ‘Well so do you, and you can either wait two hours like everybody else, or you can pack your stuff and go home, I mean this is a fair club, you’re not better than everybody else just cause you’re amazing on the pole. Same with Katey, she doesn’t get to go home cause she’s been here seven years. Saffron doesn’t get to go home because she has school work. We’re all here. If you don’t want to be here, then you can pack your stuff and leave, but we’re gonna be fair.’ And she decided to pack her stuff and leave.

**What are these rules, anyway?**

This study was much longer than a few months in the making. For example, in the process of electronically sorting my field notes, I discovered a forgotten stockpile of scanned files I had made for “The Ultimate Scrapbook” of my stripper adventures—a tragically abandoned project. I included in Appendix A a page of hand-written notes that I took during an October
2008 meeting in which I detail the owner’s attempt to “go over the rules.” In total, I was able to make more than 50 numbered rules about Titans employees’ expected conduct, which shows the importance of rules to Titans’ “show” club typology. I have also included in Appendix B a copy of the manager’s attempt, in 2011, to end the oral legacy of dancer rules by posting a set of written policies. Interestingly, he titled his list of 13 items “MUST BE FOLLOWED,” which could be taken as an implicit admission of defeat on the other 37 + minutiae. Mandated employee meetings concerning the rules and posted lists of rules support defining this strip club as a “show” club—employees’ conduct is strictly monitored and the element of “entertainment” (emotion work) is emphasized over physical gratification (sex work). The work conducted at Titans has many parallels to other kinds of formal service work, especially in terms of its show orientation.

**Enforcing the Rules**

Punishments, or “office talks,” are usually administered by the manager rather than the owner. Katey offers the following explanation for why job duties are divvied up this way.

**Katey:** Shep’s always a people person, he wants to be liked, he wants to be around people, he wants—I think he wants people to leave on good terms that way if he needs them back—and I noticed a lot of the new girls, you know, they always think Shep is a good guy, and he usually is, but at the end of the day he’s the one that creates a lot of these rules and things. So Roger’s just the enforcer and Shep’s the one who decides [and then tells Roger], “I want this girl fired, I don’t like what she’s doing for whatever reason, you need to talk to her.”

Although this occupational culture relies heavy on adherence to behavioral “rules,” the official list defining “proper” behavior is orally-transmitted and amendable rather than physically recorded and fixed. (For customers, the opposite is true— they have a posted list of rules that do not change.) All established and seasoned club workers are aware that it’s hard for new dancers to

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20 The manager’s list omits the cardinal major rules which are so ingrained within the culture they need not be mentioned on a reminder note, such as the zero tolerance drug and prostitution policy.
know what’s “right” and “wrong,” so when new girls break rules, there is a period when they are not fined, rather they are merely warned, by staff and by other dancers. Discretion about how long this grace period lasts belongs to the deejay and manager and its duration varies. Furthermore, although there is a litany of rules, the rules are open to interpretation and mutation because they have never been written down (with one exception, see Appendix B). Instead “the rules” are enforced by a sort of perverse trial-and-error.

**Darcy:** [With] me being newer, I don’t know the rules, it’s not like there’s a manual like other places. I rely basically on everybody here and I’ve asked questions. … When I don’t know rules, I turn to you, Katey, Foxy—people that know. [I ask] Basically everyone here except anyone super new.

When it is necessary for corrective action, the manager typically walks into the dressing room, announces a dancer’s name and says, “Look here,” which means he wants her to come into the office so they can talk privately. A typical reprimand for a new girl (paraphrased) goes something like this:

That thing you did, you’re not allowed to do that. Haha, we don’t do that here. And by the way, you have to be standing precisely there when the deejay announces your name. Technically you’re “late”—which you can be fined for—if you don’t do that. Oh, and you’re not allowed to wear mesh tops while you exchange your ones at the door, but mesh is okay on stage—unless it’s the bikini bar stage. Don’t worry, you didn’t know. You’re doing great! Got it? Okay, well if you think of any questions and I’m not around, ask Saffron, or Katey, or one of the other girls. Alright, see you later.

A reprimand of this nature is what dancers call “getting yelled at” and what staff members call “having to yell at” dancers. Here is what deejay Boyd has to say about the circumstances involved with “yelling” at dancers:

**Boyd:** I actually think things go smoother when you’re busier ’cause everybody’s a little bit happier. When you’re slower [less busy], girls don’t want to do stuff, and you gotta yell. It makes your job a little bit harder.

**AG:** So when you say “yell,” it’s hard for me to imagine you actually yelling.

**Boyd:** Yeah, um, I just repeatedly tell them. {chuckle} Usually I don’t do any of the yelling. I let Roger take care of that; I just send him up[stairs]. It’s his job. I just relay the problem.

I asked Roger, the manager, to describe how he handles his correctional job duty. He said:
Roger: Let’s see here—for instance—… I pull her to the side, talk to her very firmly, say, ‘Listen if you do this again, you will be suspended for a week.’ She might start crying so I say, ‘Sweetie, I’m not yelling at you, I’m just letting you know this has to be the way it has to be or else you’re not gonna have a job here anymore.’ You know what I mean? ‘If I don’t enforce this and let you get away with it, then I have to let everybody get away with it.’ … usually if you do it that way, they calm down and it makes them understand why.

The hierarchy of punishments goes from warnings, to fines, to suspensions, to firing.

While the dismissal is the greatest threat at their disposal, the staff does not actually want to fire dancers, fine, or suspend them, as they are often friends with the dancers. Staff certainly does not want to make it more emotionally difficult to be at work, either, as dealing with customers is plenty of emotion work for one night.

Boyd: I think I’m probably a little bit more strict with customers than other people would be just because when you’re around the girls so much you got a lot of friends up here. So you kind of look out after them. Pretty much you’re still trying to be respectful towards the customer because even though you’re throwing them out you still want them to come back. So you gotta get your point across but you still gotta be nice and respectful while doing it.

Some measure of solidarity between dancers and staff may come from an it’s-‘us’-versus-‘them’ survival mentality. (That is it’s Titans insiders versus customer outsiders.) The tight-knit nature of the club culture makes mutual respect more likely.

Also, the owner usually stands apart from reprimanding the dancers, and he makes himself available for dancers’ grievances with staff. He corrects the staff. Staff doesn’t want to be corrected for being too hard on dancers. Nor does the staff want to be corrected for not being hard enough on dancers or customers. The culture at Titans maintains an unwritten code that works toward “politeness” in co-worker interactions, even between staff and dancers. Figuring out what’s okay and what’s not okay within the culture is a significant part of the job. Being well-liked is essential, or at least, one must work to not be disliked. Eight to 12 hour shifts are a long period of time to spend in conflict with your co-workers.

Boyd: I probably spend more time at work than I do with any of my other friends so you don’t really have an option—you have to become friends. Even if you’re not really friends, you overlook whatever. “You do your thing and I’ll do my thing. Let’s get through the day peaceful.” For me, pretty much any peaceful day up here is a successful one.
The spirit of cooperation enables worker compliance and harmony in most cases. However, Shep will use his power to keep workers in check via the threat of losing the job. From Shep’s perspective, the prospect of a dancer losing her nice, cushy, princess stripper job is a good way to ensure compliance. From her perspective, to lose the job would mean to lose a source of not only income, but also friendships and social support offered through the job. Shep is confident that his club is not like the other clubs—it’s a place where everybody gets along like “team players”—and once a woman dances at his club, she’ll not want to dance anywhere else. There are alternative clubs in which women located in this area could work. There are two smaller and less well regulated clubs in opposite directions from the club, 30 miles away. If a dancer is willing to drive a 50 mile radius from the club, she will have three additional options. The travel routes toward cities beyond a 50 mile radius have road side strip clubs, but these are not comparable to the structure of Titans or Titans’ competitor clubs.

**AG:** How far away do you live?

**Darcy:** I live—time wise—it’s about forty-five minutes away from here. Mile wise, it’s about thirty miles away or so.

**AG:** What kind of area is it?

**Darcy:** Most people haven’t even heard of it, it’s called [a settlement], which is within [a relatively known area] which is close to [a town] and a lot haven’t even heard of that. ... That’s my big town. I go there to buy anything. The nearest gas station is ten miles away. I live in the woods.

If a Titan’s dancer can’t handle Shep’s rules, then she’s out, despite his situation of lack, i.e. not having an abundance of other dancers at the ready to replace her. Instead, he relies on the commitment of current dancers and his friendships with the “good girls” to pick up shortages. Each of the especially reliable dancers will pull an extra shift for him.

Darcy is a newer dancer who feels it’s unfair that even though she is a more committed and reliable worker, the less reliable workers seem, to her, to get away with more scheduling freedom.
Darcy: I just wish they’d be fair to everybody. Even though I’ve been here almost four months, I’m still the new girl ’cause I’m the only one that stuck around. We’ve seen probably five faces since then, but they dick around and walk out half way through—and I’ve never done that. I take this like any other job—it’s a job. I’m not someone special that I can do whatever I want. I take it seriously that I’ll do what I need to do. That’s why I still feel like the new person here. One of the ones that stuck.

AG: Well, there are two newer girls—

Darcy: Um-hum—even them, though. They’re like, ‘Oh we’re not doing Friday, we’re not doing—’ I was only supposed to do every Saturday at most. Shep was like, ‘I really need you for Friday’s.’ Okay, This Friday, ‘I really need you.’ Okay. And ever since then I’ve been guilted to doing both [Friday and Saturday] but I don’t need it, I make enough [money]. I don’t [need to work more], but I’m like, he’s a nice boss, they’ve been good to me, I’ll do what I can. I’ve paid sitters—I’ve paid to come work here. But I want to help you girls and try to be a team player and a good worker but since I’ve done that, now it’s expected of me. ... It’s not fair, you know, since I do the right thing you’re almost punished at points, is how I felt.

Darcy’s experience is one that I struggled with, too. I have worked far more shifts than I really wanted to because I was one of Shep’s “team players.” The interdependency of the workers at Titans creates close bonds among them, and these bonds have challenges associated with them as well as benefits. Many of the long-term dancers share this experience, which supports Bradley-Engen’s commitment theory, as one explanation for dancer career persistence in social type clubs.

Adjustment to this [social club] working environment requires dancers to initiate and maintain regular, positive interactions and networks of activity. As a result, dancers in clubs like these often work because they both enjoy their jobs and want to maintain these relationships. ... Being actively involved in the social networks of social clubs can encourage further participation in exotic dancing in order to meet perceived obligations to other dancers, customers, or club owners. In addition to finding their jobs personally satisfying and their working conditions amicable, women reported that they felt a loyalty and sense of responsibility to other dancers with whom they were friends or a particular club or club owner. (Bradley-Engen 2009:115)

As Katey noted, Shep does not like to be “the bad guy,” and this preference is reflected when he does actually fire someone. He does it very calmly, rather than in an emotionally explosive way. Shep makes clean breaks. He simply won’t answer a dancer’s texts, and he certainly won’t book her. He doesn’t make a big deal out of firing anyone, nor does he go out of his way to emotionally distress people, just for the drama or the overt display of power. Rather, he quietly denies them access to his club. The earliest cohort of dancers remembers this ownership style in stark contrast to the former owner’s more volatile management style. As Katey
noted, “I think he wants people to leave on good terms that way if he needs them back.” Indeed, many dancers return after long breaks, when Shep needs to fill his schedule and he’s running low on dancers. This is the condition under which Madeline now works, for example.

There is an element to Shep’s hiring strategy that involves a sincere interest in promoting positive co-worker interactions and helping “unripe apples” develop into “good apples.” Or, in other words, women who haven’t had many opportunities for positive socialization before they get to the club, he hopes, will experience it after they’ve been working at Titans for a while.

Shep: You could help them become that ripe apple. Maybe that apple isn’t quite ripe, we accidentally picked it, or it fell off the tree early. And here’s all these good apples that we have here. We bring them in around the good apples that have the same views as we do and say, “Hey, let’s all get along, let’s be a family, let’s all be happy, no cattiness.” Sometimes you get that apple that isn’t quite ripe, might have some issues, you know, and we feel by bringing her in, getting her around the ripe apples that they’ll eventually ripen into a good apple, not a rotten one.

While Shep’s interest may come off as paternalistic, it is administered throughout the culture by each Titans’ worker—not just his “dominating” force as an owner. The views that Titans workers should help each other out and generally get along are shared by most people who work there. Socialization is one clear route through which this occupational culture persists through time, even as individual dancers come and go.

**Following the Rules**

As deejay Janet announces Nova’s name over the microphone, Nova descends from the second floor balcony area to the stage floor via a staircase. It is a rule that dancers must “wait at the top of the stairs,” on the balcony, during the last song preceding her set. This rule is very often ignored, which causes some frustration between the staff who perceive it as a rule for which it is easy to comply and the dancers who think it’s an unnecessary rule. It was probably devised in order to facilitate compliance with a higher-order rule, “Do not arrive late to the stage.” Chronic
episodes of lateness on stage results in a fine, whereas *not* waiting at the top of the stairs results in a soft office reprimand from management.

Lateness on stage is a customer service violation—the rationale explained by staff to dancers is, “Why should customers have to wait on you to arrive to do your job? To dance on stage is what you’re here to do. You should be ready.” Certain exceptions apply, such as when operations are very busy and each dancer has little time to shift between giving private dances and taking her rotation on the stage. Allowing dancers to have a rotation on stage is prioritized, as evidenced by the fact that staff will make (non-regular) customers wait for their private dances until dancers finish their stage sets.

Every dancer must wear a full costume for the entire duration of the first song of a set. It’s a rule—unless there is only one dancer on stage. Then, she must remove her top, and only her top, halfway through the first song. She is to remove her costume bottom halfway through the second song. Dancer shoes must be worn during every set, except for one elective “barefoot” set, which is promulgated as a special privilege. Dancing in stripper shoes, which have extremely high heels, for a full 8-hour shift can be painful. “No barefoot sets,” as a “new” rule, is sometimes enacted as a temporary sanction when dancers collectively misbehave—such as when too many dancers take advantage of leniency extended for “late on stage” violations. The unwritten day-to-day operational rules for dancers mutate and shift in response to the behavior of the core group of dancers who have been working.
Typical Stage Interactions

The Product

Nova is about 5’2” tall without shoes. She has straight, black, a-few-inches-longer-than-shoulder length hair (all her own, but originally blonde, she dies it black). She is tan, but on the spectrum of stripper-glam techniques, she is relatively conservative. This means she does not wear acrylic nails, she doesn’t glue jewels onto her skin, she bears no elaborate belly chains, and has no genital piercings, or microdermals,21 or tattoos, etc. She takes the stage in “costume,” a short black tube dress over a simple black g-string thong. Other dancer apparel includes long sequined dresses, neon colored bikinis, fishnet and lace everything, silk corsets, and standard push-up bras; all of which come in leather, feather, fringe, fur, light-up, and camouflage varieties. Dancers also wear traditional costumes as well, such as French maids, school girls, and sexy librarians. (Or in my case, bumblebees and astronauts.) Dancers purchase all of their own costumes, makeup, and other associated materials.

Nova’s clear plastic platform stripper heels boost her height five or six inches. Her shoes are mid-height among dancers at this club. On the low end of the range are 3-4 inch heels, and on the high end are 7-8 inch heels. Everyone wears these shoes; it’s part of the technology that makes dancing like a stripper possible, by positioning one’s center of gravity higher and forward of center. Stripper shoes are required by the management, but again, it is up to the individual dancer to pay for these items.

All of the stage areas at Titans elevate the dancer above the customers. A countertop-like platform separates the customers from the stage and winds around all contours of the stage area. Customers sit, pull their chairs in, and press their ribs against the edge of the platform while

21 A particular kind of piercing that permanently embeds jewelry into skin.
resting their elbows on it. Dancers often sit on the platform to talk to customers, but even this seated position, dancers are positioned above the customers.

The fines at Titans are usually less than the largest “tipout” amount—i.e. $5 to $20. Being habitually late on stage, or late to work, results in a fine. A rule infraction that would require a higher fine would probably be instead met with a suspension (which would be far more financially disruptive than a single lump sum fee in one night). One dancer in my study, a former dancer, was suspended for a week because she had developed a “bad attitude.” No other dancers I interviewed had been suspended.

**AG:** Were there any instances where you left temporarily and came back? Or were suspended?

**Francesca:** I was suspended for a week.

**AG:** Whaddyaw do?

**Francesca:** I had a bad attitude. I was steadily declining was not caring and you could tell. It was obvious that I didn’t care. I was being kind of snarky and my humor wasn’t being received very well.

**AG:** What effect did the suspension have?

**Francesca:** Um, it taught me, it definitely taught me to leave my home at home. And leave my work at work. The two should not mix. Check your shit at the door. That’s what that suspension taught me. That was right before I had to go on a trip, too, so I didn’t have that income that week with me on that trip, so, that sucked.

**AG:** Do you think that was intentionally done by Shep? Was it Shep who suspended you?

**Francesca:** Yeah, it was Shep. I don’t think he would maliciously do that. He just decided that was when I needed to be suspended. It was the only time I was ever suspended though.

**AG:** I heard several times that money was motivator for why you danced, and you just said that it was extra hurtful to not have the income preceding your trip. How attached to the money were you?

**Francesca:** Hmm. Well, I mean, I was attached to it because it was my income. It was my sole income. In the beginning it was, I tried, I did try really, really hard to stay on top of it. “This how much money I have, and I can spend it here, but I shouldn’t spend all of it.” And then afterward, I would just walk around with $800 in my wallet for no good reason, it was just my wallet. I depended on it. In retrospect, man I should have managed that money so much better! I would have so much now if I would have just saved it and not blown it.

Foxy, too, learned lessons about money through dancing, though not from being suspended or fined. Rather, she had to go through a period of adjustment—she says she had to “adapt”—to
becoming a student dancer. She suddenly did not have the ability to make money as quickly as she once had been. She says that dancing, “Definitely made me realize how important money is and how easy it is to throw it away. I’ve learned a lot of important life lessons from being here.” Both Francesca and Foxy make reference to the club as a place to “learn” not only about money, but “life.” Titans’ dancers are not the only employees who rely on the income it provides. Owen, a bouncer, has a formal full-time job, but also works part-time at Titans.

**Owen:** I kind of need this now cause now that I moved out of my house and I’m paying eight hundred dollars a month in child support, so you know every little bit helps.

**AG:** How did you hear about the club?

**Owen:** Actually, Roger’s brother’s wife’s brother. {chuckle} I played softball with him and he’s like, ‘Hey, you looking for a part-time job?’ ‘Doing what?’ He’s like, ‘Working at Titans.’

Working at “the” strip club is an option that people in the immediate area surrounding Titans come to realize as a viable job option through word of mouth.

Shep does not advertise job openings; rather he recruits during the club’s hours of operations. Women often attend the club as patrons, and he encourages dancers to “pull them up on stage.” By doing so, dancers participate in selecting who is recruited, and they receive the added financial benefit of bringing a non-dancer to the stage—Men often throw extra money in order to see women from the crowd have their tops removed by strippers. Women often find this ritual thrilling and go home with a good story about how they went up on stage at Titans. It is less likely that women would attend as patrons or permit such public forms of sexualized behavior were Titans’ not known as the kind of place with strict rule enforcement—i.e. where the fun can only go so far. However, in terms of social acceptance, it is important to note that briefly going on stage, guided by a stripper, is distinct from actually *becoming* a stripper.

The transition from having harmless sexualized encounter to embracing a personal stripper identity must be accompanied by a substantial motivation beyond the thrill of novelty-seeking. That is, most women who start dancing are driven by a desire to make money.
Darcy: I got pulled on stage like they do with girls. Someone told me I should audition and I said, okay, I’ll try it. They hired me, and here I am. But, mostly the money, I have a kid and that it’s the best option I have right now for sure. Yeah, just money I guess, would be the top [reason]… If you have the looks and things why not? A body’s not something to be ashamed of. But yeah, I finally got the guts when they pulled me on stage here.

Taking Tips

On the stage beside Nova’s, Celeste leans the naked upper half of her body forward from a crouched position to take a tip from a seated customer. She puts both her knees on the stage countertop and steadies the upper half of her body by putting her forearms on her customer’s shoulders. She slowly moves her face toward his collar and even more slowly pulls a dollar out of his shirt with her teeth. As she is pulling the dollar out of his collar, she lets the tip of her nose brush his neck. Dancers may touch the customers with their noses or chins, but not with their lips or tongues. Not only do bouncers watch the dancers closely to ensure compliance, dancers also watch each other closely to ensure compliance. Kissing that involves licking or sucking (as opposed to a peck on the cheek) is not permitted and is viewed as an unbecoming way to earn tips by this occupational culture.

Celeste had previously taken this man’s dollar, which was sitting in a pile in front of him on the counter, and tucked into his shirt collar so that she could take the tip in this manner. The collar-dollar technique is a very common way to take a tip, and is fully approved by the rules. An alternate location is taking the dollar and tucking it behind a customer’s ear, or placing it between his teeth. Amazingly, men actually submit to women who stand over them and try to put dollars in their mouths. Some sit and wait primed with a dollar in his mouth as a signal to a dancer that he wants her to come over to him. The same dollars circulate over and over again inside the club, so I don’t know if that makes them cleaner, or dirtier, than other paper bills? Eventually new dollars, fresh from the bank, are introduced into club circulation, and all those other dollars go home with dancers or patrons over time.
Exotic dancers have a range of ways that they take tips. The most popular way for a Titans dancer to take a tip is to simply use her hand to pull her garter about an inch away from her leg and wait expectantly for the customer to insert a dollar folded length-wise into the gap between the garter and her leg. Some dancers tolerate it if a customer’s hand brushes up against her skin in this process, others emphatically do not.

Bouncers will verbally warn customers in these “brush-up” instances, whereas bouncers will immediately insist that a customer leave if he makes an aggressive, full-out attempt to grab, smack, lick, or poke a dancer. Only when customers resist leaving on their own, or when customers actually succeed at egregiously touching a dancer, do bouncers resort to physical removal tactics. Slight or subtle touches invoke warnings. These happen almost every night. Almost once per week, a customer is asked to leave for being rude, repeatedly trying to touch, or actually touching in an outright way. Out of more than a few hundred customers per week, this rate of touching is not an overly concerning statistic for most dancers. Customers who are physically “kicked out” for egregious touches are much rarer, though they do occur. As a dancer gains experience with avoiding touch—skill in vigilance—the likelihood of her actually being touched decreases. She may learn ways to stand or shield parts of her body as a way to preempt a customer’s potential touch.

No Touching

In several years of dancing, I’ve insisted probably only two people be removed for their infractions—I can’t say that an egregious touch (beyond slight leg brush) has never happened to me, but the rare instances that anything like that has happened, none of the events were memorable enough for me to recall them vividly.
Another dancer from one of the earliest cohorts, Katey, does have a memorable experience of that nature. A customer actually *bit her breast* during a lap dance.

**Katey:** I was giving a lap dance and the guy just started like, “I want to touch you, I want to touch you, I want to touch you.” I’m holding him back with my hands saying, “No, you can’t touch” you know, getting ready to end the dance and call a bouncer, holding him down like this and he bites my boob and I’ve never like flipped and [yet] I was like, “You’re fucking out!” and he was holding on to the chair and I was like yanking him, then Owen and Roger, they got him out. But, they were like, ‘Your biceps, your shoulders were like this, you were gonna attack,’ and [they] were like, “I’ve never seen you like that.” Well I’ve never been bitten like that either, so you don’t know what you’re gonna do unless you’re in a situation, I would never of thought that I would be so angry, but I was, just the way he was fighting with me and used his mouth to bite at me. I was shocked that somebody would act that way, for one, but then like to hold on to the chair and not fucking leave and [say], “That bitch has my money, I paid forty dollars for this dance.” Like “Sorry about your life, you just bit the girl, why do you think you can act that way over forty dollars?”

Staff members at Titans who protect dancers from touch seem to genuinely care about touch violation. Roger, at least, did not want to be involved in an environment where women are allowed to be egregiously violated for the sake of the owner’s money-making interest. In the next quotation, Roger calls out the owner’s influence over determining whether a club will be the kind that permits touching or the kind that doesn’t, though he takes some personal ownership of the way “we” are and what “we don’t allow.”

**Roger:** I wanted to see if the grass is greener on the other side so I decided to work [bouncing] at another strip club. It was touching allowed. Pretty much anything went as long as the guy spent money. I was at that club and I witnessed a guy actually shove his fingers up in a girl – she freaked out – but because they had a party of twenty, the owner said ‘You know what? Just warn them and tell them they could stay.’ He didn’t want to lose out on all that money. Which at our establishment, when I came back, it’s like it doesn’t matter if you have a group of a hundred and fifty, if you disrespect a girl like that, that whole group of a hundred fifty – ‘Get the hell out of here!’ You know what I mean? We don’t – and I like it how we don’t allow touching ‘cause that’s what they allowed there and I was like, you know what I mean, like most guys wouldn’t care but I was like, you know what I mean, I didn’t like it. ‘Cause – I don’t know – I just didn’t like it.

**AG:** What do you think makes one club like that and another club like this one?

**Roger:** The owner. That’s basically what it comes down to—Here, it’s wanting people to have a good time and having fun but also wanting it to be clean, professional and stuff like that.
**Touch Clubs are not “Clean” Clubs**

Earlier in her interview, Celeste had explained to me some of her experiences working with dancers at another club who did allow customers to touch them. She said she left that club, and sought work elsewhere. However, because she was trying to conceal her activity from her parents, travel time and work hours limited her choices. Her cover as a bartender loses credibility if her strip club shift ends at 4 a.m. and it takes her two hours to drive home—the bars in her area close at 2 a.m. So, she tried again to work at a club where touching is allowed.

Celeste: I went back to the place that I quit at because they had a different owner, they had a new name and everything and I worked there for a little bit … I tried to do it a little bit longer, but once again, if you don’t like the people you’re working with, you’re not going to enjoy yourself—and I mean I love working here because everybody gets along—but at the old place people were always screaming and shouting and throwing things and the deejay would have to break up fights and people were talking about who slept with their baby daddy and who wants to like send pictures to this guy cause they needed a sugar daddy and I’m just [thinking] like, ‘This isn’t me, like I’m not going to dumb myself down to work here.’ So that’s when I quit the second time from that same place.

Aspen, a former dancer, confirms the lack of conflict at Titans: “There was never a fistfight that I ever saw, pulling anybody’s hair, scratching eyes out or anything.”

Eventually Celeste found a suitable alternative to the first club where she quit. She names the upscale features of the new club where she used to work, before she became a Titans dancer.

AG: What made it a place you wanted to work?

Celeste: It was more professional. It was clean. The bouncers looked like bouncers—they wear suits—like they do here, dress shirts. The girls, they watched them pretty closely so if there was anybody who’s starting something in the group, they’ll get rid of it. There wasn’t so much drama there. It was a better well-known club and it was just a better structure to work under than some sleazy little club back home where—you know.

Her home area is more metropolitan than the area surrounding Titans. It appears to be the upscaled, highly visible aspect of “show” that makes one club less “sleazy” than another, in Celeste’s opinion.

Shep’s staff is not impressed with every aspect of their working environment. However, the most important criterion appears to be whether the club is “clean” or not. Clean in this sense
means the owner’s intolerance of “immoral” behavior—no drugs, no stealing, no fighting, and no sex for sale. Take this staff member’s assessment:

**Palmer:** I think, for the most part, aside from the fact that Shep is running cheap, and there are a lot of things that could be better, he runs a pretty clean, straightforward club. He catches somebody selling drugs, they’re gone—banned for life. Karl [a former bouncer] stole somebody’s [a dancer’s] purse—Lovey’s bag—he’s banned for life. And usually if you’re banned, you’re banned. He doesn’t mess around with it, he doesn’t let you come back or anything like that. So, for the most part, it’s not a bad working environment.

The idea of a “clean” club is also connected to physical safety. In describing how she went about choosing a club to start dancing, Aspen lists several criteria that informed her decision to dance at Titans. Although she wanted to avoid being found out by her family and other close ties, she ultimately chose Titans after physically inspecting other clubs.

**Aspen:** I would have preferred to been further out [from home] but it wasn’t really feasible to drive that far to a different club. And the couple of clubs that I found that were kind of within reason were not very nice clubs and that’s really why I took the risk at being at this one [Titans]. This is a nicer club, better facilities, better management, just better quality and better money. So, you know, the other clubs were dirtier, they weren’t as well maintained and you had to be careful because sometimes people would touch you and I didn’t want to have that kind of environment. Here, the security was much better so I felt safer. *(former dancer)*

Aspen was willing to expose herself to greater potential risk of social condemnation, than to risk her physical well-being. For other dancers, Titans is perfectly located because, “It’s so in the middle of nowhere, from where I’m from. No one’s ever going to know that I care about.” —**Simone.**

**“Clean” Touch isn’t as Good as “No” Touch**

Physicality and cleanliness are connected in terms of what counts as a sexual touch, and what is a “clean” touch. Celeste’s observation about touching, touching *where* on the body and with what intent, indicates that non-sexual touch could be acceptable, but she still prefers that customers are forbidden to touch at all.

**Celeste:** The whole no touching no matter what—I love that rule. And I’ve had customers complain to me about it like nobody likes the no touching rule—except for the girls—and I know
some guys probably really would keep it clean, they might just want to rub your shoulders or something—but I like the no touching rule.

Dancers who have dancing experience outside Titans may have experienced customers touching them in “clean” and “dirty” ways.

*Simone:* It’s so strict here. Like in the city, it was different. There were other repercussions but it was more of the aftermath of like, “Holy crap, did I just do that?” It was like, “Okay, I got that money and that rush felt good to have that grand,” but I was like, “Ewwww, that was kind of dirty. {chuckle} I shouldn’t have done that, you know? {laugh} Other clubs where they can touch, repercussions are severe, like my last boyfriend couldn’t kiss me on the neck for three years. “Don’t kiss me on the neck; don’t even put your face there.” … My friend danced at that club where it was like really touchy, really dirty and she got to that point too where it was like, you can’t. You need to take a break, you need to not— But here, this is like a baseball game. So innocent.

Other dancers equate sexual touching with dirtiness as well, and distinguish Titans as the kind of club where they can be comfortable because it is “clean.”

*Emma:* I definitely like this club because—the reason I never [danced] where I’m from is because the clubs were all like—kind of dirty—like I knew the girls were giving blow jobs and like having sex with a lot of people and the girls that worked at the clubs [there] they weren’t trying to pay for school, they were trying to pay for like drugs, or kids, or whatever else. So I never wanted to dance there ’cause I was uncomfortable with that.

In her words we can also detect morality of dancing as connected to their intent—for what reason are dancers stripping? What do they do with the money they earn? Katey implies stripper earnings ought to be used in a particular way.

*Katey:* She might be a drunk stripper who doesn’t really give a shit, like ‘This is the only job I’m gonna do. I’ll make money tomorrow. I’ll be a stripper every day of my life and if I get fired here, there’s the club down the road. I don’t have any stability. I don’t have a house. I don’t have anything worthwhile that I can’t move to Virginia tomorrow and take a strip club job out there.’ Whereas, at the Titans, I want to follow the rules. … I can’t just pick up and move tomorrow, I have a lot of stuff—I have a boyfriend here, I have friends here, this is where I’m stable at. Whereas you see a lot more strippers unstable wise. They don’t care. ‘Hey, I can load everything up I own in my van tomorrow and get the fuck out of town and abandon the trailer that I live in and move on.’

According to Katey, to be “stable” is to be good. Notice also her assumptions about distances, moving, and living arrangements—they hardly typify the options one might imagine available to the urban dancer.
Emma’s statements highlight an important stereotype associated with dancing. If a dancer is also a student, it mitigates the social stigma of dancing because she is doing it to “better herself.” In Emma’s quote, the cause of supporting a drug habit or supporting a child are equated as not as appropriate as her reason to dance—to pay for school—but to other women, to dance for a child is the most legitimate reason of all.

Darcy, who lives in a very rural area, has met the stigma of being a dancer head-on after she was found out by people in her town. She justifies her decision to work as a dancer as relatively more moral than collecting welfare, as according to Jennifer Sherman (2009), rural people may often do. Darcy says she pays a social cost for being a dancer, but she retains a feeling of self-efficacy from choosing to work as an exotic dancer.

Darcy: I’m basically the whore of my town…. I’ve been bullied a few times at bars, but can pull my own. I’m doing what I can, you know? I could be on welfare, getting child support. I’m not. I’m taking care of myself on my own.

The data revealed by dancers in this section reveals how they are sensitive to the concept of “dirtiness” in relation to their work. Many dancers characterize Titans as a “clean” club. Such a characterization may serve to reduce dancers’ internalization of negative self-perceptions. It may also build their cohesion as a stigmatized group, as “outsiders” may not understand the nature of their work, or more precisely, outsiders may not recognize the “clean” occupational culture of the particular club in which they chose to work.

**Stage Dancing and Lap Dancing**

There are four 22’ vertical brass poles centered at each of four horse-shaped stages. The impressively large stage, and its centralized placement within the club, signals to customers to expect acrobatic dance maneuvers. Although no official delineations are made, dancers seem to split their skills into three categories: pole work specialists, floor work specialists, and personality
girls. Each dancer does some of all three, but her preference for particular style usually emerges. Pole work and floor work means you can do less talking with customers, but it also requires greater flexibility, strength, and practice. The pole workers, especially, incur greater risk of injury, or even death. Personality girls put effort into creative costumes and “trademark” personas. For example, Mischa has a collection of camouflage baseball caps, from companies such as CAT (construction equipment) and Mossy Oak (outdoor hunting apparel), which she often wears with mirrored aviator sunglasses. She plays country music and caters to the “hick” crowd. From the dancers’ perspective, time spent on stage is primarily focused on collecting tips, although conversations with customers can be essential to increasing passive sales of lap dances after a stage set. Dancers may modify their stage behaviors in response to crowd levels. Kimberly explains how she transitions among strategies:

**Kimberly:** What I did was—weekdays, when it was slower, is when I would try to get my couch and lap dances in. That’s when I would socialize a little more and try to get regulars. And weekends, people are there straight-up to party, you get more people in. I would try to take money as quick as I could and, you know, if I did any pole work—climb the pole which is like twenty feet high—I would say, ‘I’m going to climb the pole how about three bucks each?’ If there’s ten people there, you’re good to go.

Money making potential varies greatly based on the time of the year; crowd levels and patron compositions change seasonally. The efficacy of dancers’ techniques and their individual drives, also make a significant difference in how much money can be made. At Titans, tip out is no higher than $20 and the club takes 50 percent of private dance earnings. Dancers are required to tip the deejay, but may choose the amount. Dancers are not expected to tip other co-workers, though it is to their advantage to do so. The more a dancer tips a bouncer, the more she can expect his protective attention. This study’s dancers are less likely to be cheated, in terms of receiving the appropriate amount of private dance money, because the number of dances sold per dancer is recorded in an electronic database and visually broadcasted on monitors throughout the night. This system enables her to easily keep track of how much money she is owed at the end of the night. Dancers keep all of the tips they receive from customers.
In the present study, the element of “hustling” men on the floor is eliminated, although soft sales of private dances via suggestion while on stage is permitted. Time that would have been spent making sales pitches off stage is replaced by time spent interacting with other dancers upstairs, which has significant bearing on the nature of their relationships because they spend more time with each other during slow times than dancers working in alternatively structured clubs. For example,

**AG:** What’s your favorite part about the job?

**Foxy:** Definitely hanging out with everybody. It’s that time up in the dressing room where you can goof off. In general, the dressing room’s a lot more fun than going on stage. The girls tend to be way cooler than the customers.

Although the club at my study site bills itself as a show club, it operates partially as a social hangout for men given its rural location, patronage, and management structure. It relies on lower-and-middle working class patrons, contrary to a typical show club outlined by Bradley-Engen and Ulmer (2009), which caters to upper/professional class clients. Distinguishing these features of this club is important because it blurs the categories of hustle, show and social somewhat, and may yield insight into how place affects club typology and the experiences of women who work within them.

**Titans Is a Show Club – Beauty Focus**

*Excerpt from an observation:*

I walk through the ground floor bar-side club entrance toward Katey, a dancer from my stripper cohort. She was onstage, topless, and dancing to “Put Me in Coach.” She waves and smiles broadly upon seeing me. I dance-walk past her stage while balancing a boxed pizza in one hand; I have my laptop-stuffed backpack slung over the opposite shoulder.
The dressing room is on the second floor—that’s where all the magic happens. The girl with long, flowing, neon green hair, Rhapsody, sees me and without greeting me displays a container of blue eye-shadow between her pink, zebra-striped, acrylic-tipped fingers, and announces in my general direction, “In middle school I had an obsession with Bonne Belle. God, I hope there are no pictures of that period of my life! But tonight, I’m gonna paint myself up like a streetwalker on purpose!” If you were never a teenage girl post 90’s, you probably won’t fully understand that reference, but you get the gist; she wants to wear bodacious makeup, o.m.g.

Lovey, a 4’6” variety dancer, who recently finished aesthetician school comes over and gives me a hug and says, “Check out my make up!” I reply, “Holy balls, you look slutty!” She gives me an enthusiastic and appreciative, “Thanks!” By now, Katey has returned from her stage set. She enters the room naked but for the sequined garter-bouquet of dollars on her thigh. She says to me, “Yay, I’m glad you’re working tonight!”

Amid typical dressing room chit chat I take up my own face painting project. I’m content with the thought that no matter how wild I get with my eyeliner and lip gloss, I will never be in danger of being mistaken for a “streetwalker,” at least not as long as Bonne Belle is around to be a yardstick. Sometimes I don’t wear any make-up and it doesn’t seem to matter much to the customers. I routinely apply mascara and sometimes glitter in order to participate in the collective ritual of stripper body-bedazzlement—it’s simply too much fun to resist. Occasionally I wonder in what ways being a show club dancer and being a circus performer are distinct, as there are probably more similarities than differences.

**Beauty Preparation is Extensive, Expensive, and Required**

**Katey:** Titan is, if you’re scheduled at seven, you gotta be on stage at seven. You change your outfits, you do your hair, you do your make-up. The [competitor club 30 miles away] is kind of, if you want to wear flip-flops on stage every set, hey whatever. Your friends can come out, drink, hang out with you, BYOB.
The distinction Katey makes between Titans “show” club and another club, which fits Bradley-Engen’s (2009) “social” club type, highlights just how much the “show” part of Titans is emphasized—strict scheduling and high beauty standards mark Titans as a show club. The owner admits that although he partly hires women based on temperament and reliably, he must also consider the tastes of his clients.

Shep: We are in an industry where beautiful, young, thinner, certain body type and certain types of image sells… Here I try to steer clear of bringing drama into the place ’cause nobody needs it. So that’s an added extra that I put in to try to keep everybody’s life more peaceful and it makes it harder to find the criteria you want. But society does dictate what I do hire for dancers.

Most dancers “fix” their hair with very hot irons. It takes an hour or more, even for the most proficient dancer, to iron (that is, to straighten and/or curl) her whole head of hair. It takes even longer if she has to glue or clip other people’s hair into her head (a very common practice that occurs simultaneously with her ironing ritual). These hair pieces are called “extensions” and they are popular not only in the dancing industry but also among models and movie stars. An internet search for “hair extensions” helped me to determine that one clip-in human hair extension costs from about $50-130 for 14” hair pieces and costs about $70-150 for 18” hair pieces. Just one clip-in won’t do the trick. This item price multiplied by three or more yields clip-in hair expenses of at least $150. Some dancers report feeling “naked” without their hair extensions, so they are willing to put out the money for them. (Note: non-human hair extensions are relatively inexpensive, but don’t last as long or “look as good” as human hair, according to the dancers who wear them. I can’t tell the difference, and the average customer likely has no idea how much effort goes into creating these looks.)

Titans strippers spray themselves from head to toe with various aerosol concoctions. To say that body spray (watered-down perfume) is applied liberally is an understatement. Dancers wear a lot of perfume. Hairspray, naturally, is used on hair, but it is also used on the rest of the body to keep skin cosmetics in place—cosmetics such as concealing liquids and powders, and of
course, glitter. A handy invention is body glitter that comes in an aerosol can. It’s designed to be used without hairspray, whereas old-school glitter-in-a-plastic-jar isn’t. Most dancers prefer spray deodorant, because it does not clump into little deodorant balls (as much) under their armpits, it doesn’t stick (as much) to their outfits, and it can be applied to more surface area than just armpits. Crotches are a popular spray destination, not only for deodorant, but also for perfume or specialized “personal deodorant” (but this is rare—most dancers who use deodorant “down there” go full-bore with the armpit kind). The air-quality in this spraytopia is poor, to say the least, but dancers rarely take note of it after the first few weeks.

They go to work on their faces, sometimes plucking errant eyebrow hairs, other times gluing on theatrical eyelashes. I’m always surprised at the frequency of makeup re-applications. I wear face makeup, too, but mine seems to stay in place once it’s on there. They seem to be always “touching up” their eyeliner or putting on more eyeshadow, but perhaps it’s more so out of boredom than narcissism. Dancers sometimes help each other “get made up,” by curling each other’s hair or doing each other’s makeup. These spontaneous events facilitate intradancer bonding.

I remember my first few times being in the dressing room, of which the entire length of one wall is lined by a big mirror. The way strippers interact with this mirror is mesmerizing. At first, I was scared to look at myself in it as much as they did. Who wants to be caught looking at themselves in a mirror?! How embarrassing! It’s like getting caught picking your nose—sure everyone does it, but no one needs to watch each other do it. I soon got over that, and many other “gasp”-type, routine, body-maintenance things that I “should not” do in front of other people. Even more easily, I got over other people doing those things in front of me.

Now, I am completely unfazed by a woman sitting at a bench facing a mirror and staring at herself for 10 minutes or more. Just as important as looking at ourselves, we look at each other through the mirror. We talk to each other’s image in the mirror, even though we sit next to each
other on the bench. We could turn our heads another 30 degrees and face each other, instead of looking in the mirror, but it’s not as comfortable. Everyone in this room talks into the mirror because you can see the whole room this way, and all of your faces. If you turn to look at just the woman beside you, you lose visual contact with the rest of the room. The mirror enhances intra-dancer bonding by serving as a physically inclusionary device.

The Customer Equation

Katherine Frank (2005) did an extensive study on strip club patrons and found several different themes among men’s motivations to go to strip clubs.

A strip club provided an atmosphere different from both work and home, a relative degree of ‘safety’ as well as ‘excitement,’ an opportunity for both personal and sexual acceptance from women, and the pleasure of a sexualized encounter without the pressure of physical performance. (Frank 2005, 116)

On the other side of the strip club interaction, dancers are responsible for understanding and anticipating this male desire for a place that is both “safe” and “exciting.” She offers her sexual acceptance, even when reciprocal acceptance is not guaranteed.

AG: What do you think about when customers say rude things to you?

Foxy: It’s really hard to deal with because first of all, I’m already putting myself out there by going on stage and getting naked in front of you. Especially when they say rude things like as far as, ‘You work for the dollar!’ or, you know, things like that—I’m already naked it’s a dollar, come on now. What am I supposed to do, tricks? So sometimes that can be kind of belittling whenever people are rude to you. Because it’s not the easiest thing to do to begin with and when people go out of their way to put you down or say something rude then it makes it harder.

The dancer offers a sexualized encounter that removes the pressure on him for a physical performance, by taking up the total burden of bodily performance. Outside the club she cultivates her body, preparing it for performance by conscientiously maintaining her body fat percentage, tanning, getting manicures, among other strenuous efforts—all in the effort to live up to a culturally-defined and hyper-feminine beauty standard. She must buy numerous manufactured
products in order to achieve this look—so that she can, in turn, be properly consumed. The exotic dancer uses her body’s image and her projected sexuality to create the strip club experience men seek. In doing so, she faces the hazard of developing a narcissistic or poor self-image, based on perpetual effluent feedback from their customers.

The job of making men feel important and wanted does not rest solely with the dancers, staff must uphold the “safe and comfortable” image of a show club, too. Of this part of the job, Roger says:

Roger, Manager: One of my biggest pet peeves is people who are wealthy people who think just because they have money they’re better than you. And whenever I worked at other jobs – of course you’re going to deliver [furniture] to wealthy people who as soon as you walk in they’ll put their nose down to you because you make nine bucks an hour and they have everything they want in the world and they think you owe them something. You gotta roll out a red carpet for them, know what I mean? That’s – I think that’s the most degrading thing in the whole entire world and that drives me absolutely crazy.

Roger, Manager: I always use the philosophy with the girls whenever they have attitudes. Say a girl is having a bad night, and they come inside the club and they’re miserable, they’re bitchy…and they take that on stage. I tell the girls I don’t care if you come into work and you’re miserable, bitchy, whatever – when you go down stage, you smile, treat people like gold. Because if guys want a bitch, they’ll go home to their wives.

In the first quotation, we can see that Roger understands how terrible it feels—as a worker—to be put down by people who act as if they’re “better” than him because of his low status job. He resents having to “roll out a red carpet” for people who act as if their status entitles them to lack manners. Yet, as a manager, the rule he imposes on the dancers is that they need to treat customers “like gold,” no matter what. Infused in his “philosophy with the girls” is the warning that men come to the club to escape nasty, presumably less desirable wives. It doesn’t matter if the guy is a rich, high-status boor who thinks he’s better because at least he’s not a stripper—dancers must smile and appease, which in Roger’s words is the “most degrading thing in the whole entire world.”
The manager’s focus on status, and sensitivity to low status, is apparent in the next exchange between us. He told me about a situation at another job when the customer was being rude.

**AG:** Do you see those kind of customers here, like the really rich ones?

**Roger:** Yeah. I mean you have people come in. I mean it’s kind of different here because it’s a different work atmosphere. In the strip club business, if people come in who have money, you want them to stick their nose up. You want them to feel like they’re high class, you want to make them feel like they’re very, very important because they have money. Because if you make them feel that way, they’ll spend their money, you know what I mean? Like, it makes more money for the girls, it makes more money for everybody. That’s what the strip club business is about. Making high class people feel like they’re the most important thing in the whole entire world and they can have anything they want. And it makes them want to come back, and if wealthy people come back that’s what keeps you in business.

**AG:** Do you have middle of the road people come?

**Roger:** Yes.

**AG:** Do you have low income people come?

**RW:** Yes. You treat them exactly the way you treat a millionaire. You treat people exactly the same. It doesn’t matter if they have a million dollars or twenty dollars. If they come in with twenty bucks, it’s ‘Yes sir, no sir, thank you sir, anything I can do for you sir, you guys having fun tonight?’ Blah, blah, blah. You know what I mean, treat them exactly the same. But the wealthy people don’t know that. The wealthy people come in, you treat them exactly like the millionaire. You treat them exactly like the people that have a dollar, but they don’t know the difference. Even the person who has a dollar, you still treat them like they’re a millionaire. Because once again, when that next paycheck comes in, they may have ten dollars left, but guess where they’re coming? The place where they feel like you know, they’re wanted, wealthy and important.

The group most likely to receive the best “yes, sir” service are “regulars,” or men who visit the club weekly or bi-weekly and spend money buying lap dances. Usually regulars don’t spend much time tipping dancers at the stage. Instead, a regular will be drawn to the club in order to spend time with only one or two dancers privately. Because access to dancers is limited by the rules of the club (no mingling), men must pay for each dancer’s time ($20 per 4 minutes), even if he wants “only” to talk. Some house dancers make almost half of their earnings through regular lap dance sales. On a Friday night, for example, if a regular wants to spend 16 minutes with his favorite dancer, it will cost him $20 in a door fee, and $80 for the dance. Many regulars also tip after the dance. So, in less than an hour, a man may have spent more than $100 in the club, at
least $40 of which the dancer keeps. If this were her only lap dance customer for the night, her tips on stage would likely exceed this amount. However, she may have more than one regular, or one of her regulars may buy more than 16 minutes. Some regulars buy a whole hour’s worth of a dancer’s time ($300).

In addition to a solid following of “regulars,” also important to dancers’ income is the influx of transient, seasonal customers. These customers are primarily drawn to the college town relatively close to Titans, and secondarily are willing to travel to the club as a source of entertainment. The club also offers a free shuttle van service back and forth from the town, so that more students may attend than would otherwise be possible, given many students do not have their own transportation. No form of public transportation reaches the club, and therefore the shuttle may also reduce the incidence of driving under the influence for town dwellers. Proximity to a more diverse and mobile population of customers via proximity to the college town infuses economic opportunity that would not be possible if the club were relying solely on the income effects of its local community base.

**Dancer Composition**

Out of 12 current dancers and the six former dancers interviewed, half of them (9) danced nowhere other than Titans. Out of these 18 dancers, four had extensive experience dancing elsewhere. They are Celeste, Kimberly, Madeline, and Simone. Though some dancers, such as Katey and Foxy, had limited experience dancing elsewhere, the overwhelming majority of their experiences occurred at Titans. I have danced only at Titans. (I do not include myself among any counts reported in this thesis.)

Out of these same 18 dancers, almost half (8) worked as students during some part of their dancing careers, but they were not necessarily students when they were working at Titans.
For example, Kimberly and Simone both completed their degrees while dancing in other clubs either exclusively or in addition to dancing at Titans. I completed my bachelor’s degree before I started dancing at Titans, and spent most of my time there as a non-student. However, I worked other jobs in addition to dancing. The management gives scheduling preference to dancers who are going to school or working other jobs, in order to accommodate and encourage women to work there who are not “just” dancers. This effort to provide a diverse mix of dancers is partially a response to what customers want to see, but also because the management prefers hiring these kinds of dancers.

The composition of Titans dancers is somewhat varied along several dimensions, such as age, relationship status, and parents’ socioeconomic status. Other dimensions, such as sexual orientation and race are remarkably homogenous—they are by and large white heterosexual women. The range of ages and life experiences do not distinguish dancers in the way that education level and experience dancing in other clubs does. Student status and having worked in “hustle” clubs are differences dancers acknowledge among themselves.

Overall, I have observed that the 1:1 ratio of student-dancers to non-student-dancers remains fairly consistent over time. The ratio of Titans-only dancers to extra-experienced dancers is more complicated. The ratio seems to favor Titans-only dancers over dancers who have danced elsewhere. Possible explanations involve the degree of successful acclimation to Titans culture. Some dancers never intend to become a part of the club culture; rather, they pass through for quick money and continue on to other clubs. These dancers are known as travelers. Dancers who work at a club regularly become known as “house girls.” (These are standard industry-wide terms.) House girls have a strong influence in determining the culture, particularly at Titans, where being a house girl means having years of experience and time to build close friendships with each other and the staff. A “new girl” must be willing to accept the pre-existing culture. Dancers who dance solely to make big money are not always happy with Titans structure, which
forbids hustling on the floor. House dancers are not always happy with dancers who come to Titans to make money and blatantly disregard their ethos of equality and friendship.

None of the participants reported being in homosexual relationships with each other. Thus, the affective nature of relationships examined in this study should be considered to be platonic or friendship-based.

**Conclusion**

This chapter detailed the physical attributes of the club itself, its routine practices, and the club’s rule structure—features which are essential to it being a “show” club. Secondly, I presented a narrative of a typical stage interactions, describing what dancers look like and how they “work” the stage. Also important to understanding the occupational culture at Titans is consideration of the dancers’ level of experience dancing in other clubs and those dancers whose primary experience is with Titans only. Other aspects of the dancers’ backgrounds, such as differing levels of educational attainment, are likely to influence dancers’ interactions with each other, and so the ratio of student-dancer to non-dancer was discussed.
Chapter 5: How does the job of rural show club dancing influence dancers’ relationships with people outside and inside the club?

Introduction

Bradley-Engen (2009) made a call for researchers to address levels of stigmatization dancers’ face in light of their “upscaled” show club status. She asks specifically, “Are show club dancers having an easier time than other club dancers with regard to experience and managing stigmas in their interpersonal relationships?” (Bradley-Engen 2009, 121). What better place to explore this question than in a tight-knit, socially conservative rural setting? Although I cannot make comparisons to other club dancers, this chapter provides rich detail regarding dancers’ experiences with being found out as strippers. I begin the chapter by reporting findings on rural show club dancers’ experiences with managing the stigma associated with their occupation, within the context of a rural setting. In the second half of the chapter, I report findings on the dancers’ interactions and relationships with each other.

How Madeline Got Started Dancing – at Titans’ Competitor Club

I open this chapter by discussing how one woman got started dancing at a nearby competitor’s club. She describes the process of how she, as a young woman, entered this industry—through serendipity, word of mouth, and trust. Madeline continued to work as a travelling dancer for several years after working at this club and Titans. Her experience does not typify all dancers’ beginnings, though two other dancers in this study started at the same club Madeline did. These two clubs demand allegiance from their dancers, which means a dancer is not permitted to work at both of these clubs concurrently, but she may travel to clubs farther away. Both compete for “house” dancers. Mike and Shep claim to have the better club.
Madeline: I had moved out of my parents when I was fifteen. So I had been on my own, jumping from house to house for a while and then I was frustrated and said I’m just going to be a stripper … and I was sitting in this trailer at my girlfriend’s house bawling and there were three men in the kitchen playing this card game called Magic and I’m telling her, “I’m gonna be a stripper, I’m just gonna work at Titans,” but I was seventeen so I’d never been to a strip club, didn’t know anything about it and she was begging me not to and this guy turned around in his seat from where they were playing the card game and he said, ‘Why would you want to work at Titans when you could work for me?’ And I was like, ‘Well, who are you?’ And he’s like, ‘My name is Mike and I own The Den. And I’m like, ‘Well, what’s The Den?’ How random is this?

AG: Yeah—pretty random. {chuckle}

Madeline: So he pulls out his wallet, pulls out a business card—I actually still have it. It’s white and it has writing on it and two silhouettes of clipart silhouettes of strippers. Hands me this card and I say, “Well, what’s The Den?” And he’s like, “It’s a strip club in [town name].” “Well, how far away is that?” “About a half an hour.” And I’m still crying, and I’m like, “Well I don’t have a car, I don’t even have a license,”—because no one had taught me how to drive because I wasn’t living at home—and I was like, “I wouldn’t be able to get there.” And he’s like, “I’ll drive you.” This man had slicked-back hair, long pony tail, leather jacket—like a cross between a motorcycle gang member and a child rapist {chuckle}—it was extremely terrifying. And I just took a chance.

Madeline: We went to the club and it was this wooden shack in the middle of nowhere. Really scary. Outside there were signs like, “Appearing Live, Live, Live!—Nude Live!, you know, “Triple X” and all these scattered signs and I’m thinking, “Oh god, what did I get myself into, this is crazy.” I was really nervous, … [we] went inside, there’s no carpets, there’s no hardwood flooring, there’s no tile, it’s this dirty, concrete floor with like rubbed off paint and this ghetto stage, and just ghetto building. Mike says, “Come back here, I want to show you the dressing room.” Went back there and it was disgusting and I was—but there were mirrors and there were these fold-out table things that the girls would get ready at and I still was kind of fascinated.

Madeline worked at The Den for several months, and Mike made efforts to take care of her basic needs, such as signing a lease for her to get an apartment. She has a good opinion of Mike, but she left The Den after a conflict with another dancer. The Den is a club located in the same county as Titans, but it is does not have the same customer base as Titans, though there is some overlap. It also does not have the same rules as Titans. It operates more as one of Bradley-Engen’s “social” clubs, but instead of selling or offering complimentary beer, customers are encouraged to bring their own drinks, which they consume inside the club with the dancers. This club makes money by charging cover fees and selling lap dances.
Dancer Experiences with “Outsiders”

I Don’t Want My Family to Know

I have found that most dancers working at Titans strongly desire to keep their stripper identity concealed especially from their families, but not all who wanted to keep their identity secret were able to do so. Anyone a dancer knows on a personal level—who is also aware that she strips—will be called a “known outsider.” The term is meant to distinguish individuals close to the dancer from people who have no emotional significance to her.

In my questionnaire (n=15) I asked each respondent if three key “outsiders” know that she dances, yes or no: (1) romantic partner, (2) parents/family, (3) other employer. These three questions were followed by a write-in response opportunity: “If they don’t know, then why not?” Finally, I asked each respondent if she plans to tell the unknowing outsiders that she dances, yes or no. In all cases that any outsider (7 family members, 3 employers) didn’t know, none of the dancers planned on telling them in the future. In all cases of dancers with romantic partners (n=8), every partner knew. See Table 5-1 on the next page.
Table 5-1. This table displays whether or not current dancers indicate that three types of “outsiders” know that they dance.

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<th>Current Dancers</th>
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<th>Parents/Family</th>
<th>Alternate Employer</th>
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For the outsider categories Romantic Partner, Parents/Family, and Alternate Employer, a blank indicates the category is not applicable, a Y indicates the outsider knows she dances, a N indicates the outsider does not know she dances. An * indicates the dancer does not try to conceal her identity.

About half of the dancers were able to keep their occupational identities hidden from family or employers. Out of 15 dancers’ families, 8 knew that she danced, according to the dancers. (A dancer’s family may know, but not admit that they know to her.) In cases where dancers had other jobs (n=6), half kept their dancer status concealed. Of the dancers who tried to conceal their identities, they gave very similar write-in responses. (Some left this question blank.)

Reasons given to not tell employer:
- clash of interest
- stigma
- I don’t need it
- will lose job/respect in authoritative position

Reasons given to not tell family:
- would not accept
- mom would get mad
- I feel it is a private matter
- not to stress them out
- do not approve
- don’t want them to worry

In my interviews, I was able to learn more about why they don’t want their families to find out about them being dancers. These dancers gave a range of responses related to levels of familial acceptance and reasons for disapproval (or approval). Some dancers suggested that their
parents may feel like failures if their daughter must resort to stripping, or that their parents may unduly worry about her working as an exotic dancer.

**Katey:** My family, personally, I think that they would feel guilty. You know, because they didn’t do enough for me. My parents are very loving, caring, nice people. Which you don’t get a lot in parents anyway and they’re still together, they’re very religious that they would be praying for me all the time, thinking that they did something wrong raising me, that they would feel that because they didn’t have enough money to help me that I had to strip to make money. I just think they would feel guilty, bad, and I don’t want to put my parents through that.

**Foxy:** It’s been up and down with my parents. Whenever they found out at first, they were both very, very, very upset about it. My dad didn’t talk to me for a while then my mom found out I was working here again because my sister told her. And I remember, she asked me about it and I was like, ‘Well, yeah. I’m not going to lie to you about it and she was unhappy with it. And over time, she didn’t ever get over—she was never okay with it, we never talked about it. … For my mom, I think it was more of a shame thing, what are other people going to think? For my dad it’s—he was really hurt. He was like there’s men his age looking at his daughter, you know? They both—even now they don’t know. When people ask me what I’m doing, ‘Oh, I’m just going to school’ and change the subject really quickly. I’m not sure what they think I do but we just left it unsaid.

**Nova:** Yes, all my friends know that I work here. Probably about half my coworkers know that I work here. As I mentioned earlier, one more found out last night. Which I have no problem with. The only people I have a problem with finding out is my family. My brother knows because all his friends know, … I just don’t ever want my parents to find out because I don’t want them to look down on me for it, to ever be concerned about my safety. They wouldn’t be the type to be like, “Oh what would people think of my daughter?” It’s like they’ll worry about what it did to me, I feel like they would think, “Oh this must of mentally damaged her so much since she did this.”

**Celeste:** Um—they’re just very conservative—they don’t like—I don’t know what the word would be—they don’t like anything that has to do with drinking, like they don’t like talking about anything to do with sex, they don’t like—they just don’t like dealing with that kind of stuff and my dad’s just a family guy.

**Francesca:** In my family, my family is extremely religious. They are very Catholic. My grandparents are very Catholic. My dad is practicing and he’s very strong in his faith. It’s just not something you do. It’s not something anybody in my family would do. I don’t wanna call it “socially” unacceptable because my parents aren’t society, but in my family it’s unacceptable. Just flat out. (former dancer)

Other dancers may resist having family members find out, but it’s not as seriously concerning to them, or at least there is nothing that can be done to hide it. The coping strategy is avoidance: they choose to not talk about it as a family.

**Silver (who was raised by her grandparents):** I didn’t want to tell my grandparents just because, you know—the idea of me talking about being naked is kind of weird for them. I don’t think they’d disown me or anything. I just think that it would be a pretty uncomfortable topic. I’m pretty sure they knew, but we just never spoke of it. I’m pretty sure if nothing else, Nana knew—probably Pap-Pap, too. It’s just something we never spoke about. Other than that, I really just didn’t give a crap. (former dancer)
**Simone:** She [my mother] doesn’t know I do it anymore. She’d probably infer if she wanted to, but she knew when I was younger when I did and she actually was pretty ‘legit to quit’[okay with it]. She said, “She’s eighteen—what am I going to do? She’s making money, she’s taking care of herself. Do I want her to be doing it? No. Do I have any say about what she does? Do I have a right to tell her to stop? No, because I’m not paying for her shit.” And that was that. But at the same time like—I don’t want my mom to know—’cause she doesn’t know what it’s like. She doesn’t know that, hey, I’m not getting touched—hey, I’m not a prostitute—hey, guys aren’t following me home. I don’t want her to think, you know, have that run through her mind. ‘Cause she’s not going to know and she’s never going to know. ’Cause she’s never going to work in this type of atmosphere. And I don’t feel comfortable enough telling her that ’cause I’m still like five to her.

**Katey:** There’s really no reason to [bring it up]. As long as I have enough other stuff going on in my life to talk about, why do I need to bring up that? It would be like—I don’t need to talk about my sex life to Joe in front of my parents, I don’t need to talk about me being a stripper in front of my parents. I don’t need to talk about going to the bar and getting drunk that night, it’s just one of the things I choose not to talk about and I think it’s the best that way. You know, if I popped a pill or tried drugs, I’m not gonna go running to my parents and tell them that, so I’m not gonna tell my parents that I’m a stripper. In their eyes I think it would be negative.

I was also able to learn more about the particular manners in which their parents found out that they worked.

**Licous:** At first they didn’t [know]. I told them I worked at a hotel. They caught on. The lady that works at [convenience store] in [town], by the high school I went to—this is really ironic—she was telling the guy in line in front of me that my dad—like my dad went to school with this guy or something like that—’Oh, his daughter works at Titans.’ [Later I find out] so this guy called my dad, my dad called my mom and my mom works in [another town] so she drove past here [the club] on her way home and drove through the parking lot and saw the car … So, yeah, they were really mad. They didn’t talk to me for like two days. But then after it was like, “Whatever, it’s a job—at least you’re making money. That’s all we wanted.”

Another dancer, Hazel, dealt with this anonymity problem by simply addressing the matter head-on. Hazel says,

I don’t like to lie. You know, just get it all out there. Besides, if you’re working at Titans and you’re from [around here], your whole entire high school is going to be here. I’ve had cousins here. I’ve had my aunt here. My uncle. Like, you know, I’ve had family reunions here. *(former dancer)*

She was only joking about the family reunions, but she has had numerous encounters with family members while working at the club. I, too, have had family members appear at the club. Many Titans dancers have encounters like these. If not encounters with family members, then it’s surprise visits from classmates, or co-workers from other “legitimate” or formal jobs.
Another finding is that working at the club is stigmatizing not only for the dancers, but also the club owner, and his staff. In one case, the doorman, Palmer, had to answer to his girlfriend’s parents about working at Titans, “They weren’t happy about it, they’re still not happy about it.” The manager’s family “accepts it” and “doesn’t really hassle” him about it, though they “don’t like it at all.” A bouncer, Owen, experienced the stigma associated with working at a strip club through his previous girlfriend’s initial disapproval.

Owen: My ex-girlfriend didn’t like it just for the simple fact it is a strip club. … I don’t know how all strip clubs are, but a lot of them get bad names because of the whole persona on TV. TV has them as whorehouses, especially the show Sopranos. That really made strip clubs look bad because, all the guys were banging all the girls and they were prostitutes and everything else and this place isn’t like that. I told her, “No, it’s not like that at all. Come up and talk to the girls, meet them and you’ll see it’s not like that at all.” She said, “I really didn’t want you working up there but since I met these girls and see how they are it’s like my whole attitude of it has changed.” It’s a shame that TV and media has given strip clubs bad names because of stuff like that.

To summarize, one of my key findings is that Titans dancers do not want to be found out as being exotic dancers. However, many of the dancers with close social ties to the area can safely assume that being found out is a strong possibility, especially the longer they work there. Eventually someone a dancer knows will find out, and then everybody else that person knows will also know. After they are found out, dancers are forced to answer questions from well-meaning, but often misinformed family members and friends. It’s usually a turning point where dancers either find a way to carry on with the stigma, or they quit all together. Sometimes they just “lay low” for a while, and then invent a new cover story.

Becoming Known to Non-Family Outsiders

Foxy has danced at Titans for several years, and when I asked her how she feels about people finding out that she’s a dancer, she said, “I try to keep it secret from people as much as possible … I don’t want that to be their first opinion of me, especially someone just meeting me. That’s all they’ll think of—‘Oh this girl’s a stripper.’ ” Foxy struggles against the typical
negative stereotypes associated with stripping—that dancers are drug addicts, promiscuous, or otherwise socially deviant.

Kimberly elaborates on what she thinks outsiders—particularly men—think about women who work in strip clubs.

**Kimberly:** I hate that about strip clubs. They think all the girls are easy. Yes, some of them are, but outside of the strip club business they are too. It’s just individual preference. But not all of us are—not all women period. Whether you’re in the business or not, we’re not all easy. You know, I’ve only been with three guys in my entire life so—to come into a strip club and think all dancers are going to go home with you is crazy. Another fantasy. *(former dancer)*

Licious also reacts to the stereotypes associated with dancing.

**Licious:** It’s like, ‘You couldn’t do this.’ That’s what I tell people. They think that this—like the people that judge you—don’t know what the hell you go through … that it’s really easy or that it’s just a joke in general, it’s like it’s not even worth it. Like they’ve never experienced it first-hand and that’s why their opinion is that way. Until you make the money, you don’t know, so—whatever. I actually said the other night, I think it’s funny the things people come up with and say about strippers. ‘Cause they’re like all the stereotypes.

Not all interactions with known outsiders are interpreted negatively by dancers. Katey seems to accept it as a pleasant phenomenon under certain circumstances.

**AG:** When you said “weird fantasies” what did you mean there?

**Katey:** Like, you know, if somebody liked you back in high school, maybe had a weird crush on you—just a small [crush], never came anything of it—to get to see you naked years later, that’s a big deal for them. I know this and it only occurred to me a couple of times. But when Licious said like all her friends had come in from high school … one of them told me, they’re like, “Ohh, this is the time of my life right now because I had a crush on that girl like four years ago and getting to see her naked just makes my life right now.” And I was like, how long ago was this crush? She’s like nineteen so you guys must have been like fourteen, fifteen, whatever, and he’s like, “Yeah, she’s so hot.” And he was so happy about it and I saw them following her around to her stages—just like people that knew me. So I’m like [wondering], did they have some weird crush on me? Or, you know, you see an attractive girl maybe you imagine her naked. I’m not a guy, I don’t know, and so it’s exciting to them to get to see somebody they know naked, or get to see them shaking their ass, or doing something that they wouldn’t ever see them do. It’s, you know, I guess it goes back to why people come into the club, and then it makes it all that much more exciting if they get to see somebody that they knew or fantasized about earlier in their life or at a different time.

There are numerous meanings that could be unpacked from her observation. Here I will note only that working in a rural club, or attending a club there as a local, is probably one of the only conditions for encounters such as the one Katey described.

Kimberly ended up dancing for someone she had a crush on years ago. It may have been
less than fulfilling for her in terms of a fantasy.

**Kimberly:** I had a crush on one of my guys that lived in the neighborhood and he worked for my mom as well—she had a arts and craft business—so he would come in to work [for her], and I had a crush on him. He was in my brother’s grade. And he came into Titans one day and was all about me—got a [private] dance with me and everything, asked me to, you know, go out with him that night and—I’m like, ‘I can’t do that.’ Like, ‘You knew I liked you all those years and you didn’t say anything to me then,’ and I knew he was married and—I don’t know if he had a child then or not, but I knew he was married, and that was enough, you know? I’m like you know, you had all those years to like take me out on a date or whatever. He tried to say he didn’t know that I liked him and blah, blah—he knew. He just saw me at the club and thought he could get a quick piece of ass. Nope. Sorry. *(former dancer)*

Greater social distance between these dancers and known outsiders helps to mitigate the anxiety dancers feel at being found out. Family members are the least desirable knowing others, according to these dancers, but even some non-family member outsiders can disrupt dancer well-being. The next section will address the problem of combining stigmatized informal work with formal work.

**Becoming Known to Co-Workers from Other Jobs**

Katey doesn’t universally accept interactions with known outsiders as pleasant, but suggests that if there is no continued contact with the outsiders who found her out, that it’s not as much of a problem.

**AG:** So other than your little brother’s friends who came in and spotted you, have you ever been spotted by anyone else?

**Katey:** Yeah, people that I worked with at [another local business], after I had quit though. I had been done with the job for a year, so it really wasn’t relevant at that point, like ‘Oooh, she used to work at Johnny’s as a cashier.’ They all came in, followed me around to my stages, acted like it was all great because they knew one of the strippers and that was that. They left and I was annoyed and you know, tomorrow’s a new day. I don’t care, like great, they all got to see me naked, I hope they got their kicks out of it and made fun of me on the way home.

**AG:** Do you think you really were okay with that?

**Katey:** It’s awkward. Like when you run into like one or two people, it’s okay but when you have this whole group of guys and a couple females who you used to work with, not in a real professional atmosphere, but they knew you as somebody different for a long time and then all of them see you naked, it just—you become very aware—like, I’m completely naked, I’m putting myself out there for you to all judge me, make fun of me, do whatever you feel like and I still have
to do this. This is my job, this is where I am, I’m not planning on quitting because you guys are walking through here, I’m not gonna hide upstairs. This is what I do and you guys all get to see it. It’s awkward. But it wasn’t like degrading, it wasn’t terrible, it was just not something I’d want to do every day but if it happens, I can deal with it.

Not surprisingly, the circumstance that bothers Katey most is when she does have to deal with the known outsiders on a regular basis, or when the stakes are otherwise higher due to the more professional nature of her other job.

AG: Did you ever have anybody find out from where you were working at the time?

Katey: Yeah, when I worked for [a more professional business], it was really awkward. A guy was picking up his wife, she worked with me, and he was picking her up and he says to her, ‘I know that girl.’ Which was me and I guess it came out later in the car ride home, … ‘I know her cause she works at Titans show club. I was there, I saw her.’ All of a sudden this woman’s pissed at me because maybe I gave her husband a lap dance because he was at Titan show club, whatever it was, and it created a little bit of drama. I mean, I held my ground that, ‘Yeah, I work at Titans and it’s completely irrelevant to this job, I don’t do anything here that, you know, makes it difficult to work with me, so just let it alone. Like, I don’t want any harassment charges or anything against you, so please, you know, just, just that’s it. Yeah, I work there, I don’t care, I hope you don’t either.

When I followed up with Katey to clarify whether she actually said these assertive statements, or if she was projecting what she should have said if she were challenged, she affirmed that she really did say them at the time. She added, "I might not have been so brave to say that if I hadn’t just got accepted to grad school and was planning on quitting there soon anyway."

**Being Found Out By Partners**

For some former dancers, their experience has been that current partners are upset when learning about their previous dancing days.

Aspen: I’ve made the mistake of telling people that I’m involved with in the past where you know, I’d tell them you know, I used to be a stripper—or I am a stripper—and that had a really negative effect on the relationship. Guys are funny because—guys and girls—are funny when you’re involved in like a romantic relationship because they get this feeling that they have to compete with something like … so many people have seen me naked. Or you know, you’ve been rubbing up against somebody else and like they get really—they can be jealous and they can—you know, gears start to turn in their head and they start wondering, you know, what about that time that she didn’t call when I called her and—? It gets weird. It just gets weird. So in this particular relationship that I’m in now, is the longest relationship I’ve been in… that’s just one thing that I don’t think he ever really needs to know. I mean if fifteen years after we’re married, it comes out,
fine. You know, at that point, it will be too late. But—that’s a part of myself that I left behind a long time ago and I don’t necessarily want to bring it back just for his own sake, not for mine. I’m comfortable with it. I can talk to almost anybody about it, except for my parents and except for him. (former dancer)

Simone’s experience differs greatly from Aspen’s.

Simone: I keep it very personal I guess—the only person that knows is my boyfriend and I think that’s the only person that needs to know. And if—he doesn’t have a problem with it because he knows me and I always—I don’t just say—like I start seeing someone for a week and, ‘Oh by the way, I’m a stripper.’ I told him like three months when I thought, okay maybe you’re going to be in my life a little longer than a week. You know, just to let him know why I’m not home at four a.m. every night, on a Saturday, or—to see his input—but whether his input is positive or negative it wasn’t going to change whether I was going to do it or not.

A current dancer, who is single, found that her relationships with potential romantic partners were affected by the knowledge that she dances.

Celeste: I’m just afraid to tell most people because, since I am in a college atmosphere, how guys will react to it. Like some of my guy friends that I have told, they’re just like, well like would you ever want to spend the night with me? And I’m like, you think I’m easy just because you found out I’m a dancer? I find that very offensive. And I’ve had people like offer me money—I’ve had so many people ask me for lap dances outside of here. And I’m just like, really?

While all of the current dancers in this study had partners who were aware of their jobs as stripper, when dancers choose to reveal this information varies. It is likely that dancers who find partners while dancing are more pressured to deal with telling a partner, than a dancer who is no longer involved in daily work as a dancer. The threat single dancers perceive toward potentially romantic interactions is complicated as well by working as a stripper.

Dancer Experiences with “Insiders”

Dancers who enter Titans with “outside” dancing experience (especially from “hustle” clubs) report club-level variation between this club and others. They remark how much friendlier and trusting Titans dancers are.

Exemplifying trust, I have observed that dancers leave earnings (10’s or 100’s of dollars of cash) out in plain view at their “spot” on the dressing room countertop—dancers simply expect
that other dancers won’t touch it—and they don’t. A dancer will return even a single dollar found on the stage floor to the dancer who was last on stage, assuming that the previous dancer dropped it accidently. Professional dance costumes and platform shoes are expensive (low range is $60-$160 per item). They let each other borrow costumes. Nobody steals them. You could sell a pair of used dancer shoes online for $50, easily. Yet no one steals anything. Not even little stuff that couldn’t be nailed down as stolen versus misplaced—like a pack of gum or a sweatshirt.22

In hustle clubs, this level of goodie-goodie trust would be simply unthinkable. According to Bradley-Engen’s research, in hustle clubs there is a sense of lawlessness which inspires aggressive protective tactics.

The lack of management involvement creates an atmosphere of normlessness. Essentially, there are no rules. Drug use, sexual harassment, and solicitation are all commonplace; theft is an everyday occurrence that goes unpunished. All the women in hustle clubs reported that they had personal items, clothing, or money stolen from them or had witnessed theft occurring against another dancer. All dancers reported using locks to secure their items in dressing rooms. One dancer stated that in addition to using locks, she secured her belongings in a padlocked trunk chained to a post in the dressing room (2009: 44).

In the Titans dressing room, an implicit norm of respect for other people’s property prevails. Dancers who have often used each other’s hair styling equipment, for example, will still request permission before using it, rather than assuming permission and simply reaching for it. Not only is consent regarding the use of property respected, but also reciprocity in sharing is maintained. For example, dancers share “products,” as they call them (hairspray, deodorant, etc.) and other items, in this manner. As long as one dancer is willing to share her work-related accoutrements, the dancer beside her will gladly share her stuff, too. Locker goodies, such as candy or chocolate, can be traded for baby wipes, eyelash glue, or carrots. There is no direct and immediate “this for that” tally; rather, it is implied that someday the dancer in need will be a dancer of plenty. Over time, dancers who seem only to borrow, but never bring anything that can

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22 The club cameras not only monitor, but also record. Knowledge of this oversight may discourage someone who might otherwise be tempted to steal, as there is a camera in the dressing room. Dancers are free to review the recording with the manager as requested.
be shared, are eventually squeezed out of the open-share. For example, if a non-sharing dancer sees that another dancer has gum and asks, “Do you have any gum I could borrow?” The endowed dancer will simply say, “No,” even though a pack of chewing gum is sitting on the counter with her stuff and could be reasonably inferred to belong to her. To the question, “Does anyone have any scissors I can use?” (a very common question), it will be met with a collective silence toward the question, or at least a reluctance to pony up the item. By contrast, when a dancer asks another dancer if she can borrow or use an item, she may follow her request with, “I ran out of deodorant, but I have some baby wipes if you need them.” To which the donor dancer will say, “No, you don’t need to do that, you let me use your hairdryer all the time!” These norms seem to spontaneously catch on.

The Owner’s Influence

When I asked Shep about his club philosophy, he told me what he wants most is for all the dancers and staff to get along like one big family, and he earnestly wants the customers to have an excellent experience.

**Shep, Owner:** I want to give people what they want. I want to give them the full satisfaction of a great night. Great music, great lights, great everything—great people.

**AG:** How do you recruit the great people?

**Shep:** Luck. (laugh) In this industry, there’s always people coming in looking for work. Especially a college town and girls wanting to pay their way through college or local girls that chose to take this route to put some money back, to get some nice things. So they’re always coming in, so we just have to pick and choose the right apples. Try not to pick the wrong ones and try to pick the ones that are the ripest and the sweetest.

**AG:** What are some of the signs of a good apple versus a bad apple?

**Shep:** I mean, you can see when somebody’s all about themselves and don’t care about anybody else. When somebody’s arrogant and catty, that’s a bad. I like people that are humble, team-oriented and like teamwork, and want to give their all to their business that they work for. They want treated and taken with pride.
When dancers behave as Shep suggests, they are extended the reciprocity of his caring attention and friendship. To me, he feels like a brother in every respect, including that frustrating annoying sibling way, at times. He is two years older than me, and we seem to have been “growing up” together at this club. I also attend his backyard barbeques and his son’s birthday parties. I’m one of the first people he wants to tell about exciting developments in his business plans, or in his personal life. Shep and his wife go out with “the girls” occasionally to movies, or before his son was born, we’d all dress up and go out for Halloween together, for example. Shep has been able to command respect as a boss, and also be a friend to dancers. To some degree, he is integrated with the dancers’ culture, as are other members of the staff.

From the staff’s perspectives, Owen, a bouncer has the following to say about the nature of his relationships with the dancers:

**Owen:** In the beginning you’re in the whole awe of, ‘I’m working in a strip club,’ but that wears off. Like, I’m here to protect you guys. I’m not here to try to you know—it’s like trying to have sex with your sister, you know, because you get so close with knowing everybody.

From a former dancer’s perspectives regarding staff members:

**AG:** You mentioned that dancers were your favorite part of the job and you liked your interactions with them. Did you also share that with the staff? Was it just with dancers that you had this kind of interaction?

**Francesca:** Well, the dancers were the people with whom I spent most of my time there. Which is not to say that I didn’t have a rapport with the staff because I did. There were certain jokes with certain people, and the bartender, I would see them relatively frequently. Staff was okay. Most of them.

**AG:** Does anyone stand out in your mind? Who was the most fun, or who was least fun?

**Francesca:** Among the staff?

**AG:** Yeah.

**Francesca:** Boyd was probably my favorite. He understood me. We had a lot in common. /Short thinking pause./ I don’t know who my least favorite would be, because Shep and I got along. Shep and I understood each other. When he had to put me back in my place, he wasn’t a dick about it. He was understanding. He knew what was going on with me. I mean, Shep wouldn’t be my least favorite at all.

I asked a seasoned dancer directly about Shep and his availability to dancers as a friend.
AG: Shep is kind of our friend, but he’s also our boss. How do you think that works?

Foxy: I think it’s really cool cause you can—it’s really nice to have a boss that you can say, ‘This is what’s going on, this is why I need time off, or I can’t come in until later,’ or, you know, and you can tell him things that you couldn’t tell other bosses.

AG: Like what?

Foxy: I mean, you could say, ‘I’m having a nervous breakdown because my boyfriend broke up with me and my dog got loose [laugh]. You know, excuses that wouldn’t fly in any other occupation that could be the cause of you having a horrible day, or a million things going wrong in your life and [any other boss would] just be like, ‘What’s wrong with this person, why’s she in my office?’ You know, like, you can talk to Shep.

AG: Did Shep ever do more to help you than just listen—with your problems?

Foxy: Oh yeah. There was a bunch of times where he would help me out like, I mean, that whole thing that happened with my ex-boyfriend who stole from me, tried to beat me up—Shep was willing to go punch him in the face /laugh/, you know? Like what other boss does that? He’s definitely more than a boss—more like a close friend.

Francesca confirms Shep’s compassion as a boss.

Francesca: He was really caring at times. He was like, ‘You know, I understand you broke up with your boyfriend,’ or ‘your cat died’—which are things that happened while I was there! He was extremely understanding of those things.

This work culture created significant bonds not only between dancers, but to some degree between dancers and staff. The owner has personal cohesion with dancers, despite being a “boss.” However; the relationships between dancers and staff do not share the same kinds of closeness, which will be examined in the next section.

“Openness” in Two Domains

Titans’ dancers are comfortable with each other in a multiplicity of ways, but I chose to limit the focus of this section on two substantive domains: the corporal and the circumstantial.

The occupational culture at this club fosters what dancers call “openness,” or a suspension of critical judgment toward each other’s person. The “accepting” relationship each dancer must develop toward her own nakedness enables her to similarly accept the nakedness of
her coworkers’ bodies. Dancers accustomed to seeing each other naked are able to regard a person’s entire body as matter-of-fact, in the same way that most of us view faces as matter-of-fact. Everyone has one. They’re all a little different, but not essentially. When it comes to both bodies and life-histories, dancers are able to gaze upon each other and to talk about what is normally expected to remain hidden under clothing or the strictures of polite conversation.

Within this culture, individual attributes that are deemed “inherent to the person” or “something we all have” are especially well tolerated—even when those attributes which fall outside the usual norms imposed by the broader social context. In other words, women who come to work at the club as recovering drug addicts, so-called “high-school dropouts,” or single mothers are not immediately cast as “lesser” beings by their colleagues. Lower levels of education or social sophistication and physical hardships are not seen as choices; rather, these are circumstances that could happen (or have happened) to any woman who decides to work as a stripper at Titans.

The suspension of judgment does not apply to current behaviors—inappropriate behavior is policed and reprimanded. What counts as “inappropriate” at this informal occupation is designated orally by the management’s rules and the collective will of dancers to follow and perpetuate those rules. Dancers also perpetuate their own norms within the dressing room. All club workers support several cardinal rules—these are respected and have stood the test of time, despite there being no formal handbook (such as no meeting customers outside the club, no drugs inside the club, etc.). Other rules shift and mutate over time. In the context of this informal work culture, a “reprimand” is constituted by a private management “talk” with a dancer, and enforcement is maintained through intra-dancer vocal disapproval, either through direct confrontation between dancers, or by “tattletaling,” (the latter of which is supported by the management and the former discouraged).

23 Of course, there are always exceptions.
The Corporal Domain

At Titans, I found that dancers share a high level of physical comfort with each other. It is hard to imagine this level of physical comfort existing for other kinds of colleagues, except perhaps sports teams or other troupes of dancers. The dancers’ acceptance of each other’s bodies is evidenced not only in their mutual witnessing of bathroom functions, but also in the advice they issue to each other regarding, for example, the treatment of skin ailments or sexual dissatisfaction. Their physical acceptance of non-sexualized touch can be seen in the assistance they offer with readying costumes to their most flattering arrangement—e.g. one dancer can approach another dancer and push up that dancer’s breasts with her hands to demonstrate her alternative opinion on how tightly a halter-top could be tied.

The following quotations speak toward some of these “comfortabilities.”

Aspen: There are two toilets that sit next to each other and two open doors, there’s no stall separating them, you know, you just go in and do it. You could be sitting next to your girlfriend here. {chuckle} Not a big deal. There is no shame. … There’s no worrying about you know, like, ‘Oh, my tit’s hanging out.’ You know, there’s no worrying about that kind of stuff.

Foxy: Even just peeing with the door open, it’s just—you become so accustomed to it, it’s whatever. But you know, [elsewhere] I’ve never gone into a bathroom before where they pee with the door open! {laugh} It’s just kind of interesting though. It becomes—normal.

Emma: My first night here, this is how I knew I was going to like working here, I was sitting on the toilet going to the bathroom and Katey came in wearing her nice white lace whatever. And I was [thinking] like, ‘This girl is sooo pretty,’ and she sits down right beside me and she looked and me, and she said, ‘I gotta shit.’ {laugh} And I was like, this is so cool! {laugh} I kind of think it’s how we all should be, you know?

I asked Hazel and Licious, two of the youngest dancers at Titans, to compare the experience of being nude with other women in a gym locker room to being nude with dancers in a strip club dressing room.

Hazel: I feel like in high school everybody’s changing to be as quick as possible so nobody sees anything. Nobody looks at each other. Nobody talks to each other. But in a strip club, [you say] ‘Oh, you have an outie vagina. You have an inny vagina. Oh, you have a different color butthole than me,’ it’s much more detailed. It’ll be like, ‘Oh, your boobs look bigger today.’ Or, ‘You lost some weight. You’re gaining some weight. You’re really tanned today. You’re really pale.’

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Licious: In high school, I feel like everyone’s like, ‘Oh my God! Don’t look at me!’—trying to cover up, all shy, embarrassed. Here, it’s like, ‘Hey, I have a mole—or an ingrown hair right here—can you get it?’ Or, the one night—probably one of the weirdest things that I’ll see here, Ruby told Madeline, ‘I have a bump in my vagina on the inside and it really hurts.’ … So she had Madeline stick her fingers up it and feel this lump—this imaginary lump and I was just like—Wow! The shit that I see here!

AG: Was that sexual at all?

Licious: No. It was just like … [Ruby] was like, ‘Something’s wrong with me!’ and Madeline’s just like, ‘Calm down. There’s nothing wrong with you.’ (chuckle) If that would have happened in gym class, one, it would have been sexual harassment. Two, everybody would have called you a lesbian. Like, if I would of looked at someone else, I would have been a lesbian.

Licious and I went to the same high school (though many years apart) and I can support her claim that “lesbian” is a likely hypothetical insult in such a situation, but this sort of judgment could occur in any high school anywhere.

The physical acceptance shared between dancers seems to transfer over to emotional acceptance. One dancer, Kimberly, has the following to say about physical openness connected to emotional openness.

Kimberly: I think dancers are more open to anything that you ask them. [It’s] more comfortable talking to dancers, maybe.

AG: Why?

Kimberly: Well I think because you’re just more open. I mean, you’re already naked in front of them, you know—putting your make-up on—your face, or your crotch, or your butt. Or you’re asking them to shave your ass {chuckle} … —you’re just more out there already.

This emotional openness inspires collective dressing room conversations that draw dancers in, as if around a campfire. If one dancer is having an emotionally difficult time, the other dancers respond by listening, offering advice, giving hugs, and issuing appropriately timed statements of levity.

Regarding the concept “openness,” Nova explains,

Nova: You kinda have to have a free spirit to work here, you can’t be super reserved. And I think there are people who keep their personal lives more separate, but I think it’s just a comfortable place to do it because everyone gets along so well. A lot of us have been here for a long time and know each other pretty well. But even when I first started, I don’t know, it seems like people just had and could form extremely strong bonds here.
This section described how dancers “form extremely strong bonds” within one of two domains of interaction—comfort for each other’s bodies in a non-sexual way. The second form of bonding reflects acceptance of intra-dancer differences.

**The Circumstantial Domain**

The differences between dancers at Titans are not easy to see. They’re all women, they’re all white, and they all have that same manufactured vixen look—they wear high heels, body jewelry and glitter. But their backgrounds vary quite a bit. They come from different socioeconomic classes and types of families. They have widely varying levels of education and age. And regardless of those things, they still share close relationships.

For example, Darcy got pregnant when she was in high school, and now she is a single mother. She works with people like me, and others, who have college degrees. At the time of this interview, she had worked at Titans for less than a year. Yet she still experienced feelings of emotional intimacy, closeness, and acceptance with other dancers. Darcy says,

> This is the one place where people are not judging one another. Here, I can be myself and the girls can even talk about personal things that we’re going through. We all have different backgrounds, but we’re all in the same boat here, and we don’t judge one another. I think I’m myself here.

My observation of this phenomenon is that a dancer may be pursuing a college degree, or maybe she already has one, or maybe she didn’t graduate high school, or her parents might have been rich, or maybe she grew up really poor, but it doesn’t seem to matter to other dancers. Strippers get naked in public for money. No one can hide behind an elite job title, or expensive business attire. Each dancer’s status is “stripper” and it means she’s no better—or worse than—anybody else. This equalizing “naked truth” seems to make dancers a lot less likely to judge each other.

**Celeste:** Working in a strip club gets rid of your jealousy very quickly. Like, there’s always going to be a better dancer, there’s always going to be somebody better at make-up, better at
hair…there’s always going to be somebody prettier than you, in better shape than you and you just basically have to get over it, and just learn that they’re not better than me because of all these qualities they have, it’s just they’re different. Know what I mean?

And sometimes they are less likely to judge themselves.

**Olivia:** I definitely got a lot more comfortable in my body. … Realistically I can say like, ‘Okay, I’m not the most beautiful woman in the world, but I don’t care, and that’s not my thing anyway.’ I don’t feel like I have to be. You know what I mean?

**AG:** So you realized that while you were dancing?

**Olivia:** Yeah, I mean before I really had focused on beauty as following a pretty rigid and narrow ideal. Okay, like it’s really you know you have a certain kind of classic face, and be a certain height, a certain weight, like a certain waist, hip, bust measurement. You should have big boobs and whatever but yeah then I started to feel comfortable in a whole different way.

After explaining to me that it’s easier to talk with her co-workers at Titans, because they are more “open,” I asked Nova about a specific topic I guessed might be difficult to talk about.

**AG:** Do you ever talk to any of the other girls who have eating dis—whatever you call it, I don’t know. I don’t want to call it a disorder, that doesn’t sound like a nice word for it.

**Nova:** Well, that’s what I call it, an eating disorder. /chuckle/ Yeah, I do, it’s been helpful for me and I think helpful for other people. I’ve talked to Foxy, I’ve called Foxy several times cause she’s been able to help me because sometimes. Like, my friend, like my best friend is really good at trying to understand but no one really gets it unless you’ve been through it ’cause it seems like such a silly little thing to do, just eat. But I’ve talked to Foxy—she’s helped me. I’ve talked to Mischa and trying to help her out, cause if you can talk to someone else who has had the problem it can be extremely helpful. And especially here when you are being judged on your body constantly. If someone makes a comment and you have an eating disorder your first thought usually is gonna be, ‘Oh my god, I can’t eat.’ That’s what my first thought is. But if you have someone talk you down out of it right away, and go, ‘Dude, who is that kid? There were just twenty people that said you looked good and gave you money. Who cares about this kid?’ It’s helpful.

I asked another dancer about a topic that I suspected may be sensitive for her.

**AG:** How do you feel about how you’re treated here by dancers and staff being that you’re a lesbian?

**Lovey:** Actually, here, it’s amazing because no one will say anything. I mean, you may have one or two, but the rest is just like I’m just another person. Which is good, because I get enough shit out in the real world.

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24 Her response does not denote a necessarily healthy approach to coping with an eating disorder—i.e. seeking from strangers more positive affirmations than negative ones—but I have never claimed the club to be a perfect world where all benefits to dancers are gained “purely.” Muddling through mixed or ambiguous situations, together, and feeling support by other “misfits” seems to be the important part to these women (and is/was to me).
Titans dancers report high levels of trust among each other. They are willing to share vulnerabilities with each other that they may not be willing to share with any other people in their lives. This kind of non-judgmental context may foster the formation of intra-dancer friendships.

**Friendships Bonds Between Dancers**

During my interview with Hazel, a former Titans dancer, she made several references to her notion that work ought to be fun and that friendship is important to her. In explaining why she wanted to work at Titans when she first started, Hazel explained,

After my eighteenth birthday I came up here as a customer and—you were working. It was very interesting, I could tell all the girls were fun and they all like seemed to like each other. Who was working that night? Francesca, you, Silver, and Foxy, I believe. It was a very fun night.

Another current dancer had a similar impression of Titans when she came here on many occasions as a customer, before she started dancing.

**Lovey:** I wanted to dance because I thought it would be fun.

**AG:** I don’t think a lot of people think that. What made you think that?

**Lovey:** Because I would come up here for so long and all the girls seemed to be having fun.

**AG:** Do you have fun when you dance?

**Lovey:** I do. I still have fun doing it, which is good because if I didn’t have fun doing it, I wouldn’t be here.

In explaining why she agreed to return to work for one weekend to dance, Hazel said, “I missed all my little friends. I haven’t seen everybody in so long.”

**AG:** What was it like when you were working with us? How would you describe that?

**Hazel:** It’s like a family type thing. You all get involved in each other’s lives, always want to do stuff together. So, it’s not like that at other places. Like the other club I worked at, people just come and go and it’s not even the same people every weekend but—everyone has attitude I guess, I don’t know. Everybody here, is like—we all love each other so much.

Later in the interview I asked:

**AG:** Did you miss working here?
Hazel: Yeah. I would think about it a lot.

AG: What did you miss about it?

Hazel: Mostly like the whole like family, like how everybody is close here and then—definitely not the rules or any of the set up—but the people for sure.

Not everyone at Titans experienced the same level of bonding. Olivia, a former dancer, says the following about coming back and seeing everyone.

Olivia: Like some people, you know, you actually have something in common with, and then you have like a lasting friendship after the whole thing is over. You know, but some it’s like, ‘Ohhh, hey!!’ It's weird coming back and seeing Lynda, and you’re like, ‘Ohh, hey, how are you doing?!’ You know? And I kind of feel guilty ’cuz it’s like oh we used to talk all the time. But, it really wasn't like a real friendship there, you know what I mean, it was just like—it was a work friendship.

Katey has a different take on work friendships. She explains,

At Titans, we’re going to school, this is where we live, we like our friends, we have real friends there and not just, ‘Hey I met you today, do you want to get drunk with me and travel the road tomorrow?’ Like years and years of friendship. … we just know each other, we’re friends, we’re all doing something—we all have a reason that we want to be there, or a lot of us do. We’re not just passing through to make the money.

At Titans, the value of friendship appears to supersede the value of making money, which is the theme I will expand in the next section.

Dancing with a Hustler – Disruption of the Friendship Ethos

I found that making money is not the only driving force for most Titans dancers. Dancing at Titans—in order to fit in with the culture—means to de-emphasize making money competitively. The value of friendship and longevity, or using Katey’s term “stability,” defines dancers and ultimately determines the kind of experience they have on the job. Kimberly, for example, was not dancing to stay in the culture. She was dancing to make money only.

Kimberly: I really kept to myself, did my job and went home. And I think that’s why a lot of dancers didn’t really like me because I wasn’t really there to socialize, I wasn’t there to make friends. I was there to do my job and when I got there all I thought of was money.
This value orientation stands in stark contrast to another key figure of Titans. A 2005 cohort dancer, and currently a solidly booked house girl, says the following about the goal of a night’s work:

**Katey:** If I make sixty bucks, it’s okay because I made three hundred last night and then I paid my bills with that and I got ahead. And yeah, maybe next time I’ll make more money, but at least I got to hang out with you guys and talk and have fun and try some new pole tricks and played on my computer.

Katey is involved with dancing for the social pleasure that it brings her interacting with her co-workers, in addition, and equally as important as the financial rewards of dancing. She is willing to accept a night making $60, rather than spending her time hustling and cajoling customers into buying dances.

This ethos is shared by a former dancer, Hazel. She says,

I’m like, ‘I got sixty dollars—I’m good.’ I’ll peace out right now /laugh/—I don’t really care. I’m not like money motivated at all, so, I’m like, I’d describe myself as the worst stripper ever. They’ll [customers] be like, ‘I’ll give you five dollars if you do this.’ And I’m like, ‘How about you give me one dollar and I’ll come put my boobs on your face /chuckle/.’ … I’m just going to go to five other people.

Hazel is more willing to perform numerous undemanding tricks for one dollar each than to perform more intensively involved tasks for the highest bidder.

According to Katey, Kimberly’s money drive conflicted with the culture at Titans which promoted equality, teamwork, and friendship.

**Katey:** It was a different stripper mentality. I mean, it definitely worked for her. It was hard to work with her because sometimes you felt like there’s her money, she made a thousand dollars, there’s the rest of us, you divide up—there’s two thousand dollars that was made that night out there—she made a thousand of it, there’s five other girls, we each made two hundred of it. You feel like, well why would she push you so much like, we’re supposed to be working together as a team, we’re not supposed to be working against each other. And I guess I had issues with that ’cause I wanted everybody to make money. Like, if I have a good night, I hope tomorrow you have a good night. Whereas I felt like every night she had a good night but at the expense of some of us. … That’s not working with everybody else, if she’s grabbing all the money, pissing all these customers off, and she just unloaded their pile of money onto her stage, I come through as the next girl, they’re already pissed. It’s hard to work with somebody like that. But there’s always two sides to it, you know, she was making lots of money, she was trying to be the best stripper that she could be. I understand all of that.

**AG:** Do you think she didn’t know that she was pissing everyone off?
Katey: I think she had to because I mean, it was no secret up there that people didn’t like to work with Kimberly.

I danced for several years at the club, and I was successful in having no significant interpersonal dancer conflicts at work. This harmonic streak suggests I may have a temperament for dealing with a variety of personalities. Yet, Kimberly tested my patience. No open confrontations ever came of it. I admit that sometimes I would “compete” with her, secretly, in dumb ways, like trying to sell more dances or raffles than her, which I could never accomplish because she was the best. She really was. She consistently made the most money—by far. She had lots of experience dancing at hustle clubs all over the state, so she knew how to work the customers. She is downright cunning, in my opinion. She was the best at everything related to dancing—pole work, floor work, “stage presence”—everything except making friends in the dressing room.

I discussed my issues with Kimberly in my interview with Katey, a dancer from my cohort who equals my length of experience working at Titans. We agreed that working with the boss’ wife was difficult, and share the hindsight perception of Kimberly’s hustling excellence.

Katey: We never really had anybody in the club like that again. And I honestly think Shep tries to steer away from that. I mean, I’ve heard him say, “My wife was hell to work with” because, he’s like, “She even broke some of the rules,” that, “Hey, you’re not allowed to require a tip” [rule] and she would be like [to private dance customers], “You could either tip before or after whichever you prefer.” ... When you say that to somebody, that’s like forcing a tip out of them saying “you have to tip me” or “when the dance is over its twenty dollars. I thought the dance was twenty dollars, I already paid. No, you have to pay me twenty dollars too.” Like forcing somebody, or “You’re buying another dance. But I don’t want another dance. It’s not a negotiation type deal, you’re buying another dance.” Like, that’s pushing Titans rules.

I asked a former dancer, one with seven years experience dancing mostly outside of Titans, what it was it like to work with Kimberly. Madeline sometimes travelled with Kimberly to other clubs.

Madeline: Kimberly?

AG: Um-hum.

Madeline: Great. She was an extremely great pole dancer. She was really mean though, I thought she was mean. But she was nice to me. She was another one that everybody seemed to hate, but
like we got along fine and she also took kind of took me under her wing in a sense, and it was like, ‘Hey, let me take you to these clubs’ and she was a hustler and she made so much stinkin’ money—and I wasn’t a hustler. I was like kind of … She was a hustler, she made a ton of money and she tried to show me how to do that. I was not good at that; that was hard.

**AG:** What do you mean?

**Madeline:** Ummm. I was not good at going up to men and just being like, “You’re going to give me X amount of dollars, you’re gonna come with me and we’re going to buy lap dances for the next hour and you’re going to tip me a ton of money, too.” I was too sweet for that. I was just happy to make a couple hundred bucks and that was good for me. I enjoyed my job—I didn’t do it for the money. I’ve never done it for the money. The money was—the money made me survive, but I actually enjoyed it [dancing]. So, she uh—I never idolized her, I mean, I looked at her like, ‘Oh okay, that’s Kimberly.’ She was cruel, she was mean to the girls, she would constantly be like, you know, ‘Your make-up looks like shit, or your hair looks bad, or you need to do this.’ But yet she wouldn’t wear an ounce of make-up or she wouldn’t do her hair. I think she was jealous of the girls. So I never looked up to her. I thought she was a good entertainer, I thought she was good at her job and she made a lot of money but—that was all for me.

Katey is not the only dancer to notice there is not much competition between the dancers, which may have implications for fostering friendship.

**Aspen:** We were all there to do our job and we all had different body types and so we knew that we were attracting different types of customers so it didn’t matter … I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that like a lot of the house girls were there [at Titans] on a regular basis and we knew each other pretty well, so there was a little bit of that camaraderie there versus other clubs where you have a lot of traveling people, you have higher stakes, bigger clubs you have more girls that you have to compete with, stuff like that.

**Emma:** I don’t think it’s a very competitive or petty atmosphere and I think, for the most part, the girls here are—we’re all on each other’s team—like, we all understand. A lot of people out there, that are coming here as customers, don’t respect us and don’t treat us all the time very nicely, so I think we understand we at least need to be nice to each other, you know? We’re kind of all we have here. So that’s how I feel. I know it differs to who you talk to, but I feel like I’m really good friends with the girls that I work with and part of me liking to work here is because I like the work atmosphere. I like the girls.

Some Titans workers look back and better understand what it may have been like from Kimberly’s perspective.

Roger, who used to be a deejay during the period that Kimberly worked, reflects on her style of dancing this way.

**Roger:** She was the type of dancer that she really wouldn’t socialize with the girls when we’re busy. Like she was here for one reason and one reason only, to make money. She danced the way you should dance. You know what I mean? Selling raffles, getting dances. So basically she was so busy, she didn’t have time to socialize with the girls. But the time she did socialize with the girls when we’re slower … I mean she had an attitude you know—like she could—like if she had a problem with somebody.
Shep says the following about working with his wife and having to be her boss.

In a work relationship, we’re going from equals to I’m her boss. So it’s tough trying to balance it, trying to keep her in check when she loses her temper. … I dealt with her being petty at times. Some of it was warranted, that people deliberately trying to get her fired would say things that happened that I knew first hand didn’t happen the way they said it happened. Other times there were things that weren’t warranted, where she walked around like she thought she was better just because she was dating the manager. So it was difficult. Working with family is difficult.

Discussing the case of Kimberly’s is important because it highlights the importance of “equality” and “friendship” among dancers, and is not meant to single her out as a “bad” dancer or person. In order to better understand this work culture, it is necessary to know that Kimberly’s close relationship to the boss affected how other dancers perceived her—especially in terms of her ability to bend the rules. Whether it was “true” or not that she could bend rules bears little to the issue I want to bring to light. That is, in a culture defined by adherence to rules, and where each dancer feels personal responsibility for maintaining the occupational culture as “not a hustle club,” the presence of a dancer who does not yield to their efforts at socialization is especially disruptive to their work order. As a dancer who has had considerable experience dancing in hustle clubs, the friendship existing between dancers at Titans may have seemed foreign to Kimberly and was certainly secondary to her stated reason for being there, which was “to make money.” Kimberly’s orientation toward maximizing her earnings represents a notable departure from what many other Titans’ dancers value from a day’s work, which will be summarized in the next section.

The Right Work Environment – Friendly, Comfortable

Nova has always relied on having another job while working at Titans. Although she gets along well with coworkers at her other job, she says there is something different about the Titans environment that allows for intimate bonding between dancers. She came back to Titans after an
eight month hiatus—at the time of this interview, she had been back to Titans for about two months. Previously she spent about three years as a continuous house girl. In the span that she was gone, many of her cohort of dancers had moved on from the club.

**AG:** [Earlier in this interview] you talked about how you were friends and would hang out with some of the other dancers and you thought we were all really nice and that doesn’t fit with, sometimes, what people think of strip clubs. Do you find this situation in other work environments?

**Nova:** I have—I only work places where I really get along with my coworkers, so for me that makes the job. The job I work at full-time as a manager, I get along with everyone. So this place is no different [in that respect] … This place is different in everyone is so open, we can talk about whatever we want. When you’re at another job, a lot of your communication is about how you need to be doing that job at the time. You get to talk about other personal stuff, but here it’s a more lax, comfortable environment where I feel you can become friends with people faster than at another job.

Licious echoes this perception of a “lax, comfortable” occupational culture at Titans.

When I asked her to compare this job with her previous job in food service, she said the dancing environment is “chill” and “laid back.” She had worked at Titans for a full year as a continuous house girl at the time of this interview.

**AG:** How would you compare the two jobs?

**Licious:** Definitely more laid back here. There, it was just stressful. And even though it was hectic there, like it’s hectic here, but like—I’m not in one spot for eight hours; I’m all over the place, so I don’t stare at the clock. It just makes things go faster. This is just way more laid back and like—if we’re not busy, it’s chill—you don’t have to do anything. You can sit here, you can go to sleep if you want. Just definitely more laid back, definitely. For sure. Most unique job—I didn’t know how good strippers had it [chuckle]. For real, I never knew that this is what you did. Wow! This is awesome! Like, what job do you know that you can order [delivery] food, sleep, do your homework, talk on the phone, run around naked, get dressed up, and make money?

If Titans were a hustle club, she would have no time to hang out and sleep; she would be competing with other dancers to hustle whatever customers were in the club—because to focus is to make money. If this were a Social club, she would be not only permitted, but also expected to hang out with club patrons. At Titans, she is forbidden from interacting with customers when she is not on stage. Although the Social club dancer might not make a lot of money from her “bar-mate” customers, her focus would be on cultivating relationships with them in order to keep them coming back to the club (Bradley 2009). At Titans, a major focus of the dancers is to cultivate
friendships with each other in lieu of hustling or getting close to customers. Licious makes the assumption that all clubs are like Titans when she says, “I didn’t know how good strippers had it.” It is unlikely she would find the same kind of “down time” perks in club not structured like Titans.

**Conclusion**

Both inside and outside the club, Titans dancers have complex interactions based on their status as strippers. Titans dancers are sensitive to their macro-level roles as dirty workers. They envision Titans as a “clean” club at a meso-level, and they work toward maintaining a “clean” imagine by socializing each other to adopt non-competitive “show” club practices. Inside the club, they build relationships which each other that provide emotional support and visibility. The gain of “closeness,” “comfort” or “acceptance.” among dancers potentially offsets financial losses, though not every Titan dancer is willing to become a “house” girl and may seek work elsewhere. Nevertheless, even house dancers in this relatively small rural club are able to achieve considerably higher earnings than they could obtain from in other kinds of (formal) service work. Many dancers chose to work as exotic dancers at this rural show club in spite of the ever-present threat of being found out. Intra-dancer friendships may contribute to their willingness to risk stigma from other parts of the social network. Family remains the least desirable known outsider for many dancers. Also problematic is the combination of stigmatized informal work with formal work. The entire work culture shares solidarity to some degree, and these relationships may strengthen over time. Though individual dancers may not be as close to staff or the owner as they are with each other, participation in Titans’ occupational culture is positive for most workers.
Chapter 6 : Conclusion

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss and interpret significant findings in relation to the study’s purpose and research questions. I explain this study’s contributions and limitations, as well as suggest possible directions for future research.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to fill interrelated micro-, meso-, and macro-level gaps in exotic dance literature by seeking answers to two questions:

(1) What occupational culture do rural exotic show club dancers share?

(2) How does the job of rural show club dancing influence dancers’ interactions with those outside and their relationships with those inside the club?

Using thick, rich descriptions (Creswell 2007) drawn from observations and ethnographic interviews, I have shown how show club structure (meso-level) and tightly-knit, conservative rural culture (macro-level) influence dancers’ interactions with those outside the club, and their relationships inside the club (micro-level).

Emergent Findings

“Show” Club Design Influences the Occupational Culture

The physical design of the club exemplifies its primary “gentlemen’s club” objective. This club solidly fits Bradley-Engen’s “show” type by prioritizing an “upscale” image of safety
and “classiness,” as well as by providing theatrical sexualized entertainment as opposed to outright physical gratification to its customers. Several structural factors inherent to “show” club design converged to create a cohesive occupational culture. Three of these factors especially promote equality in earning opportunities among the dancers. They are: (1) the orderly stage-appearance schedule for all dancers, (2) a prohibition of “hustling,” and (3) limited, controlled forms of allowable physical touch. The resultant structured equality, in turn, may facilitate the formation of strong intra-dancer friendships, by reducing the competitive drive usually present among dancers in other styles of club.

Integral to friendship formation is at least one additional aspect further qualifying Titans as a show club—disallowing customer-dancer interactions except through the purchase of private dances. If dancers were expected to mingle with customers between stage sets, they would not have an abundance of time to socialize with each other. Dancers’ ability to attract and retain “regulars,”—an important form of steady income—would be diminished by expecting dancers to mingle with customers for free, as occurs in social-style clubs where dancers and patrons spend time together as drinking mates.

However, the ability to earn extreme amounts of money through dancing (relative to levels of income offered by available jobs in the area) does not emerge as a priority to dancers. Many Titans dancers are satisfied with less income over all, and in unstable streams, ($60 one night, $300 the next night, or about $100 on average per night some weeks, $200 per night other weeks) in order to have time to attend to other matters of life while on the job, such as socialization, homework, personal entertainment, or catching up on sleep—during the clubs off-peak customer volume hours.
Slim Competition

Turnover from competition from other dancers is rare. Titans’ general lack of intra-dancer competition stands in contrast to what Bradley-Engen predicts of a show club. She has suggested that show clubs are usually very difficult for new dancers to enter, especially because of the high beauty standards and degree of technical skill required. Expectations of Titans dancers cannot be as high other show clubs might be given that it is not always easy to fill “the lineup” each night. This means beauty standards and skill levels at Titans are not so high as to prevent average looking (as opposed to hyper-feminized) women from gaining access to a job there. As Katey said, at the competitor club they can “wear flip-flops and whatever,” whereas at Titans they must always wear the typical stripper shoes (4-8’ heels), but these are not prohibitively expensive. Dancers are encouraged to do their hair, wear sexy outfits, and may benefit from learning advanced pole tricks, but also valued in a Titans’ dancer is her reliability and ability to get along with other dancers. Of course, women with hyper-feminized or super model looks are certainly welcomed and recruited by management, but they will not be retained if they have overly negative attitudes or create “too much drama” in the dressing room, which Francesca learned when she was suspended for a week for having a “bad attitude.”

The club management benefits from maintaining a satisfying work environment in order to retain its stable house dancers, in the context of a less densely populated area than would occur at clubs located in more metro areas. I have found that house dancers make up the bulk of Titans dancing populations. So, for women who would like to, dancing can become a stable, full-time informal job, with little competition. In fact, the management at Titans must cultivate and maintain friendship between staff and dancers in order to ensure that there will be enough dancers to fill any one shift. It is likely that sanctions of minor dancer misconduct are deployed in a gentle manner so that dancers will not become so upset that they no longer want to work there. In fact,
one of the most notable findings regarding this show club’s occupational culture was that it promotes equality among dancers through a detailed and well-enforced rule structure. The culture of equality may be linked to their experiences of “closeness,” “openness,” and “friendship.” When rules are not well-enforced and perceptions of inequality arise, dancers become agitated and less cohesive, suggesting that the balance between structure and agency in this culture is delicate. Particular agents can affect the culture in significant ways. The unwritten informality of the club rules allows some standards to mutate and shift over time, according to the tastes of particular dancers, while other rules remain fixed as defining elements of what it mean to work at Titans, from the dancers perspectives. “We are not a hustle club,” is one of those culturally defining features.

Knowing Outsiders Must Be Handled

Regarding dancers’ interactions with people exogenous to the club, most dancers strived to keep their stripping status anonymous. Not all dancers were able to achieve anonymity from those they wished. Upon having their anonymity breached, dancers identified tiers of people for whom they would least like to have know about their stripper status. At Titans, I have unwittingly danced for people close to me, such as my father’s friends, my uncle and his son, and a second-cousin. I’ve had numerous encounters with former high-school classmates outside the club who, through word of mouth, knew that I strip and came to check me out. I have also uncomfortably encountered, while on stage, co-workers from other jobs that I’ve concurrently held. I have dealt these knowing co-workers’ treating me differently while at our regular formal jobs. In this ethnography, I have documented similar experiences regarding anonymity for other rural exotic dancers.
Family, especially parents, emerged as the most severe form of a breach in anonymity. Dancers didn’t want their parents to have to worry about their physical or mental well-being; dancers didn’t want to be looked down upon by their parents; nor did they want their dancing status to shame their parents socially. These worries make sense given the dancers’ familiarity of the unfavorable stereotypes associated with their occupation. While asserting that their club isn’t like that usually pacified friends and some co-workers, dancers insisted that their families “wouldn’t understand” particularly because they are “very religious.” Not all dancers experienced hardship in revealing their dancer status to parents. One dancer frankly told her mother and she said “it wasn’t a big deal,” and another dancer’s father occasionally gives her a ride to work.

Interactions with known exogenous people with whom dancers will be required little further contact outside the club were the least serious breaches, i.e. former high school mates, or co-workers from foregone jobs. Being found out by co-workers from a current job, however, was certainly problematic for some dancers, including myself, and in at least one case required a dancer to threaten retaliation if she were harassed any further at her non-club occupation.

**We Don’t Judge**

Women who have faced hardship early in adulthood—perhaps not finishing high school or having troubles with drugs or abusive relationships—are not turned away from dancing at Titans. Partly, they are valued by the management because they are more easily convinced to work more days per week—they don’t have a good “excuse” for nights off, like student-dancers or other-job dancers do. But the management does not hire troubled dancers only to “exploit” their time, rather, the entire occupational culture endorses an ethos of caring and understanding for problems that they perceive other employers would be less willing to tolerate. They are willing to help each get through trying circumstances. Ordinarily, employers don’t actively seek
out recovering heroin addicts to join their ranks, and neither does Titans. However, when a woman who is “rough-around-the-edges” shows up to work, she is given a chance. The management understands that with support, these women can be some of the most loyal and hardest working “team members.”

Many, if not all, of the dancers at Titans can relate to “personal” problems that in other work environments stay hidden in order to create an aura of “professionalism.” But in a culture where personal and professional are immediately intertwined by the nature of the work—being naked in public—dancers at Titans tend to be less concerned with the presence of “emotional baggage” or other socially undesirable shortcomings. For women who come to club having suffered early life traumas, the club can be a place of healing. Strippers—who are aware that they are disdained or pitied by just about everyone who is not a dancer—tend to feel united with other dancers and to have less motivation to “judge” each other.

The scene of acceptance and healing is complex though. For some women, it can be a chance to learn how to assert boundaries—a healthy outcome—but learning to assert boundaries through avoiding the wandering hands of sometimes drunk and demanding men, is a questionable process. Similarly, gaining external affirmation as a means to support one’s positive body image—at the same time—exposes her to further potential injury. So, the lessons learned at club, as they are in life, are not “ideal” in the sense that they always come at the right time or without other costs. For example, Foxy describes her own regret with dancing, “Nobody that young should have that much money,” but concludes that she learned a lot of valuable lessons through dancing. The club is not a perfectly controlled system. Individual dancers respond to the pressures of being a dancer in different ways. Adaptation means something different to each of them, but one element of working together under these conditions emerges as an important to most of them—friendship with each other.
The value of support gained from working with other misfits is a resounding theme in the data. Over and over dancers mention the best part of the job is being able to spend time with each other. They also love the freedom that the environment gives them to explore boundaries. Especially in the dressing room, they venture to the edges of behavior that they know would not be accepted elsewhere—such as the freedom with each other’s bodies in a non-sexual, yet intimate way. Dancers seem to have been “socialized” to this non-sexual bodily comfort, by joining a group in which certain behaviors become normal, such as urinating in plain sight of others.

We’re Recognized as Individuals

The rural setting of the club limits the owner’s ability to keep a steady supply of dancers without some level of bargaining with them. Whereas a “show” club, as described by Bradley-Engen’s (2009) typology, would ordinarily have very discriminating hiring preferences based on the perceived looks and “stability” of potential dancers, at Titans there is more opportunity for women at the margin than there would be with an inexhaustible supply of women.

Further enhancing the working conditions for dancers in this rural show club is the staff and owner’s tendency to hold a paternalistic stance of protection toward dancers. Family-like and friendship bonds between staff and dancers resist serious violation of women. Violating customers are removed without debate, no matter how much lost revenue results. (If one man in a group of 10 is kicked out, the whole group may leave in protest.) In contrast, as reported by one staff member who worked as a bouncer in another club, sometimes unequivocal removal of violating men is not always enforced. He said he witnessed a dancer having been touched in a way that made her “freak out” in protest, but the owner didn’t allow the bouncer to remove that man for fear that all of his companions may decide to leave with him.
More Than The Money

Exotic dance is an informal work opportunity that allows women to make significantly more money than what they could make in the formal job opportunities available to them. Yet, maximization of earnings is not the only driving force constituting this occupational culture. At Titans, women enjoy the benefits of being physically safe and recognized as individuals. They appreciate working together “as a team,” and having downtime, rather than always having to engage in cutthroat competition.

Titans dancers make a clear distinction between their club and other clubs on the basis of the means by which they make money. “Hustle” club practices—coercion, competition—are anathema to Titans’ collective occupational values. Consequently, in my interviews one particular dancer is repeatedly mentioned as being disliked. The reason behind these ill feelings appears to be somewhat her individual temperament and her unequal position, but certainly her representation as “a hustler” impacts the relationships between the dancers and what they value as a group. The case of such an individual highlights what does not bring them together. At Titans, competition is not well received. Covert hustling is looked down on. Equality is valued. Kimberly did not act like an equal, and was not an equal due to her relationship status with the boss.

My Study in Relation to Previous Research

Two well-published exotic dance researchers, Danielle Egan and Katherine Frank, co-authored a critique on the existing feminist and sociological literature and they found that attention to the positionality of the researcher has been missing in much of the sociological literature on strip clubs, and that “attending to this issue would strengthen and deepen the research on exotic dance in significant ways” (Egan and Frank 2005, 300). By discussing my
work as an exotic dancer in my thesis, I helped answer this call to acknowledge researcher positionality, identity and experience.

Much of the literature on exotic dance has focused on dancer and customer interactions. The interactional strategies dancers use to make money from customers (Ronai and Ellis 1989), and customers’ motivations for interacting with dancers (Frank 2002; Frank 2005) are important contributions to the literature. Important, too, are examinations of women’s motivations for entering exotic dance (Boles and Garbin 1974b; Sweet and Tewksbury 2000) as well as studies on why they persist in exotic dance careers (Bradley-Engen 2009). This study reported on strip club interactions relatively unexplored, i.e. the work relationships between dancers. My study examined the work culture of a show club in a rural area, beginning to fill another gap in sociological literature.

**Limitations**

This study contributes significantly to two areas of sociological import, rural work and exotic dance literatures, but it is prudent to consider its limitations.

**Sample**

The first of these limitations involves the selection of dancers selected for this study. Though I interviewed most of the current dancers at the club, and thus well-represent the culture there, the previous dancers I selected were unavoidably less representative of their population—I interviewed six out of dozens of possible candidates. These six former dancers were better known to me than some of the other possible candidates, perhaps somewhat narrowing the range of
responses. However, I did select these six based on the former dancer’s ability to represent each cohort year and with a variety of lengths of service.

Further, it should be taken into account that dancers’ experiences with each other are limited to their interactions inside the club. Some dancers interact with each other outside the club, thus potentially contributing to their feelings of friendship. Similarly, the effects of being a show club dancer while dancers participate in other life domains—such as at other jobs, at home, at school, at recreation, etc.—has not been well-explored in existing research, and was not within the scope of the present study. For example, what is it like to balance a dance-work schedule with other-work schedules? That is, what is like for a woman to dance until 4 a.m. and be at class by 8 a.m. and for her to not be able to explain to anyone why she always looks so tired?

It is possible that my differing levels of personal affect for particular participants may have affected the findings reported. My longer history with “seasoned” members of the club may have made them feel more at ease to speak to me than “newer” dancers felt. The participants less familiar with me personally were nevertheless aware of my close connection to the boss and my extensive experience at the club. Therefore, they may have been inclined to divulge fewer or less negative aspects about their work experiences (though I did not get this impression).

Staff members may have been keenly aware of my close connection to the boss, as the information they revealed was focused about the injustices of their work experience, more so than their interactions with dancers. I have good reason to believe that the dancers were much more comfortable with me than any member of the staff, even though most of the staff members worked with me for many more years than some of my dancer interviewees.
**Reflex-ion**

I was surprised, at times, by how willing dancers were to share very intimate experiences with me as they told their life histories—especially by those with whom I spent much less time in the field. Some of them revealed to me stories of being raped, struggles with psychological illness, difficulties as recovering drug addicts, and more. I felt an increased closeness to many dancers as a result of our interviews together and simultaneously less good about my role as a researcher. They should not be the chew toys upon whom I cut my research teeth—they are my friends. Of course, I knew to expect conflicting feelings through my qualitative methods training, but I think one can never be fully prepared to encounter the mixture of emotions and loyalties that must be contemplated while in the field—the process of understanding comes even later and with no clear termination.

This study aimed for a nuanced representation of exotic dance—as a distinct form of sex work that varies not only by type of work, but also by club, its location, and its individual workers. By representing the values, beliefs and attitudes of dancers themselves, I recognize dancer agency and acknowledge that they have the best vantage in discerning their (often simultaneous) oppression and/or empowerment. Framing erotic labor as legitimate work and acknowledging sex worker agency—particularly among exotic dancers—does not mean that I wish to celebrate or romanticize sex for sale. All forms of sex work, including exotic dance, deserve sober analysis.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study and others like it show that exotic dance shares many characteristics with other kinds of women’s work which is so often marked by emotional labor. There are many
possible research directions that exotic dance scholars and rural sociologists may wish to pursue in light of this study. Better understanding the social environment in which exotic dancers operate is a rich area for future research. Replication in other clubs located in similar settings or with similar structures, i.e. a show club in a rural setting, would solidify the trustworthiness of this study. It would also be helpful to know if rural places more typically have one type of club than another. Where do heavily trafficked roadside clubs fit in Bradley-Engen’s typology? Research that illuminates how dancing in show clubs varies cross-culturally would be interesting because other national cultures may differ significantly from American notions of sexual morality and have different means of informal worker protections. In the U.S., our understanding of regional ruralities would benefit from studying clubs located in other parts of the country.

Work and friendship scholars may pursue the question of how friendship alliances might occur between workers in other jobs with similar structural dynamics or with equally complex, emotionally challenging labor. What other occupational structures facilitate worker’s socialization through comfortable break rooms, gyms, and time to work on personal projects, such as homework, reading, or exercise? Other kinds of workplaces may intentionally rely on coworker friendships in order to function, particularly in small, rural owner-operated business. Future research which explores the interconnectedness of social networks and rural work is needed.

**Conclusion**

A woman from any socioeconomic status, education level, and background can be found using exotic dance as a source of income, whether she lives in an urban or rural setting. For women who live in rural areas, the social pressure regarding her dancer status may be particularly strong coming from her family, friends, and those in her community. Living in a rural area and
working as an exotic dancer yields benefits and poses challenges that have yet to be explored. This ethnographic study begins to address some of these issues by investigating the nature of a rural “show” club environment and documenting the experiences of the dancers who work within it using their words.

In the rural area surrounding Titans, the strip club and strippers are highly visible. While dancers are much less likely to be put in compromising situations because of this visibility, they are also are much more likely to be found out for dancing at Titans than if they were working in an anonymous urban club. Being known as a stripper in rural places, where traditional, conservative family values are common, entails a greater risk to rural dancers, socially. But then again, the financial allure of making good money may be an acceptable tradeoff for them. The benefit of earnings, however, is not the only motivating force for working at Titans. Many women there enjoy the work, the lifestyle, and the company associated with their particular variety of show club dancing.

It may not be reasonable to expect exotic dance to completely cross from informal work sphere into a standard job, however the “show” club trend provides opportunity for better regulated and structured work. The tradeoff of formalizing exotic dance—requiring greater skill level, more conventionally attractive figures, and setting stricter work schedules—reduces work opportunity for women who have few alternative job options. In rural areas, these conditions might be particularly acute.

I hope this thesis will inform sociologists concerned about the nature and quality of work available to rural women. Additionally, I hope members of the adult entertainment industry will take seriously the possibility that well-structured clubs can create positive benefits for women in non-monetary forms. Dancers and their families, as well as people interested in work, friendship, informal and formal social orders, sexuality, and women’s issues can find enlightenment value in this thesis.
Appendix A

Notes about “The Rules” taken October 2008

| 50. Intercom: respond if so-in-act-in room |
| 51. Always ask about extending dances |
| 5. Tips while customer standing |
| - Customer standing over bar |
| - Leaving, holding w/ hand |
| - NOT in mouth |
| 6. Music |
| - No bitching to customers |
| - Don’t complain to D.J. if you didn’t pick it only |
| - It’s legitimate concern |
| - Be nice, be polite, be extra considerate |
| 7. Can’t leave front of stage to |
| cash bars, only raffles & dances |
| - Must be fully dressed |
| 8. Leaving club w/o bouncers |
| - Make sure! Not acceptable |
| - To follow out soon after another |
| - Girl leaves |
| - Kidnapping is a serious risk |
| - Bouncer will do lap around |
| - Building |
| - If you think you’ve been |
| follow, call and come back |
Appendix B

Titans Posted Rules 2011

MUST BE FOLLOWED

1. Ones must be cashed into doorman after every set

2. Change outfit after every set

3. Be at the top of steps to go on stage or waiting on ramp to go into bikini bar

4. Be down stairs for raffles or dances within 2 songs after your set

5. Be at top of steps waiting to go down for a hot seat not running out of dressing room

6. Be at work and ready 10min before your shift starts

7. When asked to come down for raffles must tell DJ ok over intercom so he knows you heard him

8. Everyone must participate in Hot Seat

9. DO NOT talk to bouncing staff unless you need them for an issue

10. Must keep one foot on stage

11. Nipples must be covered when taking tips

12. Music must be requested 3 songs before your set

13. Customers must be seated when you are taking money

Rules Will Be Enforced

Thank you

Management
Appendix C

Background Questionnaire

**DANCER SURVEY**

Code:_____

*Please fill in the blanks with words or numbers. Where there are boxes check the one(s) that best fits. If there is Y or N, please circle one of them to indicate yes or no.*

- How old were you when you started working at Titans? _____ years old
- What date did you start working at the End Zone? _____month _____ year
  (or season ______ if you can’t remember which month, but please don’t forget the year!)
- How old are you now? _____ years old
- How long have you been working at the End Zone? (yes, I’m asking in a different way)
  ____ week(s) _____ month(s) _____ year(s)
- Have you ever taken a break (longer than 2 weeks) from working at the End Zone? Y or N (circle one please)
  If yes, how long was your break from the End Zone?
  _____ weeks _____ month(s) _____ year(s) or ______semester(s)

*Why did you take a break? (check all that apply please)*
- [ ] I was concentrating on my school work.
- [ ] I was working at a different kind of job full time.
- [ ] I got burnt out and needed some time away from dancing.
- [ ] I got suspended from this club for a while.
- [ ] I relocated to a different town.
- [ ] My boyfriend didn’t like me dancing so I quit for him.
- [ ] My parents/family found out and I needed to lay low for a while.
- [ ] I was in a rehabilitation program.
- [ ] Other: ___________________________ (please write in)

- Have you ever danced at another strip club? If yes, what kind? (check all that apply)
  - [ ] Gowns only gentleman’s club(s)
  - [ ] Other show club(s)
  - [ ] Hustle club(s)
  - [ ] Hole in the wall club(s)  
    - Total number of other clubs: ______

- Do you have kids? Y or N

- What kind of place did you grow up? ________________ (rural, suburban, town, urban, etc.)

- Approximately how far do you travel to get to the club _____miles OR _____ min/hours

- I participate in community activities (like attend church or go to local festivals) where I live now.
  Y (a lot), Y (sometimes), Y (but not very often), or N (I’m too busy working)
• I usually my laptop to work. Y or N or N/A

• What’s your current level of formal schooling? (check one please)
  □ I did not complete high school.
  □ I am working on / have my GED.
  □ I graduated high school.
  □ I took some college credits, but haven’t continued.
  □ I am currently enrolled in college classes, pursuing a degree.
  □ I finished my associate’s degree.
  □ I finished my bachelor’s degree or more.

• How do you usually get to the club? (check one please)
  □ I drive myself in my car.
  □ I get a ride from a friend or a loved one.
  □ I carpool with other dancers and staff.
  □ I take a taxi.
  □ I use the free shuttle.

• Have you ever worked at another job while working at the club? (check all that apply)
  □ I used to work part time at another job while dancing.
  □ I used to work full time at another job while dancing.
  □ I currently work part time at another job while dancing.
  □ I currently work full time at another job while dancing.
  □ I’m working on a creative project while dancing.
  □ I’m dancing so that I can party in my free time, screw working elsewhere!
  □ I’m working on something else: _____________________________.

• My romantic partner is …. (check all that apply)
  □ Long-term (1+ years).
  □ Short-term (<1 year).
  □ My fiancé.
  □ My spouse.
  □ My flavor of the week.
  □ I don’t have a partner.

• My romantic partner knows I dance. Y or N
  If no, why not? ____________________________ (write in whatever you think)
  Do you plan to tell him or her? Y or N

• My parents/family knows I dance. Y or N
  If no, why not? ____________________________ (write in whatever you think)

• My other employer knows I dance. Y or N or “does not apply”
  If no, why not? ____________________________ (write in whatever you think)

THANK YOU!
Appendix D

IRB Consent Form

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: "A Phenomenological Study of a Rural Strip Club"

Principal Investigator: April Gunsallus, 301 Armsby Bldg., University Park, PA 16802. 814-360-9618, alg978@psu.edu
Advisor: Carolyn Sachs, 111C Armsby Bldg., University Park, PA 16802. 814-863-8641, csachs@psu.edu

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to understand how exotic dancers at a show club in rural Pennsylvania experience their jobs as dancers. Interviews will be conducted either face-to-face or over the telephone with current or former dancers.

Procedures to be Followed: As a participant, you will be asked questions regarding your perceptions of working at the club and what it is like to be an exotic dancer. As a participant you may be contacted to clarify or provide additional information after the initial interview. In addition to the interview, the primary investigator (PI) may ask your permission to observe you at work or after work.

Duration: Interviews will average sixty to ninety minutes.

Statement of Confidentiality: The information you provide will be kept confidential, only the PI (April L. Gunsallus) will know your identity. Therefore your name will not be linked to your responses; interviews will be audio-recorded with your permission; and all information that could identify you will be removed from the written transcripts. The tape recordings will be stored in a locked drawer in the office of the project director, April Gunsallus. Only the Principle Investigator will have access to these recordings. The audio recordings will be destroyed after the project’s completion (August 2012).

Right to Ask Questions: Participants have the right to ask questions at any time. Please contact April L. Gunsallus at 814-360-9618 with any questions, complaints or concerns about this research.

Voluntary Participation: Your decision to be in this research is voluntary and if you participate there is no compensation. You can choose to decline answering any questions you do not want to answer, and you can choose to end the interview at anytime. To participate you must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study. Your participation is voluntary and declining to participate in this study will have no impact on you or your job. You will be given a copy of this form for your records. Implied consent will be used in this study, therefore completion of this interview signifies you are willing to participate in this research.
### Appendix E

**First Cycle Coding Scheme**

#### Node Structure

**Titan Project**  
**First Cycle**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hierarchical Name</th>
<th>Nickname</th>
<th>Aggregate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nodes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nodes\Angry about Stigma</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
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Prologue - My Multiple Alternative Work Identities

My membership in Titans’ culture has always been complicated by my hybrid occupational identities; I have almost always held another occupational status while I was a dancer. At the time of this study, I was a 31 year old graduate student. When I first started dancing, I was 25 years old and working a part-time job as a newspaper copy editor. Editing was well-suited for moonlighting as a dancer because of its relatively late-night working hours—a daily paper goes to press around midnight, so my sleep schedule was not much affected by mixing the two jobs. After a few months, I was still unable to find full-time work, so I decided to rejoin the military as a reservist, in addition to editing. That job was not good for moonlighting as a dancer, primarily due to its schedule.25 Drilling on the weekend meant I missed high-earnings shifts at the club, plus I had to drive myself a few hours to my base in order to drill, and—most difficult of all—I had to be “situationally aware” at 0700 hours on drill weekends.26 I persisted less than a year in the reserves because not only did it wreck my sleep schedule, the reservist work was also much less satisfying than the exciting things I had done while in active duty. I was ready to put military service behind me.

Although I enjoyed copy editing, after two years, there still were no full-time positions available there. So I replaced my editing job to work as a customer service agent for one of the few employers in the area who offer part-time employee benefits. Although I thought it would be worth it in order to have an IRA and health insurance, I found out that the work was much less

25 At this point I was juggling six credits of classes, two jobs, and the reserves. My non-dancing friends had to schedule time well in advance in order to be able to see me. When they did see me, I was either so physically sore or sleep-deprived that they would bring to my attention how they pitied me. I worked 14 and 15 day stints with no days off. I’d take one day to rest, and then I’d start another stint. Some of those days I worked 12 hours or more because I’d go from one job to the other. Debt is a powerful motivator, but I didn’t want to quit my lower-wage jobs because they provided cover.

26 “Situational awareness” is military-speak for being ready for anything and everything by anticipating it, which is hard to do under sleep-deprived conditions.
than satisfying. I answered phones, massaged egos and corrected paperwork for about a year and a half—truly despising every minute of it—when it occurred to me that I didn’t have to have two jobs, which led to me simply quit formal work altogether and live on my informal dancing earnings. I lost my cover, but I was happy to leave the office.

After six months of only dancing, I took on another part-time job—but I couldn’t bring myself to quit dancing. I had been a dancer longer than I had been a student, an officer, or any other kind of worker. Even though I had the occasional difficult night working there, the club was stable, I knew what I was doing, and I liked my co-workers. The job simply fit my life at that time. Stripping was no longer about financial survival, as it had been when I first started dancing.

I liked the new formal job. It was a physically dirty blue-collar job, but it held prestige—I was taking care of multimillion dollar aircraft. I pumped jet fuel at an airport and helped park and move airplanes on the ground, among other airport operations. Dancing and pumping flammable liquids at the same time wouldn’t have been problematic necessarily, except, at my part-time job, I worked with an all-male crew from whom I wanted to keep my dancerhood secret. It was already difficult enough working as the only female there, because—as they had explained to me—they had previous experience with female employees and “none of them ever made it more than a month.” Because the job requires significant on-the-job training, they were reluctant to invest their time in me. They didn’t believe someone as small as me could physically do their masculine job (but I could, as I eventually proved to them). Simply put, they just didn’t want me around.

I don’t know exactly how they figured it out, but I got a text from one of them asking if it was true that I was an exotic dancer. I responded that I was, as opposed to evading the issue, because I thought I would gain more respect by being honest and direct, than by trying to deny it.

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27 I spent only about a half a year without another job. I was aware of the damage a “gap” in my formal resume could create, so I was motivated to minimize my time relying solely on informal work.
28 I didn’t just “like” my co-workers at the club. I felt like we were sisters and brothers.
and simply be found out later when one of them, or their friends, or their brothers came to see me at the club. Once they learned that I was a dancer, they opened the flood gates on their topics of discussion in our break area. Only then did I realize they had censored their behavior when I first started working there. Once my stripper status emerged, it was as if they thought I couldn’t possibly mind hearing them converse about their grand sexual exploits when they were younger men. Or, perhaps their behavior changed because I became “one of the guys” after proving that I could indeed fuel all the airplanes at the airport, not only the little ones, as they had initially expected. I didn’t object about their horrifically unprofessional speech around me because I couldn’t play it both ways; I couldn’t smile and try to get along, and then run and tell behind their backs. I didn’t want to stand up to them myself, and I didn’t want to get anyone in trouble—the job wasn’t easily done alone (for anyone, not just me), and if I wanted them to volunteer to go with me to fuel a plane, I needed them to like me. That’s also why I didn’t say anything when I found a bunch of porn magazines in our shared-gender bathroom—the only bathroom. Nor did I say anything when a few of them decided to come up to the club “to see me.” How could I have objected about any of that to the all-male management without further exposing myself, so to speak. Besides, the club is a public place. They had a right to be there whether I liked it or not.

Sometimes I wonder if I should have spoken up more. Maybe “playing it cool” only fanned the flames. Maybe the only way to fight fire is with fire. Yet, I feel that it is one thing to be a spit-fire sassy bitch who holds her ground against people who will have no overarching or lasting effect on her life; and it is quite another to have to live and work around the same group of people who will never go away because they are a part of your community. For one minor example, I recently attended my county’s fair and had to avoid making prolonged eye-contact.

29 I looked at the magazines, of course, and I don’t know if it was coincidence or if they intentionally planted it—because I didn’t ask them—but a Titans dancer was featured in one of the issues. I thought to myself, “Wow, I didn’t know she made it into this magazine,” although I knew that she was travelling the “circuit” and had intentions of making it big in the industry. I was so proud of her when I saw her photo shoot, and I generally always have been. She is driven and excels at what she does, even if it’s “only” looking impossibly beautiful. She is represented in my data set.
with one of my previous airport co-workers as we passed each other on a gravel path. I think he was probably as relieved as I was that we didn’t have to talk to each other. I left the airport job when I entered graduate school.

I also have experiences of being “found out” while at the club—like some of the participants in this study—so I can relate to how that feels. I wrote to myself in my journal the night one of my father’s friends came into the club. My journal missive was relatively short. I complained about him because he insensitively entered my turf—I knew that he knew I worked at Titans through my association with his daughter outside the club. I wrote that I felt it was so inconsiderate for him to come to the club and “interrupt my money,” as I would not go on stage while he was there. I’m surprised by my journal entry’s focus on turf and money, rather than deep feelings. Perhaps there was no need to record in writing the feeling vividly stored in my head. I can still remember the feeling of being caught, unaware, spinning around the pole and seeing his face, he was sitting there, smugly. It was horrific. The damage had already been done, so I finished dancing the song and went upstairs to stew.
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