

Invited Essay

Exploring the Motivations and Fantasies of Strip Club Customers in Relation to Legal Regulations¹

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Strip clubs are a popular form of adult entertainment in the contemporary United States. Strip clubs are also highly embattled entertainment venues, based on assumptions about their associations with prostitution, drug use, and “negative secondary effects” in surrounding areas, such as increased crime rates and decreased property values. Based on participant observation in five strip clubs in one city and on qualitative interviews with 30 regular male customers of those clubs, this essay seeks to challenge assumptions about the kinds of encounters sought in and purchased in such venues. Instead of visiting strip clubs out of a desire to purchase sexual release with the dancers, I found that the regular male customers were seeking an atmosphere different from both work and home, personal and sexual acceptance from women and the pleasure of a sexualized encounter without the pressures of physical performance, and a form of leisure that offered a relative degree of “safety” as well as “excitement.” Further, the men’s own fantasies of identity, their understandings of marriage, and their commitment to a particular kind of monogamy influenced their choice of entertainment and the pleasure that they took in their encounters with the dancers. The essay discusses these motivations and their relational aspects and assesses strip club regulation in light of these observations and findings.

KEY WORDS: sex; masculinity; sex industry; strip clubs; consumption.

INTRODUCTION

Strip clubs catering specifically to heterosexual men are currently a very popular form of entertainment in the United States. The number of major strip clubs nearly doubled between 1987 and 1992, and by 1997 there were around 3000 clubs nationally. The industry is estimated to be a 15 billion dollar business, with the annual revenues of strip clubs ranging from \$500,000 to over 5 million (Hanna, 2005; Schlosser, 1997). Strip clubs range in type from neighborhood bars to high-end entertainment complexes known as gentleman’s clubs, and may offer an array of services inside—stage dancing, table dancing, lap dancing, extended conversational opportunities with dancers, food and beverages, liquor, and televised sports

events. Upper-tier gentleman’s clubs may also provide conference rooms or VIP rooms to draw a professional or business crowd; many of these clubs also are marketed to middle class customers as “classy” venues featuring refined “entertainers.”

Despite their popularity and ubiquitousness, strip clubs are also a highly embattled form of entertainment, currently the subject of intense public scrutiny, debate, and regulation. The opposition to strip clubs (and other forms of sex work or adult businesses) is often fairly organized and groups such as the National Family Legal Foundation draw on discourses of public and private morality to bolster their attacks against such establishments (Hanna, 1998a). Though exotic dance has minimal protections as a form of expressive conduct, there has been a tendency in both the upper and lower courts to allow local municipalities to enact restrictive zoning regulations based on often unsupportable claims that strip clubs pose public health risks, encourage prostitution, are associated with drug use, and lead to adverse secondary effects in areas where they are located, such as increased crime and decreased property values in surrounding areas (Land,

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Williams, Ezell, Paul, & Linz, 2004; Paul, Linz, & Shafer, 2001). Some extreme conservatives have also suggested that strip clubs lead to increases in rape and domestic violence in the communities where they are located, again despite a lack of evidence (Snider, 2003); others pose concerns about the dissolution of “the family” or harm caused to minors as a result of sexualized commodification.

As zoning regulations are often designed and implemented to eradicate nude or topless dancing in communities (Baldas, 1998) and tend to be based on fears of economic or moral blight rather than on research into whether or not the clubs actually cause social problems and what those problems are, regulatory attempts may produce unintended or even humorous results. Zoning laws instated in New York City in 1995, for example, forced many sexually oriented establishments to either relocate or adapt their operations such that they complied with relatively extreme ordinances. Hanna (1998b) notes that one of the new requirements under these ordinances, that sexual entertainment and materials make up only 40 percent of the businesses, meant that as adult establishments tried to avoid being regulated out of existence they ended up with “G-rated videos on one side of the store, XXX-rated ones on the other; pool tables and dart boards replacing table-dancing tables” (Hanna, 1998b, p. 9). One strip club also began to allow minors to enter with parental supervision in order to avoid the designation of “adult” entertainment—one can easily imagine the kind of response that received. An ordinance passed in 2001 in Boise, Idaho, banned public nudity except in instances where it had “serious artistic merit”; clearly an attempt to crack down on bodily display in strip clubs without also censoring art classes, plays, or other kinds of performances. With a spark of creativity that must have been maddening to the City Council who supported the ordinance, a local strip club allowed dancers to forgo their g-strings and pasties on “Art Club nights,” where customers could purchase art materials and practice nude figure sketching.⁴ Strippers attempted to use a loophole in a public decency ordinance in Seminole County, Florida, that banned nudity except in “theatrical performances” by performing scenes from *MacBeth* without their g-strings and pasties. Commissioners later closed the loophole by banning all nudity in establishments that sold alcohol.

Such regulations are more disturbing than amusing, often having devastating consequences for the women (and men) who support themselves and their families by

working in the clubs, and posing serious First Amendment questions as well. Over the past several years Hanna has testified as an expert witness in First Amendment cases related to strip clubs in over eighty court cases in states like Nevada, Tennessee, Florida, Ohio, Virginia, California, Michigan, and Washington. She writes that she has watched the courts and legislatures “impose restrictions on all aspects of exotic dance, including distance from the audience, degree of nudity, self-touching or touching of a spectator, lighting, types of gesture and movement, whether alcohol may be served, and the proximity of clubs to schools and residences” (1998b, p. 8), as well as on hours of operation for the clubs and on requisite licensing of the dancers. A 2000 Supreme Court case addressing the issue, *Erie, PA, et al. v. Pap’s A.M., et al.*, upheld the constitutional validity of such regulation despite the often ambiguous and contradictory evidence for these kinds of negative primary and secondary effects, and Justices Scalia and Thomas argued that municipalities had the right to regulate the conduct of their residents through restrictive legislation regardless of whether or not this impinged on free expression.

Now, most of the ordinances drafted by local communities, as well as the Justices’ decisions in the above case and others, seem to be based on conjectures about just what the men (and women) are up to when they enter a strip club. There is endless speculation about drugs, prostitution, and crime—by customers, lawmakers, and people who have never even entered a strip club. Yet my experiences as an ethnographer of American strip clubs did not confirm the worst of these fears. While these activities surface at times, in often-scandalous ways—as they do in many industries—I came away from my research with a belief that most of the customers were in search of something completely different through their interactions, especially the regular customers of these kinds of clubs.

In my recent ethnography of no-contact strip clubs in the United States (Frank, 2002a), I discussed customer motivations for visiting strip clubs and the experiences they purchased inside these venues. In this particular research, I was specifically interested in exploring the personal and cultural fantasies underlying visits to strip clubs for certain groups of heterosexual men. My primary argument in this ethnography and in related publications has been that the customers’ understandings of their visits to the clubs are intertwined with cultural discourses about masculinity, sexuality, and consumption, but also that their visits become meaningful and desirable in relation to their everyday lives and relationships and their own personal and emotional experiences of gender and

⁴MSNBC, February 17, 2005.

sexuality. In this essay, I explore some of the customers' motivations in relation to the assumptions underlying strip club regulation, and suggest that perhaps some of these efforts at social control are misdirected.

A few clarifications are necessary. In the clubs I studied, strippers are generally *not* selling sex to their customers although they are indeed selling *sexualized* and gendered services (about which I will go into more detail below). Second, I also need to point out that the focus in my research was on regulars—those male customers who visit strip clubs *often enough to consider this a significant personal practice*. For these customers, visits to strip clubs were part of a meaningful and desirable repertoire of sexual and/or leisure practices, and were a form of consumption that was integrated with their other activities, pursuits, and relationships. These were not men who just happened to wander in off the street wondering what a strip club looked like inside or men who accompanied friends or business acquaintances for a bachelor party or other event; nor were they men who were dissatisfied with the services offered inside—they paid repeatedly, and usually quite highly, for those services. This is a significant distinction that I return to quite frequently. Many dancers make the majority of their income from regulars, not from incidental customers.

My decision to focus on the male customers of the clubs rather than the women who dance in them was motivated by both political and theoretical concerns. Upon hearing I have conducted research in strip clubs, people often ask me: “Why do the *women* do it?” In fact, this was my initial question as well. After all, nearly all the literature I could find on strip clubs, both academic and popular, dealt with the mythologies that surrounded the dancers: What kind of “personality” does a woman need to have in order to become an exotic dancer? How many dancers have been sexually abused or use drugs or alcohol to “make the work bearable”? How many dancers have dysfunctional relationships because of breaching the taboos on appearing naked in public and on mixing money and sexualized encounters? These questions are still being asked.

Yet, assumptions about the nature of sex work and sex workers (such as the belief that a woman would have to be damaged in some way to choose to work in the industry), along with the power differentials that often exist between researchers and their subjects in terms of gender, educational levels, economic resources, and cultural capital, influence not only the questions that are asked, but also *who* is studied, in what manner, and how the findings are represented. This is not to deny that some dancers have been sexually abused, may use drugs or

alcohol or have difficulty forming intimate relationships—just as individuals working in other occupations do. Rather, it is to point out that the kinds of information that are sought by researchers and the questions we ask are in and of themselves political and based on cultural assumptions. In this case, the behavior of the dancers has been repeatedly interrogated by social scientists (often as a form of pathology or deviance) while the actions of the customers who support the industry have often been normalized or ignored until more recently. At the same time, lawmakers and activists often make assumptions about the reasons behind men's use of the sex industry and about the effects of adult entertainment on relationships and communities. In this research, I wanted to interrogate the behavior of the male customers of strip clubs as a modern form of voyeuristic, gendered leisure practice, rather than unproblematically taking it to be an expression of some pre-existing, natural male sexuality, and to question assumptions about the kinds of interactions the men were seeking from the dancers.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

The data for this particular study were gathered through participant observation and through a series of multiple, in-depth interviews with 30 male customers of strip clubs in a large Southern city, which I refer to as “Laurelton.” As a participant observer in Laurelton, I selected and worked at five different strip clubs intermittently over a period of fourteen months as an entertainer. I selected a range of sites, from the most prestigious clubs in the city to lower tier bars. At each of the selected clubs, I went through the application, audition, and training process as would any new entertainer and worked a variety of shifts to gain access to a range of customers, employees, and experiences. After being hired I was forthcoming with my managers and co-workers about my research when asked. While some managers and other dancers showed an interest in my project, offering insights and suggesting interviewees, others seemed to barely take note of my existence, either as a dancer or a researcher. In addition to my research in Laurelton, I worked off and on for about six years as an entertainer in an upscale club in the Midwest. This was not an official field site, but my experiences there both before and after my employment in Laurelton inform my interpretations and analysis. Over the years, I have also observed in strip clubs around the country and continued to interview dancers, customers, and other individuals involved with the industry.

As an ethnographic research method, participant observation has a long history in anthropology and other

fields, and there is an expansive literature reflecting on the benefits and limitations of the method, interpreting findings, and understanding the complex interactions between researchers and the communities they study. Prus (1996) argued that participant-observation affords researchers “with invaluable vantage points” for appreciating the life-worlds of others, and in this situation, engaging in participant observation meant that I had the opportunity to interact continually with a variety of male customers in the actual setting that I was studying. Interactions between dancers and their customers are semi-private; the noise of the club and the physical proximity of the participants are such that their conversations would not be accessible to a mere observer. In this respect, working as a dancer and recording my own interactions was essential. As an employee, I had access to the conference rooms, VIP rooms, and the private, backstage areas of the clubs. I was also subject to the same rules, procedures, and tip-outs as other dancers, which meant that I needed to quickly figure out how to be successful at the job. Being involved in multiple interactions in the clubs with customers, dancers, and other employees gave me insight into the context and meaning of customer behaviors and fantasies. Though recognizing me as a researcher might have led some individuals to change their behavior or monitor their responses to my questions, I was also involved in transactions in Laurelton where I was seen as only a dancer (situations where the customer did not want any conversation or did not believe I was a researcher, or where I did not have time to reveal this information for one reason or another).

While striptease audiences in the past may have been engaged primarily by the dancers on the main stage (Salutin, 1971), contemporary strip clubs often offer a more individualized experience for their customers, with dancers circulating amongst the crowd between their sets. Each selected venue in Laurelton offered stage performances by the dancers, along with the opportunity for customers to purchase “private” table dances. Table dances were offered to the customers at their seats, on a raised platform or table, or while standing on the ground between the man’s knees. These private dances involved a more individualized interaction between the dancers and their customers, but although a dancer could disrobe completely and place her hands on the customers’ shoulders, other forms of bodily contact were prohibited and these rules were enforced by club employees. Dancers were also required to keep at least one foot of space between themselves and the customers during dances. Customers were not allowed to touch the dancers, or to touch or expose their own genitals. These rules were rarely openly transgressed, and when they were, the

customer was usually asked to leave the club.⁵ As the dancers circulated amongst the customers to sell table dances, the individualized interactions and conversations that took place became an important part of the overall experience. There are clubs in the US and elsewhere that offer lap dancing—which involves varying amounts of contact between the dancer and the patron and can lead to sexual release for the customer, who may even wear a condom underneath his clothes. For the purposes of this research, however, lap dancing is considered a different form of entertainment because of the contact involved and the meaning of such an encounter for the customers. The regulars themselves claimed to consider lap-dancing a different form of entertainment—there were a few topless clubs in Laurelton, for example, that did not serve alcohol or allow full nudity but permitted lap dancing; however, these served a different customer base. Rules and regulations may vary by geographical region, community, and even from club to club.

In addition to conducting extensive participant observation, I collected qualitative interview data from 30 regulars. Except for two men who were also employees, all the interviewees were customers of the strip clubs I worked in. While working in Laurelton, I spoke with hundreds of male customers about my research and almost always approached those customers as potential interviewees. I was forthcoming about my research purposes whenever possible and provided the customers with my real name (in addition to my stage name) and information about how to contact me for an interview. Many men declined to do formal interviews but commented on my research, telling me their reasons for visiting the clubs and discussing their opinions about adult entertainment, commodification, masculinity, and sexuality. The taped interview sessions with the official interviewees were conducted at their workplaces or at restaurants or coffee shops. Interviews usually lasted from two to four hours, with 2 or 3 follow-up interviews several weeks later. The interviews were open-ended and many of my questions aimed at eliciting extended narratives about their experiences in the clubs.

⁵There were some ways that dancers and customers made contact that bordered on breaking the law or the club rules but that they were not reprimanded for if the contact was consensual and quick. A dancer might lean in towards the customer during her table dance, for example, momentarily leaving less than 12 inches between them. She might touch his legs or shoulders during a dance, or let her hair graze his lap. Customers might sometimes be given a hug while the dancers were clothed, a thank-you peck on the cheek after a tip or a dance, or be allowed to lay a hand on a dancer’s leg while she sat next to him (again, clothed). Dancers might also quickly run their hands over their own breasts during a table dance (though would be reprimanded if this happened onstage in most clubs, as it was against the law in Laurelton).

The interviewees ranged in age from 28 to 57. All situated themselves as heterosexual, as somewhere in the middle class, and as having at least some college education. Twenty-seven were White Americans, two were African-Americans, and one was a White British citizen who frequently traveled to the US on business. Men who interviewed, of course, differed from other customers (e.g., by placing more value on higher education or having the free time, privacy, and interest to participate). Given that there were too many customers in the clubs for me to approach every one every night, my sample is somewhat biased in favor of men who chose to interact with me. However, my employment brought me into contact with hundreds of men on each shift and the interviewees did not strike me as substantively different from these other customers. Also, as customers and their desires were one of the main topics of conversation among dancers in the dressing rooms, I can be reasonably certain that my customers and these interviewees were not unique. A distinction should be made between regulars of particular strip clubs and regulars of particular dancers. Although such a distinction is not absolute, there are some customers who tend to return to the same club or clubs repeatedly, regardless of which dancers are available to interact with, while others consider themselves loyal to a particular dancer (or dancers) and may even begin frequenting a different venue if she decides to change workplaces. Both of these kinds of regulars are represented in my research.

My methodology presented several unique opportunities as well as certain limitations. First, because the men I interviewed were *regular* customers of the clubs, I often had the chance to interact with them in multiple ways and on a variety of occasions—as both a dancer and a researcher, before and after the interviews. Second, whether men visit strip clubs in groups or alone influences both the conversation and the physical dynamics of the interaction. Because I could never interview an entire group of men at once (and I could never recreate the club setting and interpersonal dynamic), I had to observe the interactions of men in groups and interview them singly. Because their personal narrative accounts often differed from the group interactions that I observed while working, both of these methodologies were valuable. (For example, men in groups were much more likely to speak in demeaning ways about a dancer's body but were respectful in individual interaction. Also, as many group occasions were bachelor parties, men in groups often spoke detrimentally about marriage and relationships with women. Singly, however, these same men often professed love for their wives and a great deal of satisfaction with their outside intimate lives. Though neither of these

interactions should be taken as more *authentic* than the other, the contrast is significant.)

Because I was studying educated, middle-class men, I was often interviewing from an inferior position in terms of gender, age, and resources as well as from a socially stigmatized position, and this was something that many of the interviewees were aware of and commented upon. The fact that I was a woman may have influenced interactions with the male interviewees, and the men might have interacted differently with a male interviewer. However, it is important to remember that I was involved in interactions with each of the interviewees before our formal interviews and that I was perceived by them as a dancer as well as a researcher. Many of the men made comments like, “I can tell you this because you're a dancer,” and claimed they could be more honest with someone who understood the interactions in the clubs and for whom they did not need to “censor” their beliefs or desires. Given that the interviewees also often expressed a difficulty in discussing personal issues with other men, their conversations with a male interviewer may not have been more truthful or authentic. Further, although it can certainly be argued that the interviewees and other customers were reluctant to tell me the whole truth about their motivations and desires in our conversations—in fact, it would have been impossible for them to do so if one accepts the possibility of unconscious motivation—I can say with confidence that I do know what men were willing to *pay for* night after night.

CUSTOMER MOTIVATION

So what were the customers interested in purchasing? And how might an understanding of customer motivation help us think about regulating strip clubs?

Although it is often assumed that men visit all of the different venues of the sex industry seeking physical contact and actual sexual release with women, this assumption is faulty. In this particular case, not one man I interviewed said he went to the clubs specifically for sexual release, even in the form of masturbation at a later time. Most men, and especially the regulars, realized that sexual activity was available in other venues of the industry and were explicit about their knowledge of this fact. The Laurelton sex industry, like that found in many metropolitan areas, offered a full menu of sexual goods and services from which to choose, including full service prostitution, erotic massage, and venues for interaction with masturbation. One-time or infrequent visitors were more likely to assume or hope that sexual release would be available in strip clubs.

Instead, regulars claimed that they went to the clubs to “relax.” By this, the men actually meant several different things: strip clubs provided an atmosphere different from both work and home, allowed them the opportunity for both personal and sexual acceptance from women and the pleasure of a sexualized encounter without the pressures of physical performance, and offered a relative degree of “safety” as well as “excitement.” In the following section, I discuss each of these motivations briefly.⁶ Then, I explore the relational aspects of the men’s visits, as the men’s own fantasies of identity, and their understandings of marriage and monogamy, also influenced their choice of entertainment and the pleasure that they took in their encounters with the dancers. Finally, I return to the idea of regulation in light of these observations and findings.

Masculine Space

Strip clubs provide an atmosphere different from work and home in part because they provide an environment where men can engage in traditionally masculine activities and forms of consumption often frowned upon in these other spheres—cigar smoking, drinking, and even being “rowdy,” vulgar or aggressive. But part of the reason this distinctiveness was experienced as *relaxing* was related to the kinds of relationships that could be developed with women in the clubs. Despite the fact that the nudity becomes commonplace to regulars, it is still significant that the clubs are a place where many everyday expectations are inverted; for example, women are undressed in a public space and tend to initiate sexualized interactions rather than the men, sometimes quite aggressively, and sexualized relationships are *openly* facilitated through economic exchange (rather than, as the customers pointed out, the many covert ways that this happens in everyday life). For these customers, everyday relationships with women were often seen as a source of pressure and expectations. Many men I spoke with described relations between the sexes in the U.S. as being “strained,” “confused,” or “tense.” Over half the interviewees specifically appreciated having an escape from the rules of conduct and the social games involved when interacting with other women in an unregulated setting.

Interactions with women in the workplace were also often felt to be constraining. One man pointed out that he felt nervous about complimenting women at work for fear that they would accuse him of sexual harassment. Another

said that club visits “let frustration out”: “With all of this sexual harassment stuff going around these days, men need somewhere to go where they can act like they want.” In the clubs, another interviewee claimed, “everybody knows what the rules are.” There are other spaces, then, where the men do not understand exactly what is going to “get them into trouble.” Some men explicitly stated a desire to interact with women who were not “feminist,” and who still wanted to relate to men in more “traditional” ways. Others said that men had to continually “be on guard” against offending women. Though I was sometimes disturbed by what I interpreted as anti-feminism in some of the men’s talk, I found it significant that these men experienced their visits (and also, in part, *justified* them) within a framework of confusion and frustration about the meaning of masculinity and the nature of male-female relationships rather than simply one of privilege or domination. The rapid increase in the number of strip clubs across the US in the mid-1980s, after all, coincided with an increase of women into the workforce and more attention paid to issues of sexual harassment, date rape, and the condemnation of the sex industry. While this is not a case of simple cause and effect, such developments certainly affect the ways that the men’s visits to the clubs are spoken about and understood.

Personal and Sexual Acceptance

Another motivation that brought the regulars to the clubs was a search for personal and sexual acceptance. One of the things that surprised me when I first began working in strip clubs was the emphasis the customers placed on conversation with the dancers and the pleasure they derived from it. Certainly, such a claim could be seen as a way to defray guilt about sexualized consumption. However, as I was a participant in thousands of these transactions, I cannot dismiss this aspect of the experience. The interviewees claimed that it did not even matter what was discussed; for some men, just talking to a beautiful woman about *anything* was considered a luxury. Dancers offered an opportunity to talk to women with whom these men would not generally be able to interact, for a number of reasons—a lack of attractiveness, age differences, class differences (in either direction), availability, and the women’s willingness to interact outside of the clubs, for example. It was not *just* the presence of nudity, nor *just* the presence of talk, that made these venues appealing, but the presence of *both* of these that allowed for the mutual creation of fantasies that were both relaxing and stimulating to the customers. The upscale clubs in Laurelton provided opportunities for the men to have dinner with the dancers for a fee, or to pay to take them

⁶These aspects of the men’s visits are explored in more depth in relation to gender and power in Frank (2003).

“off the list” (the disk jockey’s [DJ] stage rotation) to sit and talk in the VIP rooms. These spaces were semi-private and less noisy and crowded, offering a chance for greater verbal intimacy.⁷

Sometimes, the conversation was valued because it was of a type the men had difficulty finding elsewhere, especially in male-dominated workplaces. For a variety of reasons, these customers felt that women provided conversation in ways that were significantly different from men. One customer, for example, said that his male friends were good to talk to about “sports, women, or work,” but that he felt more engaged with *women* in conversation about other things. Another said that though “men can open up to women,” they have difficulty communicating with each other because their egos are “too big” and “too fragile.”

Some men explicitly noted that the interactions they purchased in strip clubs were “an ego boost” because they provided safe opportunities for interactions with women without the risk of rejection. Sexuality and sexual conquest, after all, can be experienced as humiliating and stressful for men as well as thrilling. Many sex workers joke about really being “therapists” and explicitly understand their jobs to be about boosting a man’s ego by convincing him that he is desirable, masculine, and successful.

In addition to the customers who enjoyed the everyday conversation, some men were also searching for acceptance of their sexual desires. Male customers

told dancers things they claimed they had never told their wives or lovers—usually specific fantasies or experiences they thought the other women in their lives would not understand or that had caused extreme negative reactions in the past, such as a desire to give or receive anal sex. A no-contact strip club thus offers a certain protection from vulnerability that other arenas—including the bedroom at home—may not. In a strip club, a customer can fantasize about a sexual encounter with a woman, yet is not responsible for actually physically performing or providing pleasure to her. He is also prohibited from revealing his naked body to the dancers, which in itself can provide another form of refuge from judgment.

Youthfulness was another issue that emerged quite frequently in conversations and interactions I had in the clubs, as the majority of the regular customers were men middle-aged or older. The clubs, in some ways, provide an interesting and complicated return to a site of adolescent fantasy. A DJ that I worked with stated that if the music was right, “you become that girl he wanted in high school and didn’t get, or that one he let get away.” For some customers, effortless sexual response (though not necessarily desire) was something that was associated with youth. Some of the older men, for example, expressed difficulties becoming aroused by their wives or long term partners at the same time as they claimed that they *wanted* to be able to be excited by them.

When discussing their partners’ almost universal disapproval of their visits to strip clubs, customers also discussed the difficulties their wives and partners had with “losing beauty and youth and with not wanting to be reminded that it was still out there” by the men’s interactions with strippers. They also cautiously discussed the importance of their partners’ losses of youth and beauty to *themselves*—sometimes explicitly comparing the bodies of the dancers to those of the other women in their lives. While these men’s visits could quite possibly have contributed to their partners’ insecurities about aging or sexual attractiveness (and several interviewees explicitly stated that they believed there were connections), and while it is certainly the case that the ability to purchase the attentions of others in order to make oneself feel younger and more desirable is a privileged position (and one their partners might not be able to occupy, for a variety of reasons), the visits were thus also intertwined with the men’s own insecurities about losing a youthful body, an attractive body, a body that would and could perform sexually when the opportunity or need arose, especially in the context of an on-going intimate relationship. There is a Viagra commercial which portrays men jumping for joy in the streets while the rock song “We are the Champions”

⁷Though the regulars usually respected the rules of the club and the boundaries of the dancers even in these semi-private spaces, more infrequent customers assumed that the VIP rooms meant an opportunity for greater sexual intimacy as well. Elsewhere I discuss the fantasies about sexual opportunity that circulated among customers about the Laurelton VIP rooms (Frank, 2002a). These stories were treated as fantasies, similar to urban legends, however, because they were told to me by customers who admitted that they had never personally engaged in sexual activity in a VIP room and had never been offered an opportunity to do so by a dancer. Because the VIP rooms were more profitable for dancers than working the main floor (bringing in an hourly rate in addition to money for table dances and tips), it was a well-known sales ploy for dancers to tell customers they could get “closer” or “wilder” in the VIP rooms. However, I never met a dancer in Laurelton who admitted to selling sexual release in the VIP rooms and I spent a great deal of time in the rooms with other dancers (in addition to sitting alone with customers) without observing any such transactions. My interviews with dancers and customers in other locales have led me to believe that variability in whether or not sexual contact occurs in such “private” areas of the club is in part a function of the interaction of corporate policies, competition between dancers, and customer expectations, as there are indeed cities where sexual transactions are more commonplace. Even though the Laurelton market was somewhat depressed during the years I conducted my fieldwork, stripping was still lucrative enough that dancers did not feel the need to also sell sexual favors.

plays in the background—presumably, these expressions of joy and vitality are a result of being able to perform sexually once again. The importance of sexual response and desire to men's conceptions of self should not be underestimated (Tiefer, 1995). At the same time, however, it is noteworthy that the expression of this response and desire in the space of the strip club did not require sexual release. Indeed, for these regulars, it was important that sexual contact did not occur with the dancers, often because of their commitment to sexual exclusivity in their marriages or outside relationships.

Safety and Excitement

As has already been suggested, strip clubs derive some of their appeal from their ability to be both *safe* in a number of ways (when compared with the illegality of prostitution, for example, or the disruptiveness, risk, and vulnerability of a "real" affair) and *dangerous enough* to be exciting spaces, and when the tension between these boundaries disappears for a man, he may cease to be a regular customer.

A quick story illustrates this well: I met Saul at a lower tier club. Our interaction was pleasant, and after asking a number of questions about my research, Saul agreed to an interview. The morning of the interview, he called at the last minute to change our location—from a bagel shop to a Starbucks coffee house. When he finally arrived, a bit late, and we settled into our coffee, he admitted that he had been nervous about our meeting. "Who knows?" he said. "I've heard of men being robbed and killed this way." (*At Starbucks? I was tempted to ask.*) He continued: "You never know by looking at somebody . . . I mean, I would never know if you were . . . like, a crack dealer, you know? Or like living day to day?" As I had provided him with a business card, my home telephone number, my real name and my university affiliation, I was surprised that I could be perceived as so intimidating.

Saul was not unique, though, and other interviewees expressed similar misgivings. Could I be a prostitute using the researcher line as a ruse to drum up business? Did I work for the mafia? Was I going to try to rob them? And it was not just about me—the tales I heard about the supposed proclivities of my co-workers and the other customers in the club over time were fascinating, and rarely, in my experience, based in reality. However, such fantasized brushes with *danger* (with unsavory characters, with the dangers of possible sexual contact, with the boundaries of the law) were an important and exciting part of many men's excursions.

Many of the interviewees also discussed their experiences in the language of "adventure" in addition to "variety," "travel," "fun," and "escape." Some described themselves as "hunters" or "explorers." For many customers, especially those who preferred the lower tier clubs, the fact that visits to strip clubs often implied a journey into "bad areas" of town was exciting, a form of erotic slumming. The men's talk about danger and adventure was connected up with historical discourses about masculinity, travel, and encounters with various categories of "Others." Customers also discussed "adventure" in relation to sexual discovery—even without physical contact, they were getting to know someone in a sexualized situation, and engaging in a transgressive, mutual construction of fantasy. The interviewees tended to identify with discourses that associated sexual conquest and desire with masculinity, freedom, and adventure and that made such practices meaningful as an expression of self, identity, and individuality.

Yet despite descriptions of strip clubs as places with "no rules" and as "outside the law," and although customers experience and express feelings of freedom, adventure, or excitement during their visits, the clubs have been tightly regulated. The city has usually delineated where such clubs can be located and what types of interactions can be had inside. Clubs also set additional rules for employees and customers, and most clubs have security guards in the parking lot and at least two or three floor managers to enforce those rules. Other kinds of behaviors are policed by both the dancers and the other customers, such as proper etiquette in regard to watching table dances, tipping procedures, and customer-to-customer interactions. The men also police their own behavior—few bachelors *really* need their hands to be tied during a table dance, and even men who claim to be wild with testosterone are usually found sitting calmly in their chairs. Further, even men who claimed to be interested in purchasing some kind of actual sexual contact from the dancers were satisfied, over and over again, with *talking about doing so* and paying for table dances.

Many men also explicitly claimed that strip clubs provided safety in relation to marriages or long-term partnerships, providing a safe space in which to be both married (or committed) and sexually aroused (or at least, interacting with other women in a sexualized setting). This is related to cultural ideas about marriage, monogamy, and consumption, as the boundaries between different venues and services are less rigid in many other countries, with stripping becoming much more blurred with prostitution or with customers alternatively visiting venues that offer sexualized conversation, manual or oral release, or actual

sex.⁸ For many of my interviewees, “looking” was the final limit with which they felt comfortable. For example, although some admitted to periodically reading *Playboy* or renting pornographic videos, this was not as significant or enjoyable to them as their experiences in strip clubs. None of the interviewees admitted to *regularly* using escort services, prostitutes, or massage parlors; nor did many of the men that I interacted with on a daily basis in the clubs. Several of the interviewees discussed past experiences with prostitutes, yet they did so with much more ambivalence, distaste, or guilt than when discussing their visits to strips clubs and none considered this a practice they were likely to take up again.

Fantasy Play

Relationships in the strip club between dancers and their regulars take place within a larger gendered and heterosexualized network of power relations. Further, these relationships are based on an exchange of sexual self-identities, and as such, involve a complex entanglement of fantasy and reality. Intimate relationships in a strip club evolve as a result of a mutual manufacturing of fantasy and identity—a co-creation of fantasy that may be incorrectly interpreted by lawmakers, enforcers, and some customers. In a strip club, a man will most likely be denied sexual access to the women. A *fantasy* of sexual possibility and interpersonal intimacy is cultivated, however, and the combination of these elements makes it an alluring atmosphere for some customers. The regulars gave me many reasons behind their presence in the clubs which implied that the *illusion* of intimacy provided by the interaction was more desirable than an outside relationship, sexual or otherwise. As mentioned in the previous section, in the clubs, customers were granted safety from the struggle to attract “real” women, from the necessity to form “real” commitments and from the demands of those real women on their time and emotions. Further, behaviors that were unacceptable in the “real” world, such as an obvious appraisal of women’s bodies, were allowed in the club, even encouraged by the women themselves (Want to buy a table dance?).

However, this notion of the “real” should be problematized. One of the verbalized goals of a customer who *frequents* a strip club is escape from the “real” world. This may mean several different things, however.

There are, of course, regulars in the club who do have commitments with women outside the club, women who are making demands on their time and emotions and for whom the club provides an “escape from.” There were many other men, however, who were actively seeking an “escape to,” searching for an intimacy that was clearly not available to them in that outside world—men who had recently divorced, had troubled marriages, had few social skills, or had physical disabilities. Repeatedly, I listened to men who claimed that they “didn’t know how to talk to women,” “had difficulty meeting people,” or just “didn’t have the time to develop a relationship.” These men, then, paid the dancers to listen to their work stories, laugh at their jokes, and eat dinner with them. In my experience in the strip club, “realness” was thus more highly valued, or at least more realistically expected, than what was actually “real.” There is thus a fetishization that underlies the provision of sexual services. Allison (1994) writes that in paying money for a sexual service:

Men are not only buying a commodity but putting themselves into the commodity too. That is, there is a fetishization of subject (man) as much as of object (woman), and the customer is not only purchasing one thing or an *other* but is also paying to become one other as well. He seeks to be relieved of his everyday persona—the one to which various expectations are attached—and given a new script in which he plays a different role. (p. 22)

Thus, while the man might know that it is a fantasy persona, its “realness” makes it all the more desirable. Here we can see a multiple commodification of bodies, identities, and intimacy at work, and there are several “imaginary” relationships involved in the transaction. The dancer, as an employee of the club in which she works, is produced as a particular commodity, a body that can be viewed upon demand. The special lighting, the costumes, and the make-up all combine to make her very body imaginary, something that would not be exactly reproducible outside of the club or in a different venue. Through the physical presence of the dancer, the customer is visible as a heterosexual man who desires women. This is a specular *image*; the other dancers and customers are witnesses to the transaction (this witnessing is a crucial element—if a man was not looking for a public encounter, he most likely would not have chosen a strip club). Further, while the dancer herself is also manufacturing or presenting a particular identity, a public *image*, in her interaction with the customer, she is simultaneously involved in the production of particular *male* subjectivities, one of which may be that of “being a male who can pay a female to service him” (Allison,

⁸This blurring of the boundaries may also be the case in certain locales around the U.S. However, even in cities which offer full nudity and lap-dancing, as in San Francisco, one can often also find profitable venues offering table dancing or sexualized encounters without sexual contact and the possibility of release.

1994).⁹ The man's private *image*, his self-representation, is thus also involved.

There is a mix, then, of lies, truths, and partial truths which underlie relationships between dancers and their regulars, and thus these interactions become more complicated as time passes. One of the complications lies in the fact that despite appearing as a "real" woman (who might really desire a man like him) a dancer must also remain a fantasy to her customers. Customers expressed disinterest in dancers who complained too much about financial problems, kids, or difficulties at work. While most of the dancers were involved in relationships with men or women outside of the club, these relationships were not always disclosed to the regulars. Dancers admitted that if relationships with regulars ever did lead to sexual contact outside the club they were almost guaranteed to lose the man as a regular *customer*. When I first began dancing in the Midwest, I found it beneficial to speak very carefully of my life outside the club if I wanted to develop a base of regulars (when I began officially studying the male customers in Laurelton, however, I was necessarily forthcoming about my actual identification, pursuits and interests). While men would often ask many questions about me, I found that even telling them too much about my friends or activities would tend to upset the balance of our interaction. If I had such a good social life, was I maybe lying about being single? Could I be lying about everything? If I simply said that my social life was severely curtailed because I worked all of the time, however, it left intact the possibility of the mutual construction of an on-going fantasy relationship. Maybe we could go to dinner together, go dancing or horseback riding someday. The creation of *possibility*, then, was essential at the outset. Cell phone calls or lunch dates were used by some dancers to generate this feeling of possibility and maintain interest, and the most successful and profitable dancers developed ways of convincing each regular that he was special through personalized contact of some sort, yet still clearly delineating the boundaries of the relationship so that it unfolded within the walls of the strip club.

Some men seemed to recognize, consciously or unconsciously, that it was really the possibility that was important. These men would not ask me to see them outside of the club often, and when they did ask it

⁹Conversely, he may also have fantasies of himself as a man who is worth talking to regardless of the money, as a "big spender" who can impress the dancers, as a savior to the dancers (helping them pay for college, deal with difficult relationships, or even to leave a degrading job), or any other number of possibilities. Successful dancers learn to recognize these fantasies and build on them through particular kinds of attentions and stories.

was often *already impossible* for me to say yes—a pilot continually asked me to go on fantastic but infeasible last-minute vacations, for example, while another man would take me off the stage rotation for hours to discuss the possibility of living together. He did not want to hear my practical excuses or honest reasons for not wanting a relationship; rather, I found that he was thrilled by my fictitious excuse that I did not believe in living together before marriage. When it became obvious that the possibility of an outside relationship would never be realized, or when the fantasy ceased to be *believable enough*, as it did in some cases, the man might terminate the relationship by simply not returning. Or, if he was a loyal customer of the club, he might instead select another dancer with whom to spend his time and money. Whether or not this meant that the men desired a "real" outside relationship with a dancer, sexual or not, however, is not ascertainable; in fact, these regulars often *behaved* as if what they wanted was not a real physical relationship with a sex worker (which they could have easily paid for in another venue) but a realistic fantasy of such a relationship (which is what they paid for in the clubs).¹⁰

Dancers used different strategies in generating and maintaining regular relationships. After all, not every customer was interested in fantasizing about developing an outside relationship with a dancer. Some of these men wanted to develop ongoing "friendships" with the dancers, for example, and in such a situation a dancer might find that sharing intimate details about her life (real or fictionalized) was necessary to create a desirable interaction. My point here is to emphasize that interactions in strip clubs transpire in an environment where the

¹⁰Elsewhere, I have discussed the issue of sincerity and authenticity in dancer/customer relationships in more detail (see Frank, 1998, 2002a). Discussions of authenticity were important to the customers and their relationships with the dancers were continually interrogated for signs of genuine interaction and involvement. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the commodified nature of the relationships was a desirable part of those relationships, at some level, for the customers. Regulars used a number of strategies to "prove" the authenticity of their interactions, such as claiming friendships with the dancers, claiming to recognize performed emotion, disavowing the importance of the money to themselves, and arguing that all relationships between men and women had the potential to be inauthentic and financially motivated. I found it more useful in this situation to explore the ways that a discourse of authenticity becomes meaningful and exciting for the customers than to try to posit a steadfast distinction between real and performed emotion or interaction. As Hochschild (1983) and others have argued, emotions may be harnessed and organized in the service of profitability. Further, given that inequalities impact many of our relationships, we cannot simply set up a distinction between relationships that enfold in a sex "market" and those that do not, or those relationships based on economic or class-based concerns and those based on desires for "creativity" or "similarity" in partners (see also Illouz, 1997).

intermingling of fantasy and reality is expected and, indeed, is part of the very attraction of the space. It is not surprising that some customers (or police officers posing as customers), especially those who do not regularly visit strip clubs, leave feeling as if sex (or a date, or a “real connection”) might have been available to them had they stayed longer, spent more money, or interacted with the right dancers—they are not necessarily playing the same game. This is not to say that some men do not attempt to purchase or succeed in purchasing sex in strip clubs, of course, or that some dancers do not attempt to sell it for a variety of reasons. Rather, it is simply to point out that the regular customers of strip clubs are quite willing, night after night, to open their wallets in the name of fantasy. Instead of seeing these men as somehow duped by the dancers, exploited by corporate interests, or being led by out-of-control levels of testosterone, I prefer to believe that they are purchasing exactly what they want.

MARRIAGE AND MONOGAMY

Another important area to look at when attempting to understand the customers’ motivations and experiences is to their beliefs about monogamy and the ways that they *practice* marriage (or heterosexual relationships more generally). It is important not to analyze strip club visits (or any other use of the sex industry) as unrelated to other aspects of the everyday—work, home, relationships, identities, and aspirations. But despite the fact that literature focused on the sex industry has noted its entanglement with the institution of marriage (Allison, 1994; Califia, 1994; Nagle, 1997), there is little attention paid to the sex industry in the copious academic literature on marital relationships. As commodified sexual services and images (both legal and illegal) make up a multi-billion dollar a year industry, and as many of the customers in each sector are married men, this absence is striking. When the use of the sex industry is discussed, it is often to say something about the male partner’s inability to develop a “healthy” intimacy with his wife. As Stock (1997) writes: “The predominant effect of the sex industry on men is through the alienation from self, an impaired ability to relate intimately to romantic/sexual partners, and an increased likelihood of inflicting emotional and physical harm on female romantic/sexual partners and on children” (p. 111). Stock draws on the idea of nonrelational sexuality, or “the tendency to experience sex as lust without any requirements for relational intimacy, or for more than a minimal connection with the object of one’s desires” (Levant & Brooks, 1997, p. 10). Stock admits that “nonrelational sex is not inherently bad” but that male socialization has elevated nonrelational sex to

“the most desirable form of sex” and sometimes “the only option in men’s sexual repertoires.” The use of any sector of the sex industry by men, according to Stock, is an example of a problematic nonrelational sexual practice.

Yet the assumption that customers of the sex industry have unhappy, unsatisfying, or troubled marriages is one that should be problematized (and a great deal of research could be done in this area). Men go to strip clubs for a variety of different reasons and with varying frequency throughout their lives and their use of the sex industry, in any of its forms, may not necessarily be a result of an inability to be intimate.¹¹ Rather, for some men, such visits may be a means of dealing with one of the psychic side effects of love and intimacy—aggression—in long-term and traditional relationships.

Sixty-three percent of the thirty men I interviewed (and approximately the same number of those I interacted with on a daily basis) fit a specific pattern of beliefs and practices. These men visited strip clubs regularly, varying from several times a week to several times a month, usually alone. They were either married to, divorced from, or planning on being married to women whom they described as “conservative” with regard to issues of morality and sexuality—for example, the men described themselves as “weaker” or “lazier” than their partners in terms of moral resolve and also portrayed themselves as more “sexually adventurous” and “interested in sex.” But they saw their relationships as stable and caring and believed their marriages would be considered “successful” to an outsider, describing themselves as “reasonably satisfied” with their relationships to “very much in love” with their wives. The men claimed to be committed to monogamy and that they chose strip clubs because they believed they would not be expected or tempted to have sexual contact with the dancers.

Further, these men did not consider themselves to be consumers of other forms of adult entertainment, describing pornography as “too impersonal,” “boring,” and “unrealistic,” for example, and prostitution as either “cheating,” “too dangerous,” or “too direct of a financial exchange.” All of these men also preferred strip clubs in which lap-dancing (a form of personal dance which can lead to sexual release through bodily contact) was *not* allowed. While this preference is in some part because this type of contact was forbidden in Laurelton if a club offered alcohol and allowed full nudity, most of the men had traveled widely and experienced other types of clubs and services.

Finally, and significantly, for these particular men, visits to strip clubs were kept as secret as possible, as

¹¹See Frank (1998) for a more in depth discussion of this issue.

they had different ideas about what constituted monogamy than their partners did. They were aware that their visits to strip clubs affected their wives and partners, and expressed concern about this, offering stories and examples of how their behavior was perceived by their spouses. Their wives' responses ranged from "going ballistic" to mild displays of anger when they found out about the visits. However, despite admissions of empathy and guilt on the part of these men, knowledge of their wives' disapproval or dismay did not result in a change of practice.

The encounters purchased by these interviewees were exciting and desirable to them for two primary reasons—they were *secret* and they were interactive, *sexualized* (but not sexual) encounters seen as outside of their primary committed relationships. Both of these things—secrecy and outside sexualized relationships—are often believed to be destructive of marital intimacy by one or the other partner. This behavior was thus *transgressive* through its *sexualization* (though without sexual contact or release) and its proscription, and *sexualized* through its *transgressiveness*. The excitement of the visits was experienced in the context of relationships in which a conservative woman would find this behavior upsetting and would feel betrayed or hurt if she knew about it.

Some of the women objected to their visits, the men said, because it made them feel insecure in the relationship or about their attractiveness. Nick said that if his wife found out about the regularity of his visits to strip clubs, "it would break her heart." Likewise, Jim said: "I think she is upset about it because she feels like maybe that means she isn't satisfying me enough and, you know, that means she's less of a woman . . . and that's why it upsets her. And I guess it bothers me too, that she feels that way." Some wives expressed concerns about sexual fidelity; others were worried about betrayal through emotional involvement with another woman.

In addition to being secretive about their visits to the strip clubs, these particular interviewees also often hid the fact that they were interviewing with me from their wives. Jim had been married for twenty-three years and said that he went to clubs "on the sneak." The visits started after he got married. "Stolen watermelons taste better than the ones you buy," he said, describing his reasons for enjoying the secrecy. Towards the end of our first interview he asked: "Does it feel like you're sneaking around right now, Kate?" "No," I answered, "why?" He laughed, and answered: "By helping me sneak around!" Soon after telling me that part of his motivation for coming to the interview was the thought of a potential sexual relationship with me, he noted that he considered himself a faithful and attentive husband. Despite his spoken desire for a possible "real" sexual encounter, he admitted that

this was not something that he actively pursued. Like many of the other men who fit this pattern, Jim painted a picture of himself as a man who was interested in the "thrill" of sexual adventure, but not in actual sexual release outside of his marriage. Further, he admitted that he knew about other available sexual services in the city yet did not actively seek these out. Once again, the balance between safety and danger was carefully managed.

Despite dreams of lasting romantic love, many people have difficulties sustaining the early passion and excitement of their intimate relationships and find that the passion felt in the early stages of their relationship is gradually replaced by a less intense, affectionate relationship (sometimes called mature love by psychoanalysts). These interviewees discussed such a transition in their emotional involvements and also complained of an accompanying boredom, not just with the sexual aspects of their relationships, but with the entire pattern of interaction. Further, the "variety" they longed for was rarely simply the desire to *view* other naked female bodies but was often meaningful in terms of the interactive nature of the encounters—"building rapport" and experiencing both oneself and one's partner of the moment as "new" and "exciting." Yet although they missed the early passion of their relationships, they did not wish to end their marriages and understood their visits to the clubs within this framework. What men hoped for in strip clubs, Steven argued, was to "reignite that spark" that had gone out of their marriages (though without involving their wives in the interactions).

Kernberg (1995) argued that it is aggressive forces that eventually undermine intimate relationships, not cultural and social structures (such as an erosion of the sanctity of marriage) or the eventual replacement of passion with friendship. According to Kernberg (1995), a mature sexual love relationship integrates both tenderness and eroticism, but will also involve "all aspects of the ordinary ambivalence of intimate object relations" (p. 29). That is, just as "affectionate and generally pleasurable experiences with mother" come to be integrated into libidinal strivings, an aggressive drive is the result of the integration "of a multitude of negative or aversive affective experiences—rage, disgust, and hatred" (p. 21). Aggression against a love object, for him, is thus an intrinsic part of erotic desire, and fantasies of penetrating, engulfing, hurting, or destroying the other are always part of intimate relations, yet can be experienced as pleasurable because they are "contained by a loving relationship." (While Kernberg's retention of the drive concept is problematic to many modern users of psychoanalytic theory, his idea that aggression is a part of both healthy and pathological object relations is important. We do

not necessarily need to view aggression as the result of a precultural drive or instinct, but rather, can theorize it as emergent in the context of intimate, dependent relationships.)

As emotional intimacy develops between two people, unconscious reenactments of earlier relationships, parental or otherwise, occur, and partners induce in each other past impulses and fears. In order to discuss this process, Kernberg (1995) elaborates the ideas of direct and reverse triangulations, which may either destroy or strengthen the couple. Direct triangulation is “both partners’ unconscious fantasy of an excluded third party, an idealized member of the subject’s gender—the dreaded rival replicating the oedipal rival.” This results in the common conscious or unconscious worry for both genders of being replaced by their sexual partner, leading to emotional insecurity and jealousy. Reverse triangulation, on the other hand, is the “compensating, revengeful fantasy of involvement with a person other than one’s partner, an idealized member of the other gender who stands for the desired oedipal object.” This establishes a triangular relationship in which the subject is courted by two members of the other gender instead of having to compete with the oedipal rival of the same gender for the “idealized oedipal object of the other gender.” Kernberg (1995) thus argues that there are “potentially, in fantasy, always six persons in bed together: the couple, their respective unconscious oedipal rivals, and their respective unconscious oedipal ideals.” Fantasies about “excluded third parties,” he writes, are “typical components of normal sexual relations. The counterpart of sexual intimacy that permits the enjoyment of polymorphous perverse sexuality is the enjoyment of secret sexual fantasies that express, in a sublimated fashion, aggression toward the loved object” (p. 88).

When a married man visits a strip club, he may in effect be consciously creating a situation of reverse triangulation—displacing aggression and enacting a secret, vengeful fantasy as his wife becomes the excluded third party. For many of the men who fit this pattern, visiting the clubs was consciously related to how their relationships with their wives or partners were going. Joe, for example, said that going to strip clubs was like “rebellious” even if his wife never found out about it. His wife’s distress (fantasized or real) was important to him because it added to his feelings of rebelliousness and independence. In other situations, a man might not be consciously angry at his wife or partner; yet, he visits a club “on the sneak,” expecting and perhaps even hoping to get caught. Regardless of the outcome, his knowledge (or belief) that the visit would cause his wife emotional pain is significant and a reverse triangulation is also set up.

The unknown aspects of the interaction and the potential intersubjective encounters lend excitement to the scene at the same time as there is also a comfortable balancing out of the risk, that is, the man knows that sexual activity will almost certainly *not* occur and that he can terminate the interaction at any time. Though the men discussed here may not have actually been unfaithful by their own definitions, their behavior was in part motivated simultaneously by wishes to betray, and wishes not to betray, their wives or partners. It is not just men who visit strip clubs, or other sex industry venues, or just men in long-term relationships who may need to find ways to deal with unacknowledged aggression towards intimate partners. Even in the early stages of a relationship, secret fantasy scenarios, power differentials, and aggression may intrude.

The satisfaction gained for these men from their visits to the clubs was of course also related to the fact that they held particular cultural beliefs about gender identity, sexuality, and marriage that made such practices meaningful as expressions of freedom and individuality. Thus, though there may be a similar build-up of aggression and a need for deflection in most long-term relationships, not every man becomes a customer of the sex industry, much less strip clubs. The interviewees, as noted earlier, tended to identify with discourses that associated sexual conquest or sexual desire with masculinity, freedom, and adventure. At the same time, they held particular beliefs about what constituted monogamy for themselves—looking and interacting outside of the marriage was acceptable while sexual release through contact was not, for example. Strip clubs, then, provided a safe space in which to be both married (or committed) and interacting with other women (often simultaneously or alternatively idealized and degraded)—setting up a triangular situation. This in turn was important in the way that it activated particular self-representations that a man identified with and found pleasurable—as a desirable and desiring man, for example.

The difference in class status between the customers and the dancers is also psychologically noteworthy. Strippers are still stigmatized and these customers who found the clubs most erotic, exciting or transgressive (thus becoming regulars for whom visits were a significant sexual practice) were also those who had married, or imagined themselves being married to, very “conservative” women. As traditional, middle-class femininity is associated with relative sexual modesty, women who dance nude in front of strangers have transgressed a significant class boundary regardless of their background and what kind of club that they work in. These particular customers often identified with the dancers and against

their wives, again in a rebellious fashion: *we are both morally weaker than she is; we are both more sexually free; we are both more adventurous, independent, and experimental.*

Whether or not these visits *actually* caused the men's wives any emotional pain is to some extent irrelevant in explaining the men's satisfaction (although this issue is not irrelevant when thinking about the impact, importance, and existence of the sex industry more generally—this is another area where research is especially needed). The essential thing here is that these men's *belief* that their partners would feel upset was an intrinsic and important element of their experience, causing them to feel an ambivalent mix of pleasure and guilt, regardless of whether they were *actually* caught or their wives *actually* felt betrayed. In some ways, the experience may be all the more powerful if it remains secretive; after all, not only does socialization require that most sexual activity be hidden, but for some men sexual behavior and sexual excitement has been associated with secrecy (and secret or fantasized identities) since they hid their first pornographic magazine under the bed as teenagers. Further, in some situations, the pain or discomfort that the men believed they were causing may even have been more intense in their own fantasies about "getting caught" than as actually experienced by their wives or partners.

Whether these encounters are positive or negative for the trajectory of the men's marriages is inherently difficult to determine—even the men themselves could rarely voice an opinion on this issue. Yet the customers who use the sex industry cannot be simply opposed to those who develop some ideal intimate monogamous heterosexual relationship. After all, despite the emphasis on communication and honesty in intimate relationships, many people are unable to express particular emotions or desires within the context of their primary relationships. Even individuals who have not cheated on their spouse may fantasize about doing so and wish to express those fantasies (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983), but find themselves unable to do so. As a sex worker I often heard this complaint from men who believed that they could not disclose either the truths of their past or particular desires and fantasies to their wives.

In fact, many traditional marriages may be successful *because of* an inhibition of certain kinds of intimacy, especially when intimacy is conceptualized as involving high levels of disclosure. Much popular psychology literature tends toward the idea that if we all just expressed our feelings to each other, we would suddenly be able to be truly intimate with our partners and be able to maneuver through the vacillations of sexual passion. While for some couples this may be true, in other cases an inhibition of

intimacy may even be necessary in order for a particular relationship to continue. As Blum (1996) writes:

The persistence of human self-interest is of course closely related to intimacy and infidelity. For example, some of the chief matters that spouses tend, by and large out of courtesy, not to discuss with each other are their everyday selfish wishes: not to have to sweep the floor, take care of the kids, or take each other's needs into account; wishes to be taken care of without reciprocation; and certainly their wishes to sample different sexual partners. Does this withholding limit intimacy or permit it? (p. 142)

Some marriages would cease to exist if they were constantly interrogated by the participants, yet divorce is not necessarily an attractive option. For a variety of reasons, then, people find themselves in relationships that do not fulfill all their needs. Should those relationships be abandoned? Or should their participants arrange more creative ways of fulfilling those needs?

At times, then, an analysis of such encounters comes down to ideas about authenticity. What is a real relationship? What is real intimacy? Some of these men suggested that appearances (and the *realness* of those appearances) were more important than the real. Given the importance of being able to "play the couple game" in many social circles (Duncombe & Marsden, 1996), and the willingness of so many couples to co-create this particular public fantasy, this is not necessarily surprising. Further, some of the interviewees valued "lastingness" in their relationships more than absolute honesty. As Steven said: "What does faithful even mean, Kate? Does it mean I'm faithful in my mind? Does a one-night stand in a hotel room somewhere, years back, mean that I am not faithful to my wife? A year from now? I would say that I am faithful to my wife because I love her and there is no one else I want to be married to and share a life with. I've been married to her for 14 years and I'll be married to her for fourteen more."

Certainly, help should be available for men who seek it and who feel that pornography or the sex industry is affecting their ability to have intimate relationships with their wives. Some men experience their sexual desires and practices (especially those connected with the sex industry) as compulsive, addictive, and disruptive to their long-term relationships (Brooks, 1995; Stock, 1997). Even given this psychoanalytic perspective of the interviewees' visits to strip clubs that I have put forth, perhaps there are also more effective ways for men to discharge the excess aggression in their relationships—ways that would cause their partners less pain and which would not reinforce the double standard for women, for example. On the other hand, there are indeed individuals who combine satisfying relationships with commodified

sexualized services. Rather, the answer to whether using the sex industry, or strip clubs in particular, is a “good” thing for some relationships, in part, depends on how one feels about “lastingness,” commitment, self-fulfillment, honesty and authenticity in long-term relationships, and different people prioritize these values in distinct ways as they practice marriage on a day-to-day basis.

Several questions about culture, power, and history need to be addressed when analyzing such encounters using psychoanalysis. First, strip clubs have not always existed in their current form, and have proliferated in recent decades. Given this fact, what might account for the changes in the composition of the industry over time, and why might more men be seeking such encounters now in strip clubs? There are a number of social elements that are important to understanding just where these kinds of secret and sexualized relationships take place and between which kinds of participants. A commitment to monogamy in the age of AIDS may be a contributing factor, as may be the growth of serial monogamy instead of maintaining one long-term, but not necessarily faithful, marriage for men. Changing patterns of mobility, and thus commitment, may make relationships and affairs for some men difficult to negotiate and maintain. Strip clubs could be seen to offer a McDonaldized, virtual affair, for some customers: predictable (to an extent), efficient (no “games” necessary), calculable (the prices are set up front; sex will not occur), and controlled (there is an easy exit; the effects on the primary relationship are pretty well known).¹² There is also a continuing connection of sexuality and sexual experiences with a kind of last frontier, to transcendence and adventure, for many Americans. As discussed earlier, strip clubs articulate with certain ideas about masculinity and consumption that appeal to particular men as well, in addition to providing spaces where certain kinds of masculinized leisure can be engaged in without remorse.

Second, without positing some essential difference between men and women in terms of their psychological processes, how can we explain why it is men who visit strip clubs and that similar services do not exist for women on the same scale? Cultural expectations of gender as well as social inequalities and positionings affect people’s opportunities, choices, and resulting satisfactions as well as the meanings of their practices. The historical difference in disposable income between men and women is an issue here, as are the different meanings that

individuals place on money (as power, as security, etc.). As more women earn higher salaries, travel alone more frequently on business, and move away from traditional ideologies about passivity or the need for emotional connection in sexual relationships, they may indeed come to desire commodified sexualized services in greater numbers.¹³

Further, women may have developed other ways of fulfilling their needs. For now, the still greater need for many women to become and remain married for financial security, for example, along with cultural ideas about the importance of female virtue, may lead to the necessity for women of releasing aggression or creating triangulations in different ways depending on their social position. O liker (1989) found, for example, that married women in traditional relationships developed friendships with other women that fostered both intimacy and a mutual validation of individual activity and inner self—an “ego boost.” The women she studied also did marital “emotion work” with their friends, that is, these close friendships allowed the women to express anger and frustration about their relationships and to return to their partnerships with more peaceable attitudes.

Again, this is not to say that the sexualization of the encounters that the male customers sought in strip clubs was not important. After all, even a regular who is seeking conversation and fantasy is seeking it in a setting where women’s bodies are being routinely displayed in ritualistic ways. Though these particular customers were not actively pursuing adulterous sexual affairs, the experiences were sometimes discussed as analogous. At one point during our interview, for example, Jim referred to his experiences in strip clubs as “quickies.” Steven used the phrase “falling in love again” to describe such experiences. Thus, these men were often enjoying the *fantasy* of such a transgression and, in effect, creating situations of triangulation. That this would *not* happen with male friends in everyday interactions was directly suggested by many of the respondents.

Another issue is that there is little doubt that even as the husbands described themselves as satisfied in their marriages, in certain cases their wives may have felt that their own needs for intimacy were not being met (seemingly a common complaint among women in heterosexual relationships more generally). Marriage, after all, may

¹²Ritzer (1993), a sociologist, has discussed the process of “McDonaldization” in the contemporary United States as an extension of Weber’s principles of rationality to cover ever more aspects of consumer life.

¹³The sex industry is already arguably growing for certain sectors of women (see Ross, 1989) and women may also have developed unique ways of obtaining the erotic materials they desire (Juffer, 1998). For explorations of the spatial and theatrical elements of strip shows for women, see Liepe-Levinson (2002) and Smith (2002). At this time, it still appears as if women use strip clubs in ways that are significantly different from men.

yield different sorts of pleasures and dissatisfactions for men and women. Some of the men that I spoke with also expressed sexist sentiments or a distaste for their partner's bodies based on cultural ideals—saying “I wish my wife had nicer breasts”; “tried to dress sexier”; “had a better hip to waist ratio,” etc. Many men indeed have unrealistic expectations of what women's bodies look like because of the way women are represented in popular culture, and have difficulties accepting their wives' bodies as they age. There are also men for whom certain kinds of intimacy may feel unachievable or threatening. I would agree, then, with those who argue that there are certain cultural and social configurations of gender and power that work against the possibility of marital relationships that are egalitarian and satisfying (physically and emotionally) for some individuals, and that men's use of the sex industry may reflect some of those inequalities (although I do not believe that this is inherent to the commodification of sexual services). All the same, we should not assume a particular kind of ideal intimacy in long-term marital relationships that can be simply opposed to that found in commodified relationships. Indeed, many long-term marriages or partnerships involve forms of deception; some of which are based in the psychodynamics of interpersonal relationships and some that are perhaps crucial to lasting marriages.

CONCLUSION

The proliferation and upscaling of strip clubs needs to be situated in late capitalist consumer culture as well as within a variety of social changes and developments. A commonly noted feature of late capitalism is that more and more forms of entertainment become preoccupied with the commodification of spectacle and experience—certainly, the proliferation of strip clubs can be offered as an example of the profitability of this strategy. In many ways it makes sense that strip clubs should multiply in the U.S. during the last several decades. The process of upscaling in strip clubs, with a promise of “clean” and respectable interactions, could alleviate certain fears about contamination and disease that escalated around prostitution or promiscuity. There are numerous other social changes which may be influencing this rapid increase in strip clubs in the United States as well: the increased presence of women in the workforce, a continued backlash against feminism and the idea of “political correctness,” on-going and concerted marketing efforts to sexualize and masculinize particular forms of consumption (“sports, beer, and women,” for example), changing patterns of mobility which have influenced dat-

ing practices and the formation of intimate partnerships, renewed commitments to monogamy for certain groups of married men, and changes in the nature of work that involve more out-of-town travel for businessmen and thus more anonymous opportunities to purchase commodified sexualized services, to briefly name just a few.

Opposition to strip clubs, and the regulations spawned by this opposition, is often fueled by accusations that the customers are seeking (and the dancers are providing) illegal sexual services. My research, which has now spanned almost a decade, has indicated that there is indeed a large population of men who are instead interested in purchasing a voyeuristic, interactive fantasy of sexual access. Again, this is not to argue that men never seek, or are not ever successful in receiving, sexual services in strip clubs—there are, after all, clubs that offer varying levels of contact around the United States, legally or illegally. There are also men who seek sexual services from strippers, even if escorts or erotic masseuses are available elsewhere. Competition between dancers and exploitative corporate policies in some locales may combine so that dancers feel as if providing sexual release for their customers is the only way to remain profitable, though these conditions vary greatly around the country. Yet, I believe that it is safe to say that striptease remains a unique form of entertainment from prostitution, and that there are men who are willing and able to pay highly for it to remain a unique service.

Moralistic regulation is often aimed at fixing problems that do not even really exist, and ignores problems that should be addressed. As Hanna (2005) and others have pointed out, laws already exist against the crimes that are allegedly associated with strip clubs and specifically targeting adult businesses is discriminatory. There are indeed issues worth exploring in relation to strip clubs; in other work, for example, I have explored gendered and labor inequalities between dancers and customers, exploitative workplace policies and safety concerns, a lack of benefits provided to women in the industry, the negative effects of social stigma, and negative attitudes towards sexual expression and activity that impact both dancers and customers (see Frank, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Egan & Frank, 2005; Egan, Frank, & Johnson, 2005). Other researchers have explored similar issues with regard to sex work more generally as well (Chapkis, 1997; Nagle, 1997). Certain kinds of club *rules* can make strip clubs better workplaces for the employees.¹⁴ Some dancers

¹⁴As many of my interviewees noted, certain regulations about touching were also desirable to many of the customers, and those who wanted more body contact knew that this could be purchased in other venues.

enjoy lap-dancing and other forms of contact; others prefer to maintain a distance between themselves and the customers. Restrictions against intimate touching in strip clubs, for example, can protect dancers against unwanted advances from customers and mean that if contact does occur, it is on the dancer's terms. In Laurelton, as in other cities that I worked, such rules, when realistically enforced, gave the dancers a great deal of control over their transactions. In six years of dancing, I was touched inappropriately *once*, and the customer was promptly removed from the club when I alerted the management (if only I had been so lucky while waitressing!). In an ideal situation, women could *choose* which kinds of services they offered and to whom and could be assured that they would be supported by the management in their decisions. Unfortunately, few (if any) of the zoning regulations being imposed on clubs around the country are pitched towards improving working conditions for the dancers or allowing women more control over how their bodies are commodified in the sex industry.

Moralistic regulation also seems based on an idea that there is one authentic sexuality that can be legislated and policed—heterosexual, reproductive, serial monogamous (and preferably married) coupling. In fact, I argue that strip clubs remain desirable, in part, because of these kinds of sexual policing, not in spite of it; visits to the clubs become meaningful for the regulars *because of* the fact that they can be figured as expressions of freedom or rebelliousness from social controls at the same time as the clubs are regulated, sanitized, and controlled in the interest of profitability and legality. This is not to say that strip clubs, along with other forms of adult entertainment, would disappear overnight if they ceased to be stigmatized and embattled venues; rather it is to argue that the meanings of the interactions and services would change, possibly along with the clientele.

Regulation of the different venues of the sex industry, when appropriate, should be created through knowledge rather than by fear and moral panic. Only through concrete explorations of particular sites of sexual commodification and of the motivations of their consumers can this type of knowledge be generated and used for productive kinds of interventions.

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