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Winning Entry 1995 SAS Undergraduate Student Paper Competition

An Ethnographic Analysis of Stripping

by Chris Longfield
Georgia State University

Objectives
This study attempts to explore the working conditions of strippers in the nudebars of Atlanta's sex industry. Specifically, I have tried to focus on the reasons why women choose stripping as a profession and why they stay in a job that appears to reduce their function to that of a sex object. Originally, I expected to find women "oppressed" by a system that holds them captive through high wages in return for debasement and abuse by men. My lead interview question, "What's it like to work in a strip joint?" did not, however, lead to a discussion of the negative aspects of sex-industry work as often as I expected. I found, overall, that the women who do not like working in strip-joints get out of it, and that those who stay, while enjoying the high wages such work provides, find other aspects of the work appealing besides the monetary benefits.

Methods
The primary method of data collection I used for this study, tapping conversations on a cassette recorder, allowed me to very accurately record conversations I had with informants. I have done a good deal of participant observation, but my notes were almost all taken from taped transcripts. Paying so much attention to this method has left my database lacking in other description - particularly visual. Anthropologists, as Jean Gearing has pointed out to me, have often been accused of being voyeurs - a role that I have avoided in this study, much to its detriment. I did not wish to be labeled a "customer" by the dancers. Not knowing the "rules" of behavior for customers, and also having no sense of how dancers would interpret my questions if they thought I was not only a "college student," but also a "customer," led me to shun that label in the hopes of better access. Consequently, I did not tip in the clubs, and I tended to sit off to the side instead of the middle of the room, talking only to strippers to whom my main informant introduced me. This type of behavior, e.g., trying to look like I was not observing or participating in the scene, is not considered very highly of a strip joint customer, much less an ethnographer. My aloofness tended to result in more formal interviews rather than plain conversations. Although I began to relax as I came to understand the role of the customer, engaging the dancers as a researcher may have actually hindered me in my early interviews, as the dancers were put on their guard while they tried to figure out what our proper relationship was supposed to be.
Several points are of interest here when interpreting the information I have gathered. Primarily, my key informant is proud of not being a hustler\textsuperscript{2}, and admits that she does not like hustlers as friends. Only one of my informants is a self-described hustler. My emphasis on the relationships that the strippers form with their customers is in part due to this bias. By all accounts, hustlers are not interested in "having a good time" and "bullshitting" with customers. Non-hustlers are.

Another fact of my data collection that should be taken into account is that I have focused on one particular bar in which to do my research. I believe this is important in order to find long term patterns that could be confused if several bars were included in this short-term study. The strippers I interviewed discussed the differences between this bar and other bars that they have worked at; many have worked at a number of sites. It is also important to note that this bar is predominantly white and that none of my informants have worked in strip joints where the clientele is mostly black. From second and third hand reports, black strip clubs are quite different in ambiance and performance aspects; unfortunately, I will not be able to deal with that here.

The Scene

The bar I went to is divided into two sections, the main stage area and the pool tables. There are also VIP rooms off to one side of the main area, somewhat obscured by a partial wall. The stages and the pool area are separated by two large bars. In the stage area there are four stages: the main stage across the room from the pool areas; two satellite stages between the main stage and the separating bar; and a bar/stage opposite the VIP rooms. While many customers choose to sit in the more isolated area across the separating bar and near the pool tables, most business is concentrated in the main stage area where the tables are surrounded by stages, and thus, naked or semi-naked women. Almost every wall is covered by mirrors, and angled mirrors hang above the satellite stages. Spinning, multi-colored lights dot the ceiling, and there is a disco ball above the main stage. While this bar did not use a smoke machine on any of my visits, the smoke from cigarettes in the air was easily thick enough to enhance the light show. Each stage is outlined with blinking lights. The dancers enter the room from wings behind the main stage or the dressing rooms off to one side of the stage area.

The dancers' costumes vary widely, from a dancer wearing a bikini top and bottom covered with fluffy fuzz, affectionately known as the chicken lady, to a "gothic chick" wearing thigh-high black leather boots with matching gloves, spiked bracelet, and full length black leather dress. The dancers pick their clothing according to an image they want to project and generally strive for some element of uniqueness or novelty. Dancers may change costumes throughout the evening - the chicken lady later changed to another bikini style outfit with an American flag motif. The "gothic chick" donned a corset in subsequent sets. Costumes can be bought from shops specializing in such outfits, or vintage thrift stores, or sometimes even from shops in the strip club itself. Many clubs have "house mothers" who repair costumes on the spot.
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and sell perfumes and makeup, in addition to "keeping the girls out of trouble" by policing the dressing rooms for drug use and discouraging inappropriate behavior.

Makeup and hairstyle also contribute to the dancer's "look." Although the house mother provides some makeup, most dancers carry their own kits, and many dye their hair to enhance their sex appeal. Blonde is a popular color among dancers, but other colors are seen as well. The leather-gothic dancer described above dyes her hair jet black to contrast with her pale skin. Others find red hair to be more interesting than their natural brown or auburn. Cosmetic surgery is also popular, and my key informant estimates that some thirty percent of dancers have breast implants.

**Performance**

There are several reasons that women stay in the industry, but the one motivating force that draws them into the business is the lure of big money. One of the predominant ways that women take the first step towards dancing in strip clubs as a job comes through amateur night contests. Women sign up for the contest at the beginning of the night shift, around eight o'clock, and each amateur dances, in turn, to a set of three songs. Those contestants not on stage must stay in a designated area, ostensibly to prevent competition for the regular staff. When all the contestants have danced their set, they are brought together on the main stage and each one walks down the runway as the crowd votes by clapping or handing out "ballots" to their favorite contestant. The winner is declared, and all of the contestants dance one more song together on the main stage. This last dance, as well as the three song set, provide the contestants with the opportunity to collect tips. For the winners, the prize money is usually substantial ($500 split among three winners), but even the women who don't win may make tips during their fifteen or twenty minutes on stage.

While amateur nights are generally contests between professional strippers away from their own clubs, occasionally a true amateur will enter the contest. They rarely win, but are provided an opportunity to experience dancing and make some quick money through tips. The amateur I interviewed said she had been thinking about stripping for months and decided that "it was now or never" that she would try. She reported it to be a positive experience in that she felt she had overcome her fear of being naked in a room full of men. She "needed some money fast" for reasons unclear, and said she would probably try to get a job the next week. My key informant reported a similar experience, finding the freedom to be naked in public as enticing as the opportunity to make good money. While one of my informants reported that she did not go to an amateur night first, but just went to a club and was hired, it seems that the amateur night ritual allows a woman to maximize earnings through tips and prizes while minimizing her exposure to the crowd -- usually only fifteen minutes or so of nudity. Coming out of this experience with less fear and positive expectations of money earning potential may give many women the extra push towards applying for a license and getting a job in a club.

Once a woman becomes an employee of the club, she earns money in
three different types of performances, each done in a different location in the bar: runway dancing, table dancing and VIP rooms. Runway dancing is required by the clubs of all dancers who work there. There is usually a rotation that the DJ uses to schedule performances so that each dancer is on stage an equal amount of time. The stage performance begins as the dancers walk, clothed, to their respective stages. On very busy nights, when there are a number of dancers working (usually twenty or more), two dancers will occupy the same stage. The runway set begins as dancers walk up the stairs of the raised stages and begin to gyrate hips and torso, perhaps leaning forward or leaning back and cupping their breasts, tossing their hair if it is long. Dancing is characterized by gyration, undulation, posing, and walking or strutting - there is little frenetic bouncing up and down as the dancers are always wearing heels. Poses are usually directed toward a customer sitting on or near the runway, and eye contact "targets" this customer. Once eye contact is established, the customer is compelled to tip the dancer or avert his eyes. In one instance, a dancer admonished me for not tipping her though I was watching her performance from a close proximity. Wagging her finger in a "no, no" motion clearly imparted to me that I was not fulfilling my role as a customer. Maintaining eye contact with suggestive dancing and posing -- touching one's stomach or breasts, or brushing one's hair back, seem to be enough to get most customers to tip. As a customer, you realize that tipping is your obligation. Being singled out and given "attention" gives you the opportunity to personalize the sexual fantasy. This "counterfeit intimacy" comes with a condition, however -- payment for services rendered. If the customer persists in watching without tipping, the dancer will begin ignoring him by walking to the other end of the stage and no longer making eye contact.

The runway dancing itself generally proceeds in three steps. The first song is usually danced clothed, and during the second song the dancer will remove one article of clothing, usually her top. On the third song, the dancer removes her bottom piece of clothing; by law she is required to leave her shoes on. This is only a general statement and variations are seen. Many dancers will dance fully clothed until they earn a specific amount, then remove their top, or sometimes bottom, and wait until they have earned another five or ten dollars before removing their last article of clothing. The DJ will encourage the men to tip by saying such things as "a little tipping goes a long way; it's not hard to get the ladies' clothes off, gents; things get harder after the clothes come off." One dancer I interviewed said that other dancers would become angry when she disrobed fully as soon as she got on stage, but she felt she made more money this way.

Table dancing, the second of dancers' performances and the most lucrative, begins with "The Deal," in which an agreement is reached between a dancer and a customer that a table dance will be performed for a certain amount of money. Usually the price is fixed by the club at ten dollars, but there may be times when it is lowered. Roughly seventy-five percent of the time, my informants claim, the deal is initiated by the dancer who walks up to the table and asks "What do you say to a table dance?" (I was surprised to hear this question given the assumption that customers would want to talk with the customers) or "Do you want a table dance?" Once the customer initiates the table dance him or herself, they usually after the customer initiates the table dance. The customer will always be in the vicinity of the customer who wants to hire her services. The table dance will begin with "The Deal," in which an agreement is reached between a dancer and a customer that a table dance will be performed for a certain amount of money. Roughly seventy-five percent of the time, my informants claim, the deal is initiated by the dancer who
walks up to the customer, and after little or no conversation asks, "Would you like a table dance?" Occasionally, the dancer will sit down with the customer and talk for a while before asking. When the customer initiates the deal and asks for the table dance himself, (or herself on that rare occasion the customer is a woman) it is usually after the dancer has initiated a conversation. Sometimes, though, the customer will ask a dancer who happens to be in the vicinity without any prior contact. On very rare occasions, the person who wants a table dance will use an intermediary such as a waitress or friend to ask a dancer for a table dance. The table dance begins at the start of the next song, or immediately if the song playing has just begun.

When the dance begins, the dancer takes off her clothes. 99.99% of the time, it is done naked. Only rarely is a table dance performed fully clothed. Sometimes a dancer may leave a top or bottom on for part of the song, but by the end she is always (99.99%) naked. My informant classified all table dancing into two types. The first, known as the "Cheetah Bop" is done strictly for money, and is "as least erotic as possible." This dance involves the same motions as other table dances - hip gyrations, belly/torso undulation, and perhaps slapping the bottom in an imitation of spanking, but is considered more distanced and less intimate than the second type. Eye contact is avoided, especially when the customer is a stranger, and sometimes the dancers will talk to their customers. I observed one instance of talking at a very close distance, and was surprised to hear such a casual conversational tone. According to one female informant, "Talking to someone you don't know while you are naked is less intimate" than dancing and being silent. In the "Cheetah Bop" the dancer will generally turn her back to the customer, unless she thinks he will try to grab her.

The second type of table dance is more intimate, described by my informant as an attitude that does not express itself physically. She was hard pressed to describe exactly what made it more intimate, but when I asked if the dancer put her breasts in the customer's face both my informants responded with an emphatic "No!" She did explain that there was greater eye contact in intimate dances, and that sometimes, but not often, the dancing was physically closer. Most table dances I observed put dancers' legs inches from their sitting customers, with the torsos two to three feet apart. One "intimate" dance described by my informant put her in contact with the customer, but this was for her an extreme example — she later married the man. In the intimate table dance, the dancer always orients herself facing the customer to facilitate eye contact. The intimate dance is always described as having a motivation other than money, such as sexual interest or "thinking the guy is nice." This increase in intimacy occurs, I believe, because the subject(customer)-object(dancer) relationship changes into a subject-subject relationship in which each participant can fantasize about the other. I will return to this idea of intimacy arising from mutual interaction in the conclusion.

At the end of the table dance, the dancer puts her clothes back on. This rule is never broken. Usually, this is the time
the dancer collects the fee, and possibly an additional tip. If the customer is reluctant to pay, stubborn insistence on the part of the dancer will usually get the money. As a last resort, the dancer can get the bouncer to enforce payment, but I have not observed this, and S-- said this happened rarely. My male informant, D.J.J., seems to think that the dancers feel obliged to solve such problems on their own. In the one case I observed, the dancer got her money after sixty seconds or so of arguing.

After being paid, many dancers will sit with their customers and chat. If the customers are spending money, this facilitates getting another table dance quickly. If they are just "nice guys" the dancer may enjoy hanging out, and possibly get a drink bought for her. The hustler, my informants claim, is not likely to hang out, but may ask the customer directly, "do you want another table dance?" This approach often works, but since non-hustlers are reluctant to press for a second table dance, and the guys rarely ask for two in a row, it is usually only the hustlers who get table dances one after another. Here the division between hustlers and non-hustlers is described by my informant as cold vs. caring. The hustler, she reiterates, is only out for money, and doesn't care about the customers. The non-hustler, being a caring person, will want to sit down and talk to the customers. In her eyes, the ten dollars paid for the table dance entitles the men to some discussion and "fun" unless the club is quite busy and the dancer is called for a table dance somewhere else. Money comes into the picture, but is not the only reason one works in a strip joint if one is a "caring" person.

Both of my informants, when commenting on the table dances we had observed that evening expressed surprise at some of the things the dancers did. When I asked them to compare table dances we had seen with those of a few years back they said, "There are no rules anymore." There was a fine, if fuzzy, line between "lewd and nude" they said, and many "lewd" things we observed would not have been allowed to happen a couple of years ago. Kneeling down to get tips (on stage) instead of standing with the garter open used to be unacceptable but now is the norm. In the table dance, bending over even forty five degrees was not done, where today we saw dancers bending over, almost touching the ground, to expose the clitoris. Touching one's own body had long been considered inappropriate, but now is common in both the table dance and on stage (usually, this means touching or squeezing one's breasts - never the clitoris). S-- also expressed dismay at table dancers "rubbing their ass on his zipper." Since much of this description of table dances was derived from the experience of my two key informants, it may reflect a more conservative view of what the table dance "should" be rather than what it was at the bar we frequented.

VIP room dancing is a third performance the dancers engage in, and as I was not able to participate in this activity directly due to cost, I have had to rely heavily on my informant's description. Generally, a customer will "rent" a VIP semi-private room from the club, and a dancer of his choice will perform an extended table dance. Most VIP rooms are relatively open. The dancer will receive a table prostitute will receive a certain amount of money, and is generally required to work. She will not tip, but may ask for an additional tip. If the customer is reluctant to pay, stubborn insistence on the part of the dancer will usually get the money. As a last resort, the dancer can get the bouncer to enforce payment, but I have not observed this, and S-- said this happened rarely. My male informant, D.J.J., seems to think that the dancers feel obliged to solve such problems on their own. In the one case I observed, the dancer got her money after sixty seconds or so of arguing.

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relatively open, not sites for under the table prostitution. Sometimes the dancer will receive some part of the "rent," but it is generally understood that the customer is required to tip the dancer to "make it worth her while." My key informant could not recall a case in which a customer had not tipped generously in a VIP room, but she supposed that a dancer who did not feel it to be worth her time would simply leave.

In one club T-- had worked at, the VIP rooms were fully enclosed, cutting the dancer off from bouncers and other club personnel. She reports that her first week of work there she danced for a customer in a VIP room, and he tried to grab her buttocks. She whirled around and slapped him, and he sat back and didn't try again. She later found out that he was a regular, and tried to molest new dancers in the hopes that they wouldn't respond as aggressively as she had. One must suppose that occasionally, in that club at least, some don't. Whether through confusion about their role as a dancer, or in the hopes of earning more money, some sexual contact may occur in this type of private interaction/environment.

**Conclusions**

Several aspects of strip joint dancing make it an attractive occupation for strippers. Dancers generally choose their own hours and are given a wide degree of self-determination in the performance of their job. The club owners depend on having a large number of strippers working at their establishments, and there is a general consensus among employees and management that the more strippers working at a location, the better business will be. Although individual strippers may not make a lot of money when the bar is overstaffed, and customers are few, they seem to think that variety adds appeal to a club's image. Self-determination -- who to sit with, how frequently to solicit table dances, being able to drink on the job -- gives a dancer control over her situation. Clubs are so numerous in Atlanta today that they are forced to cede this control to dancers or lose them to more tolerant clubs.

The amount of money a woman can earn at stripping is one of the main factors that keep her in the profession. It is definitely the main draw that brings new women into the profession. Although the amount can vary wildly, one hundred and fifty dollars for an eight hour shift is not uncommon, and three hundred or more can be made on a weekend (busy) night when the dancer is out to make cash (hustling). Of my informants that had gone on to higher education, most were still in school, and felt this was certainly the most lucrative job they could do while attending, or perhaps even after graduating from school.

M: Um...what else...and you become addicted to the money.
M: I mean I'm gonna graduate from college in a year, but I really...it's like a big mind struggle for me to say.. I'm gonna get that job for twenty grand a year..

The money, then, helps attract women to dancing and keep them in the profession. This much I expected, and I expected to find that this "addiction to money" would lead that dancers to stay in their jobs past the point of it being someth-
ing that they wanted to do. I felt that the objectifying aspect of the job -- consistently dealing with men gazing at their bodies for sexual gratification -- would eventually become psychologically taxing, yet they would not want to quit and lose the high standard of living they had become accustomed to. While the flexible work schedule and the high income make for "easy money," the dancers with whom I talked all mentioned a third aspect of the job that challenges my hypothesis that being leered at eight hours a day would take its toll, psychologically, on the women.

All of the dancers referred to the incredible amount of attention they received at their jobs as highly addicting. Even the "hustler" I spoke to, working "(only) for the money" says:

\[ M: \text{the attention is very addicting, and get used to the men buying you drinks, and really just paying for everything around you. And it kinda, y'know, when you leave here you kinda...want other people to treat you that way when you're not here, you expect them to tell you that you're beautiful and all that. Like, I hate going to bars, I don't go to other bars. I mean I go once every two months I'll go to Buckhead or something, because I cannot stand the kind of attention I get there, in comparison with this, it's just, it's annoying. (laughs)} \]

The fantasy for the male in a strip joint is that a beautiful woman "wants" him. That she, in reality, "wants" him to give her money does not intrude on the fantasy that she "wants" him sexually. In fact, both parties understand that the more money that changes hands, the more attention will be given. But there is a second fantasy operating here, one which adds another level to the interaction. The dancer's ego is reinforced as she fantasizes about being "The most beautiful woman in the world." The attention given to the dancer fulfills a psychological need, and adds another dimension to her work, changing it from a purely economic venture to one in which she, like the customer, sees herself getting non-economic benefits. This aspect of the job can be seen on the floor for example, when a dancer will sit with a customer for a period of time without receiving money. She enjoys the attention that the men give, and has a chance to talk to someone herself. That the men enjoy the attention is evident, too, in that dancers describe a simple or overwhelming majority of customers (depending on the dancer), as "nice guys who just want to talk," sometimes adding, "to a pretty face."

It is the customers' role to look at the women,\(^6\) but it is also expected that they will talk, and customers who are distant or quiet tend to make dancers uncomfortable. When asked by complete strangers for a table dance, a dancer will often make surprisingly casual conversation while she dances naked in front of the customer. This has the effect of making the table dance less intense, and less uncomfortable for the dancer, but also opens another dialogue, another medium of exchange besides the money-for-nudity "purchase" that characterizes her job. Conversation personalizes intercourse, and helps change the "representation of the object" the male voyeurists work to objectify. While many dancers who work in strip joints to assist with their assigned studies consider this attention uncomfortable, and some hope to mitigate this tension by working "(only) for the money," their informants say:

\[ \text{She does not turn the work off because she is addicted, and chatting with them respect, and enjoying them. The one thing that she likes is getting attention from people like me, and chatting with them for very long periods of time. She'll get, you know, minutes of grinding, and they'll get.}} \]

"representation to extricate..." This is a) demeaning the human female and b) considered to be degrading characters (43). I would argue that the woman has enabled representation to extricate..." of sexual objectification.
helps change the relationship of the subject-object voyeuristic fantasy into that of two participants, two subjects. Perhaps half my original thesis was accurate, and women who work in strip joints find themselves objectified, and find that objectification uncomfortable and demeaning. They mitigate this tension, however, and overcome their assigned status as objects. The strippers I talked to insert themselves in the dialogue aggressively, and take from it emotional satisfaction. S--, for example, considers herself to be a caring person. She does not turn off that caring just because she is at work. In sitting down and chatting with her customers, she shows them respect, and forces some respect out of them. The ones who insist on treating her like meat will not have a relationship with her for very long. She will leave them for the hustlers to pick over; three minutes of grinding for ten dollars is all they'll get. Perhaps some men want that, but the evidence, if I am to trust my informants, shows that a distinct minority of strip joint customers express this attitude. Most of the men are happy to talk, are there to talk. They apparently do not frequent strip joints for the same reason that men use print pornography.

Helen Longino argues in Lederer's Take Back the Night, that pornography is "representation of sexual behavior (which is a) demeaning and degrading portrayal of the human female," and "that a person consented to be harmed...does not alter the degrading character of such behavior"(42-43). I would argue that, in a strip joint, the woman has enough control over her representation to extricate herself from the role of sexual object and becomes a sexual subject interacting with the men around her under circumstances that are under her control. While it is clear that objectification of the woman as a sexual toy is possible in a strip joint (witness the dancer being grabbed in the VIP room), the women break down that impersonal barrier and become individuals interacting with the men. They do not "consent to be harmed;" in fact, they work hard to avoid it. They direct the men to a more personal relationship. This is what makes the "intimate" table dance possible. My informants do not call it an intimate dance because one person knows the other. It is intimate because each reveals something. Eye contact and body language are the instruments of communication through which each can express a fantasy and become a fantasy. Unlike the images of print pornography, which can become truly divorced from the person as a whole and represented as vagina, breasts and flesh for male consumption, my informants do not allow themselves to be represented as less than they are. They present themselves, and in so doing, retain some of the qualities that a print pornographer can strip away, the qualities that keep them human.

References Cited


Notes
1) Only one of my informants had left the industry; therefore, my accounts are based upon the testimony of those who like their
work, and have stayed in it.
2) A "hustler" is a label given to a stripper (or waitress) who works the crowd for maximal economic gain. The self-defined hustler I interviewed put it this way:

M--: I'm here to make my money, and I'm gonna hustle, and I'm gonna plug the customers until (I make what I need). I will walk around and ask the same man eight times if they want a table dance, until they walk out the door and leave, I don't give a shit. I mean, I smile at 'em, I'm nice and everything, but, y'know, I'm not 'em go by, I'm not gonna pass by them without trying to get some kind of money out of them.

Non-hustlers work and "just let the money come" without pushing the customers - they wait for the customer to ask for a table dance, they sit down and chat with someone without being given money, etc. Most dancers use both these styles of working, and the label "hustler" or "non-hustler" just refers to the approach they use most often.

3) Term borrowed from Enick, Graves, and Preston.

4) Or, for the cynical perhaps, an object-object relationship.

5) When a DJ friend of mine was looking for a job, he was given a chance to perform spinning discs, but the management also wanted to know, "How many girls can you bring?" This refers to the fact that often dancers will move from club to club following DJ's who play music they like, and who they get along well with. Dancers can also be influenced to move if the DJ tells them there is more money to be made at the new club. My informant, who is annoyed by this question responds (to me) "You want girls, have a contest!" This is intended as an amusing jab at the management, but may also indicate that amateur contests function as a way for dancers to check out their earning potential at other clubs without quitting their present jobs. For example, my key informant (referring to the earnings of a real amateur that we saw perform) states:

S: ...She had a thirty dollar set! In the corner! I mean, that's incredible on its own. She told you herself she was pretty close to last (onstage) and some of the girls told her they made ten and fifteen, and she made thirty. There are some girls that work there that probably don't make thirty dollars per set. So I think that was quite impressive.

Certainly dancers from other clubs that do not make this kind of money would be attracted to a club in which they always had a good amateur night set.

6) One informant did a table dance for me to appear as if she was working (and I suspect because she wanted to see how I would react), and told me "you don't have to look (at my body), but you will have to face me (with your body) or I will be offended." Paralysed that I would offend her by looking at her body, I kept my eyes on her face, and to my dismay she kept dancing through a second song.