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*“...power is understood to be a contested, negotiated social resource that is constantly being enacted during interpersonal encounters.”*

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**WORKING IN THE FANTASY FACTORY**  
The Attention Hypothesis and the Enacting of Masculine Power in Strip Clubs

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*Using ethnographic data, this article argues that interactions between strippers and their customers are vehicles for the conveyance of attention and the enactment of masculine power in addition to being locations of erotic entertainment. Rejecting the anti-sex-work feminist argument that erotic entertainment serves men by objectifying women, this article argues instead that interactions in strip clubs rely on dancers as interactive subjects rather than as sex objects. Using Goffman's notion of "impression management" and Hochschild's notion of "emotional labor," this article presents an analysis of strip club encounters that fits into a feminist-interactionist framework.*

**F**eminist objections to sex-work tend to be framed in terms of men's objectification of women (Barry 1979; Chapkiss 1997; Griffin 1981; MacKinnon 1987; Roiphe 1993; Phelan 1989; and others). Prostitution, pornography, sex shows, nude dancing are all venues for men to gaze at women's bodies. This argument regarding the objectification of women in this way assumes a sort of power wielded by men, against women, that keeps women oppressed, beaten down, submissive, or alternatively keeps them buying into a male-dominated system of sexuality and commerce.

Previous sociological research on stripping and strip clubs has focused largely on issues other than gendered power. The most common approach to research on stripping has been framed in terms of "deviant occupation" studies, examining the career paths of strippers and the shared characteristics of strippers as workers in a deviant setting (McCaghy and Skipper 1969, 1972; Skipper and McCaghy 1970, 1971; Boles and Garbin 1974a; Carey, Peterson, and Sharpe 1974; Forsyth and Deshotels 1997, 1998). This work frames the stripper as a subject, not as an object, as argued by proponents of the feminist anti-sex-work perspective mentioned above. A second way to depict the stripper as subject, rather than as object, is to examine the actual lived experience (Ronai 1992). Carol Ronai (1992) places her own subjectivity as erotic dancer and researcher in the center of her analysis of the work of stripping.

This article fits more closely into a third approach to the study of stripping, that which places the interaction between the strippers and

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customers at the center of analysis (Boles and Garbin 1974b; Gonos 1976; Ronai and Ellis 1989). While descriptive of these interactions, the article's focus is on questions of gendered power, taking issue with the objectification thesis of the anti-sex-work feminist characterization described above. Rather than understanding power as a monolithic social force oppressing women, in this article, power is understood to be a contested, negotiated social resource that is constantly being enacted during interpersonal encounters. This power is relational. It is in the service of men but in a manner more insidious than the power described by the anti-sex-work position of MacKinnon (1987) and others. This article will first describe the characteristics of this power and will then explain how the enacting of this power creates a source of reinforcement for traditional notions of masculinity. Finally, it will illuminate the creation and enacting of this masculine power (so called because of its connection to traditional notions of masculinity) through specific types of interactions between dancers and customers in strip clubs. These interactions are characterized by two related processes. The first is composed of the transformation of dancers into fantastical subjects through interaction with customers, where the customers might imagine backgrounds and lifestyles for the strippers with whom they interact and the strippers work to anticipate these imagined backgrounds and present an image consistent with them. The second is composed of the "impression management" (Goffman 1959) and "emotional labor" (Hochschild 1979, 1983) on the part of the dancers that makes that subjectification possible.

## METHODS

The data for this article were drawn from ethnographic research I engaged in from 1996 to 1998. My primary method of data collection was participant observation; I spent 110 hours as a customer in two New England strip clubs. I participated in interactions with strippers, buying table dances, tipping at the stages, and also in conversations with dancers at my table, where I revealed my interest as a researcher. This afforded me the opportunity to interview dancers as another method of collecting data. Twelve dancers participated in individual open-ended interviews. A third source of data was created as I carried on informal conversations with customers in the clubs. Although no customers I

approached would consent to formal, recorded interviews, many were willing to talk to me informally in the club setting. All were informed of my interest as a researcher, and all participants of interviews and conversations were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. Data were analyzed in the style of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

### A NOTE ON SUBJECTIVITY AND RESEARCH

Being a clothed woman in a place where women are supposed to be naked and being a customer in a place where customers are supposed to be men raises important methodological questions. These questions fall into two categories. The first category contains questions about how the researcher affects the environment she studies. The second category contains questions about how the researcher's identity affects the collection and interpretation of data. An entire article could be devoted to these questions, but here I will only address them briefly.

Women who visit strip clubs where the customers are men and the dancers are women, whether or not they are researchers, affect the environment they have stepped into. During my initial visits to Michael's, I realized that my presence drew the attention of customers away from the dancers at times. I discussed this with Diana, a dancer there. She related to me a similar experience.

I checked out Michael's before I worked here, and I found that I walked in and they [customers] were looking more at me than at the girls on stage. Because you're there and you're not a dancer, you're more fascinating.

Men who came to the strip club to interact with women were also interested in interacting with me. Customers who came to the club only to watch naked women dance, on the other hand, seemed discomfited by my presence. I was not the only woman customer to enter the clubs. Occasionally, other women would come in. Some were accompanied by men. Others were friends of dancers. A few came to see feature performers. All seemed to draw a bit of attention from the other customers in the club. I minimized the intrusiveness of my presence in two ways. First, I stayed for at least two hours for each visit. I noted that after I had

found a place to sit and had been part of the crowd for about an hour, people stopped noticing me. I blended in. Second, I visited each club frequently. This allowed me to become familiar to the regular customers and to the staff, so that my presence was less remarkable. When customers did remark on my presence and interact with me, I would answer questions honestly and politely and inform them of my research interest. Several fruitful conversations with customers about their impressions of the clubs were conducted this way.

Addressing concerns about how my identity as a woman-feminist-clothed-researcher-customer would affect my data collection and analysis was stickier. I have confidence in my data and my analysis for the following key reasons. First, I encouraged myself to experience what the other customers might have found enjoyable about the setting. I bought table dances and tipped dancers and kept my "sociological imagination" (Mills 1959) open to what was fun or erotic about those experiences. I followed up on these observations by comparing my own responses to those that dancers told me about in interviews. Second, I paid close attention to my personal feelings about the clubs and the people I encountered in them. Whether positive, negative, or neutral, I wrote about these feelings in my field notes, and when analyzing my notes, I was able to reflect on how my understanding of the research environment might be affected. Third, I allowed my interviews, my observations, and my conversations with customers to all inform each other as I progressed in my research. This provided me with ways to check my own interpretations against those of the dancers and other customers, as well as to check what was reported by dancers and customers against what I witnessed myself in the clubs.

### THE ATTENTION HYPOTHESIS AND MASCULINE POWER

At table-dance clubs, in addition to dancing on stage for tips, dancers sell nude dances performed at the customers' tables but where there is no physical contact between the customer and the dancers. It may seem obvious at the start that the magnet attracting the men to bars that charge more than five dollars for a beer is the sexiness, the live nude girls. It is pay-per-view in which the view is of breasts and hips and legs and bottoms all belonging to sexy women in various stages of undress: perhaps

clad in tightly clinging gowns, or sequined bras and panties, or then again clad only in skin lit by strobes and black lights. This article argues below that eroticism is only part of what draws the men. Close observation indicates that this eroticism is a vehicle for the conveyance of something more: (attention) If not for the direct attention a dancer and customer can pay each other, there would be little difference between this type of erotic entertainment and erotic videos. It is the possibility of interaction that sets them apart. The attention, I observe as I watch customers stand a bit straighter when the dancers on stage notice and approach them, seems to be as necessary, perhaps more necessary, than the nudity. The customers have paid money to come in and pay more money to watch women strip, but they also pay to be seen by the women. They too receive recognition and attention. The following observation notes demonstrate some of the types of attention routinely given to customers by strippers.

I notice that several of the dancers lean far forward when receiving a tip and seem to whisper to the customer, closing out the distractions of loud music and other customers.

One element of tipping that is very ritualized for many dancers is putting themselves in a position to look up at the customer (she slides her back down the pole to sit on her heels). This not only seems to acknowledge the customer by altering her position to better speak to him but also reinforces his importance by voluntarily putting herself in the "inferior" position.

I witnessed several "missed opportunities" tonight where tips were not collected because the stripper failed to notice the customer or the customer failed to get her attention. In three different instances, customers stood in one place, money in hand, even though the stripper had her back to them, and did not move around to where she could see, despite the fact that she was not dancing for another customer at the time. That seems to indicate that it is very important to the customer to have the dancer acknowledge him, rather than having to work to get her attention.

I argue that this attention is most valuable when it allows for two things. First, it must allow for witnesses; that is, it must be visible to the other customers and dancers that fill the social space within the strip club. Second, it must allow the customer to imagine the personality and history of the dancer who is attending to him; that is, she must not impede his imagination by telling him details of her life that will jeopardize his ability to see her as a sexy, sensual, and most important,

available, woman. When these two things occur, they make available more than simple attention. They create a possibility for the enacting of masculine power.

The term *masculine power* requires both definition and context, as notions of power and of masculinity and femininity are themselves problematic. I use the term to indicate two specific pieces of a socially constructed puzzle that when assembled according to our cultural expectations, produce a collage of characteristics we most often attribute to men or that we count as most appropriate or fitting when exhibited by men. My use of this term is consistent with an understanding of gender (the division of human beings into "men" and "women") as being a product of culture and relations of power rather than with an understanding of gender as biologically determined. I do not imply, through calling this power masculine, that it is an essential element of being a man (i.e., not all men need possess it, nor does any man need to possess it at all times), nor do I imply that possessing it is sufficient to indicate that one is a man (i.e., it might be possessed at times by boys, girls, or women). Terms such as *masculinity* and *femininity* often are used to highlight differences between men and women, while minimizing differences among women and differences among men (Rubin 1976; McCall 1992). Masculine power, then, is power that differentiates men from women, ordinarily being attributed to men, and when acknowledged in women, it is downplayed, de-emphasized, or construed as unfeminine.

I will now describe these two pieces of that socially constructed masculinity that I have grouped together under masculine power. These two characteristics can best be described as being desirable to women and being able to financially take care of a woman. I emphasize that this power is masculine because it is affirmed for men, by men and women, in a very heterosexist environment that caricatures modern socially constructed standards of masculinity and femininity (i.e., that men should be providers of economic security for women, that they should be desired by women, and that women should be providers of emotional and sexual security and should be desired by men). It is important to recognize that these traits (being desired by women and having money) are culturally linked and that this is evident both inside and outside the strip club. Outside the strip club, men might be seen as more desirable to women if they can potentially take care of a family.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, women might be seen as more desirable if they can keep men feeling good about

themselves. Strippers who participated in interviews underscored these points. The most sought-after customer in the strip club is very likely going to be the one most willing to spend his dollars. The following passages, taken from interviews with dancers, illustrate the way they categorize and evaluate customers based on the customers' willingness to spend money. Lynne describes how dancers warn each other about customers who are not spending money.

You definitely classify them. If somebody's cheap, you say "Those guys are cheap," and you tell the other girls in the dressing room. . . . Or, "Hey, these guys are tipping me really well, go over there," or "Go talk to these guys. They've got money."

Becky describes the customers she finds most frustrating.

Lately, I've been finding a lot that they just come in, just to watch, and they don't tip. I don't know if they don't understand, or if they just don't care, that we're there to work. . . . They just want to see what they want to see, and a lot of them don't even pay for it.

*yes!* The best paid stripper is likely to be the one that is best at creating and conveying feelings of intimacy, interest, and desire for her customers. Strippers I interviewed often conveyed a sense of needing to make customers feel desired in order to sell dances and to keep customers tipping. Diana discusses her frustration about not making as much as some of the other dancers.

Sometimes I get irritated because some of the other girls do really well and I don't understand why, because I think I have a better body; but . . . it seems like they're better with humoring the customers and eye contact and stuff.

Lynne describes her start at her first table dance club.

*!* I was watching some of the girls who were not very attractive, and they were making killer money, and I thought, "How do they do that?" and I would ask, and they'd say, "You just ask." And I was like, "What do you mean 'you just ask'?" and I couldn't comprehend it for awhile. But then I understood that they [customers] want to be approached and asked [for dances]. They want you to come to them. They don't want to have to ask you.

Delaney describes how she approaches selling table dances.

I probably walk by and smile and try to engage 'em in a little conversation beforehand, because I realize I'm not the most beautiful girl in there. . . . But I'm flirty, and you have to flirt with them and make them feel special. And then, they're like "wow . . . cool."

"Approaching" customers, "humoring" them, and "making them feel special" are all ways that dancers describe their attempts to give customers a sense of being important or desired, and this feeling of being important or desired, according to the strippers interviewed for this study, seemed an important factor in keeping the money flowing.

Several possible criticisms of this attention hypothesis seem likely, and I will address them here. At first, it might seem that this affirmation of desirability is undermined by its connection to money. It is the customer's money, not his self, that the dancer desires, and we can see this when we watch a stripper dance for one customer, attend to him, take his money, and then move on to the next customer. However, three things keep this relationship between money and attention from devaluing the possible affirmation of power and desirability available through the interaction. First, the giving of money need not be associated with a purchase transaction. Several other ways of framing the situation (Goffman 1974) exist and are used by customers in strip clubs. Dancers I interviewed reported that customers often use reward frameworks ("Here, take this, you deserve it") or gift frameworks ("Here honey, let me help you with your bills/tuition/etc."), as if the fee being paid is not a contractual arrangement but rather given out of good will. This latter framing mechanism, the gift frame, can also be seen as a sort of providing frame: the customer understands himself to be contributing to the dancer's financial security rather than as taking part in a fee-for-service interaction. The second reason this relationship between money and attention is less problematic than might first be assumed has to do with its explicitness. Trade and exchange underlie many types of social interaction between men and women. Often, we try to minimize the visibility of these exchanges or frame them in ways to make them seem less strategic. By keeping the exchange visible and explicit, the transaction becomes simply a part of the social setting, taken for granted and placed in the realm of social convention rather than in the realm of intentional purchase or sale. Finally, as indicated above, the giving of money to a woman for something she has provided lends power to that

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