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Exotic dancers in an awkward negotiation: Implications for affect control theory



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ABSTRACT

We use affect control theory (ACT) to test the veracity of mathematically derived predictions that an exotic dancer will act in ways that are consistent with societal expectations for her “deviant” label. We also explore the strategies that exotic dancers use to maintain the definition of the situation. Our findings indicate that exotic dancers do not define their own identities as predicted. Our data also demonstrate that participants in our study were at least as likely to manage the identities of others as they were their own identities. We conclude our paper by discussing our interpretations of the data and the veracity of ACT.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to test the veracity of affect control theory (ACT) and examine the extent to which an exotic dancer will act in ways that are consistent with societal expectations for her “deviant” label in the context of a particular awkward negotiation. ACT is a mathematical derivation of symbolic interaction that is used to develop theories addressing a diverse set of topics, including emotions (Rashotte, 2002), choice of interaction partners (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992), online subcultures (King, 2008), gender issues (Kroska, 2003), and politics (Schneider, 2004, 2007). ACT is also useful in developing non-intuitive theories about deviance (Hunt, 2010; Kroska & Harkness, 2008; Schneider, 2006, 2009; Tsoudis & Smith-Lovin, 1998, 2001). Definitions used in ACT indicate that exotic dancers are evaluated negatively and perceived

as weak by others (Schneider, 2006). Nevertheless, to our knowledge, no one has used ACT to explore the exotic dancer identity in context.

Extant literature on exotic dancers indicates that they tend to be stigmatized by the general population and that they are aware of their deviant status (Bradley, 2007; Brewster, 2003; Forsyth & Deshotels, 1997, 1998; Sweet & Tewksbury, 2000a; Weitzer, 2000; Wesely, 2003). However, the literature also reveals that exotic dancers tend to define themselves as good, decent, and normal (Sandberg, 2009; Thompson, Harred, & Burks, 2003). A plethora of studies examine typical exotic dancer/patron negotiations (Frank, 2007; Wahab, Baker, Smith, Cooper, & Lerum, 2011). Research indicates that exotic dancers have expectations that they will have non-problematic monetary exchanges under typical conditions (Forsyth & Deshotels, 1997; Ronai & Ellis, 1989). Nevertheless, exotic dancers frequently negotiate with nervous patrons (Frank, 2003). Erickson and Tewksbury (2000) report that dancers are more assertive with nervous patrons than they are with average patrons, but they do not describe the dancers’ specific assertive behaviors.

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In this paper, we describe ACT and the corresponding INTERACT computer simulations that produce mathematically derived predictions that an exotic dancer will act in a variety of negative ways toward a nervous man. Given that research suggests opposing propositions that exotic dancers negotiate with patrons as feminine women under typical conditions (Bradley, 2007), we present additional mathematically derived predictions that a woman is likely to act in positive ways toward a nervous man. We then compare these two ACT predictions with interviews of exotic dancers commenting on their own situations with nervous patrons.

2. Literature

2.1. *Nude and semi-nude dancing*

Labels to describe nude and semi-nude dancing are frequently used synonymously or ambiguously in the literature. Exotic dancers are called topless dancers, table-dancers, and/or strippers. The terms “table dancer” and “topless dancer” are often used to describe a dancer that removes her top, but not her bottoms (Ronai & Ellis, 1989). The term “stripper” is used to describe various degrees of nudity, from dancing topless to removing all clothing (Barton & Hardesty, 2010; Trautner, 2005; Wesely, 2002).

Exotic dancers have financial agendas, and they are strategic (Mestemacher & Roberti, 2004). They are able to assert their power in the workplace by acting purposefully to manipulate and exploit their patrons. However, exotic dancers are constrained by both institutional and societal norms to adhere to rules about femininity and propriety (Murphy, 2003). They earn money by taking off all or most of their clothes on a main stage, encouraging patrons to buy drinks, and/or performing a variety of special performances. Special performances include lapdances, couch dances, and VIP dances during which a performer dances erotically for a patron in close proximity or in a private room (Boles & Garbin, 1974; Forsyth & Deshotels, 1997). The establishments in which exotic dancers perform may be accurately referred to with a variety of terms, including gentlemen’s clubs, nude dance clubs, exotic dance clubs, or strip-joints (Barton & Hardesty, 2010; Thompson et al., 2003; Wesely, 2003).

2.2. *Exotic dancer identity*

Some authors argue that the increased popularity of exotic dancing, along with the increased acceptance of exotic dancing in popular media has changed the ways the public views exotic dancers. For example, Bradley (2008) argues that the stigmatizing idea of the “dirty stripper” has shifted to a more open, acceptable imagery. Bradley argues that the business of exotic dancing is changing and becoming more accepted as a legitimate career choice. However, the increasing popularity of exotic dancing does not mean that negative attitudes toward this population have disappeared. In fact, research indicates that many dancers continue to experience stigma associated with their occupations (Barton, 2002; Egan, 2006; Fogel & Quinlan, 2011; Thompson et al., 2003).

Exotic dancers are aware of their deviant statuses (Bradley, 2007; Brewster, 2003; Forsyth & Deshotels, 1997, 1998; Sweet & Tewksbury, 2000a; Weitzer, 2000; Wesely, 2003). A commonly held perspective is that stigmatized individuals will likely engage in self-loathing and that they may act in ways that are consistent with their deviant identities, especially when interacting with “normals” (Bord, 1976; Goffman, 1963). However, research suggests that exotic dancers tend to define themselves in positive ways such as good, decent, and normal (Sandberg, 2009; Thompson et al., 2003). Existing research indicates that deviants frequently assert that they have been unfairly labeled and that they are basically “good” (Elliott, Ziegler, Altman, & Scott, 1982; Jones et al., 1984; Park, 2002; Scully & Marolla, 1984). Deviants may argue that they are not fundamentally different from non-deviants (Rogers-Dillon, 1995), or they may claim that they are not as “bad” as other individuals with similar labels (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003; Snow & Anderson, 1997).

Social setting influences the likelihood of being labeled deviant. An attribute that is discrediting in certain situations may be accepted as perfectly normal in others (Elliott et al., 1982; Goffman, 1963). Many exotic dancers try to avoid disclosing information about their occupations (Philaretou, 2006). Exotic dancers report feeling a significant amount of stress in their relationships, and they must cope by using a variety of strategies. Some dancers simply accommodate stigmatization from their loved ones, while others decide to quit dancing (Downs, James, & Cowan, 2006). Some exotic dancers choose to avoid stigmatization from loved ones by seeking relationships with other dancers (Bradley, 2007). Conversely, Trautner and Collett (2010) report that exotic dancers tend to avoid making friends with co-workers to maintain a separation between the world of the exotic dancer and the mainstream world. Furthermore, Trautner and Collett argue that maintaining an alternate identity, like student, allows an exotic dancer to claim that her primary identity is not stripper, but rather that of a student. It is important to note that the behaviors of exotic dancers are influenced by the rules and conditions of different types of establishments and not all exotic dancers report feeling stigmatized (Bradley-Engen & Ulmer, 2009).

2.3. *Dancer/patron negotiations*

Exotic dancers vary in their backgrounds, motives, and personalities (Mestemacher & Roberti, 2004; Sloan & Wahab, 2004; Sweet & Tewksbury, 2000b; Wesely, 2002) and the rationale for engaging with customers vary. Research indicates that exotic dancers may interact with patrons for conversation, companionship, or even safe reprieve from other patrons (Ronai & Ellis, 1989). Nevertheless, economic exchange is the primary motive of exotic dancers (Pasko, 2002; Sijuwade, 1996) and a great deal of research focuses on exotic dancers’ negotiation strategies.

The concept of counterfeit intimacy is a long accepted phenomenon influencing exotic dancer/patron negotiations (Boles & Garbin, 1974). Counterfeit intimacy refers to the various strategies dancers use to feign interest in

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