

# Holding on to Both Ends of a Pole

## Empowering Feminine Sexuality and Reclaiming Feminist Emancipation

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## **Holding on to both ends of a pole: Empowering feminine sexuality and reclaiming feminist emancipation**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, we study pole dancing as a potential site of feminist theorization. Finding that instructors at pole dancing studios figure themselves in and through tensions between empowering feminine sexuality and the taint of sexualized labour, we discuss the productive potential of these tensions in terms of postfeminist discourse, on the one hand, and the feminist critique of this discourse, on the other. Holding on to both ends of this pole, the pole dance instructors twist and turn their words and bodies so as to produce emotionally attractive and socially recognizable subject positions for themselves and their female customers. We do not seek to dissolve the inherent tensions of these moves, but discuss how they can become productive: For the pole dance instructors, as they find opportunity to discursively resist sexualization whilst materially performing sexuality; and for us as feminist scholars as we become able to celebrate and criticize the idea(l) of empowering feminine sexuality.

**Keywords:** Emotional Labour, Feminism, Discourse, Materiality, Pole dancing, Sexuality

### **Introduction**

One of the uncertainties of (academic) writing is the identity of the reader. As we set out to situate the present piece, we are quite confident that you are interested in the academic field(s) of emotional aesthetic and sexualized labour (this being the topic of the special issue at hand), but how do you feel about pole dancing? We cannot assume any alignment with you on this matter, and we cannot ask you how you feel. Instead, we will seek to establish common ground by presenting our own starting point for entering this empirical field. Maybe you come to the text with entirely different experiences and expectations; we do not and cannot know, but at least we can disclose our own motivation for embarking on this study. What follows may seem a bit unorthodox as far as introductions go, but it is, after all, not that different from the presentations of theory and method you will meet in the next sections; it situates our knowledge (Haraway, 1988).

Our interest in pole dancing began when one of us participated in a friend's hen night. Here is the story of this first encounter: *I had not been involved in planning the day and one of the gimmicks was that only the organizers knew what was going to happen – the rest of us were simply taken from event to event. Halfway through the day, we were driven to a bleak building along one of the very trafficked roads around town; it looked like a warehouse. Then I saw the sign, which showed a sparsely dressed woman wrapped around a pole whilst holding the viewer's gaze. And I froze. I really didn't want to go in there. I did not want to take part in an activity I related with oppressive sexualisation of women's bodies. Pole dancing, I thought, was everything I, as a feminist, was against. I almost didn't go in there, but today I am happy that I did. Although I felt very awkward when we were supposed to walk sexily around the pole, the actual pole exercises were the most difficult and physically demanding I have ever done. And after our practice, the instructor gave us a show: she twirled around the pole two meters up as if gravity didn't apply to her; she stretched and*

*twisted her body up and down the pole as if she were able to hold on to both ends at once. Afterwards she told us her story; she had travelled to the US at the age of 18 to study at a film school and become an actress. Being unable to find acting jobs, she took to pole dancing at a strip club, and a few years later she returned to Denmark. However, she did not go back intending to hide her failure as an actress nor her successful strip club career. To the contrary, she said, she had found strength and power in the art of pole dancing and returned with the aim of teaching it to other women – not for them to become strippers, but as a means of re-claiming and enjoying their own sexuality... Although I was not entirely persuaded by this story, I was intrigued! I couldn't ignore how much the experience I had and the story I heard challenged my preconceptions of pole dancing as a purely exploitative form of sexualized labour; I couldn't let go of the many questions they raised in terms of whether and how a practice that I instinctively viewed as exploitative might hold empowering potential.*

So, we did what academics do when faced with things we do not understand; we turned to research. In particular, we interviewed pole dance instructors to explore how they perceive and manage the ambiguities of their work, asking how the work makes sense to them and what they make of the perceptions and reactions of others. Early in this process, it became clear that the accounts given by the pole dance instructors all hinged on the question of how to manage the taint associated with the sexualization of their work (Tyler, 2011, Sullivan, 2012). As the instructors sought to attract clients to their studios (be it for one-off performances or regular classes), they positioned themselves in relation to perceptions of their profession as a form of aestheticized sex(uality) (Hong and Duff, 1977; Mavin and Grandy, 2013; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009; Whitehead and Kurtz, 2009). This process of positioning continued in their talks with us, but, we realized, it also shaped their engagement with the material practices of pole dancing: the décor of their studios, the outfits they chose for performances, the musical accompaniment. As such, these pole dance instructors engaged in familiar taint management strategies; discursive and material practices that are well-known to the study of dirty work, more generally (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Bolton, 2000; Lemmergaard and Muhr, 2012; Tracy, 2004).

What is particular to the pole dance instructors, we found, is the way their taint management draws on concepts of empowerment, choice and individuality/individuation as propagated by a particular postfeminist discourse on the relations between gender, sexuality, and work (Duffy et al., 2017; Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al., 2017, Gill et al., 2017; Villesèche et al., 2018). This postfeminist discourse is particularly visible in discussions of mainstreaming sexuality, porn chic, and raunch (Atwood, 2009; Levy 2005; McNair 2002; Paul 2005). Here, it is argued that female empowerment may be achieved by reclaiming female sexuality; shifting female sexualization from a passive object of the male enjoyment to an active choice of women who perform as strong sexual subjects enjoying themselves. Consistent with this discourse, all our interviewees perceived their work as empowering women by teaching them to (re-)claim, be proud of, and engage in an active female sexuality.

The postfeminist discourse has, however, been heavily criticized for being but a new modality for controlling female bodies and objectifying women's sexualities, this time embedding such control within neoliberal technologies of the feminine self (e.g. Gill, 2003, 2008, 2012, McRobbie, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; 2011). In fact, as McRobbie (2009) argues, the postfeminist construction of an empowered feminine sexuality puts the progress made by feminism in the 1970s and 80s at peril. She explains:

While many feminists, including myself, were never part of pro-censorship and anti-pornography campaigning back in the 1970s and 1980s, there was nevertheless

disquiet on my own part when confronted with new issues such as the trend for pole-dancing being promoted as yet another form of women's empowerment. (McRobbie, 2009: 3)

We begin from a similar feeling of disquiet; asking how we may deal with the tension between the claim to empowerment as expressed in the postfeminist discourse and reproduced by our informants, on the one hand, and the feminist critique that this discourse is yet another control-mechanism, on the other. As feminist scholars, we share McRobbie's concern with the way the discourse of empowerment, choice and individuation seems to legitimize the sexualization (and objectification) of women while delegitimizing any feminist fight against such sexualization. However, our own first meeting with pole dancing made it impossible for us to discard the pole dance instructors' expressions and perceptions of empowerment. There is more to what they do than objectification by choice, but this does not mean that their practices are entirely unproblematic. This is the premise from which we begin; that practices may be simultaneously empowering and exploitative and that the potential for feminist emancipation lies in (re-)claiming the potential of such tensions rather than seeking to dissolve them. Our ambition, then, is not to choose sides; instead, we seek to hold on to both ends of the pole, claiming that the tensions and strains inherent in doing so may become productive for feminist analyses and theories of sexualized labour.

Thus, this paper has two aims: 1) empirically, we analyse the ambiguities of managing the taint of sexualized work and 2) theoretically, we discuss how this ambiguous relationship of empowerment and taint management in sexualized work can help inform and bring forward a feminist critique of the postfeminist discourse. We ask: How is pole dancing constructed (by pole dance instructors who are, themselves, dancers) as an empowered/empowering practice of feminine sexuality? And how can analysis of the material and discursive dimensions of this construction further feminist theorization of empowerment and emancipation? What can we learn from the practices of pole dancing without sanctioning them naively and how may we critique these practices without neglecting nor rejecting the experiences of pole dancers?

To achieve these aims, the paper unfolds as follows: First, we lay out the two ends of our theoretical pole: 1) The postfeminist claim that expressions of feminine sexuality are empowering and 2) the feminist critique that such expressions are destructive to women's emancipation. We then position ourselves in relation to this debate, evoking Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledge, and presenting our specific methods of data collection and data analysis. On this basis, we move on to our empirical investigation of the pole and the dance around it. Identifying three strategies of managing the ambiguity of the taint of female sexuality in our data – substitution, sublimation, and subversion – we analyse the pole dance instructors' discursive articulations of these strategies as they relate to their material practices. We end the paper with a discussion of how the dancers' management of the taint of sexualization and claim to sexual empowerment can forward feminist theory of sexualized labour in organization studies.

### **Pole dancing in context: Empowering feminine sexuality or diffusing feminist emancipation?**

When posited as an object of scholarly knowledge, pole dancing is typically studied in the context of 'dirty work' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007; Hughes, 1962; Kreiner et al., 2006) and/or emotional labour (Bolton, 2000; Coupland et al., 2008; Fineman, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). What is it like to do work that is stigmatized in society? How does it feel to be professionally objectified and sexualized? (for other examples of studies of sexualized labour as/in workplaces,

see Brewis and Linstead, 2000, 2002; Hancock et al., 2015; Hudson and Okhoysen, 2009; Murphy, 2003; Tyler, 2011).

In recent years, however, pole dancing, as a phenomenon of (popular) culture, has undergone a veritable revolution. It is increasingly disassociated from the context of stripping, in which it was formerly embedded, and re-branded as a recreational activity. As such, pole dancing may now be performed by the average woman who wants to combine 'staying fit' and 'having fun' (Whitehead and Kurz, 2009). Just as strip may take a radical anti-sex position (Mavin and Grandy, 2013; Wood, 2000), a radical anti-strip position has become available for pole dancing. In the re-positioning of pole dancing as a recreational sport, taking on such an 'anti-strip' position is a central strategy for pole dancing professionals. In order to enter the lucrative fitness market, they need to brand themselves and their work as 'clean'. Thus, they engage heavily in non-sexualized (even anti-sexualization) image work – in marketing material, teaching, and performances alike. Repressing sexual aspects, they instead emphasize the athletic dimensions of pole dancing, the strength, agility, and technique needed to enjoy the fun of the sport. When presented as a recreational activity, then, pole dancing is defiantly not 'sex work'.

### *Empowering feminine sexuality*

All claims to the contrary, however, pole dancing continues to be sexy and, hence, about sex in subtle and not so subtle ways. Without the element of sexiness, this activity is not differentiated from regular fitness or dance classes and, hence, does not have any special appeal. Rather, pole dancing draws its hype from what McNair (2002) calls porno-chic, which is the tendency of mainstreaming a culture of commercial sexuality. Here, sexual labour becomes socially legitimate as not only occurring in seedy strip clubs or bordellos, but also distributed to the masses through media, relationships, educational as well as working lives (Attwood, 2009). When joining in this trend, women learn that they should not be ashamed of their sexuality, but instead perform it actively, embracing, enjoying and reclaiming their right to sexiness. Thus, a new claim to feminism, or a postfeminist position, emerges; one that promises empowerment through expressions of feminine sexuality.

When repositioned as fitness activity, pole dancing fits nicely within this trend, and many performers and instructors have promoted pole dancing as a practice that empowers women as sexual subjects (Gill, 2012). When pole dancing is performed as a fitness activity, the female body becomes less of an object of surveillance or for public consumption (Murphy, 2003); instead, the individual woman takes control of her own body and how it can perform – to the point that the classical economic transaction is reversed: women are no longer being paid to pole dance, but are themselves paying to learn how to dance. Within the schema of this new transaction, the performer/instructor is admired not for her sexual attraction per se, but for her proficiency; her flexibility, strength, and the aesthetics of her choreography.

Ultimately, pole dancing is repositioned as an expression of discipline, bodily control, and powerful sexuality (Whitehead and Kurz, 2009). When pole dancing is re-inscribed in this discourse of empowerment, it offers women the opportunity of entering a sphere of powerful, active sexuality, hitherto only inhabited by men and male bodies. Pole dancing, then, becomes a platform for articulating an active (even aggressive) feminine sexuality – and for defending one's right to do so. As Whitehead and Kurz (2009, p. 225) ask:

Is one to conceptualize the various choices of women to wear items such as g-strings and playboy bunny midriff tops in terms of empowered women making free,

autonomous choices? And if so, should the voices of these women not be foregrounded and respected, rather than critiqued and problematized?

While these questions may be posed rhetorically, they do insinuate that such conceptualization in terms of empowerment is not uncontested. To the contrary, it has been heavily criticized by feminist scholars. It is to this critique, the other end of our theoretical pole, that we now turn.

### *Dismantling feminist emancipation*

The claims to an active and empowered feminine sexuality and the mainstreaming of that sexuality through, for example, pole dance classes, sit uncomfortably with feminist critiques of the hyper-sexualized contemporary commercial culture. Thus, the discourse of sexual empowerment has prompted a feminist ‘back-lash’ (Faludi, 1991), which claims that it dismantles the project of – and progress made towards – feminist emancipation (McRobbie, 2009). McRobbie, for instance, positions the empowerment discourse as postfeminist and characterizes it as “a process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 11). Ironically, what postfeminism offers young women is “a movement beyond feminism, to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for themselves” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 17). Within this new comfort zone, feminist critique of sexualized behaviour seemingly loses its brunt; women are not the passive objects of male sexuality, but freely choose to perform an active feminine sexuality. But, as McRobbie (2008a, p. 546) rhetorically asks: “what price does she pay for such seductive freedoms?”

In the postfeminist schema, McRobbie explains, historical concerns with understanding and dismantling gendered dynamics of power and constraint have been replaced by “celebratory connections with ordinary women ... who created their own, now seemingly autonomous pleasures and rituals of enjoyable femininity from the goods made available by consumer culture” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 3). The problem, however, is that power dynamics have not disappeared from gender relations; instead, they have become inarticulate: “Despite the language of empowerment, discussion of power seems curiously absent,” meaning sexual objectification can be wrapped “in a shiny, feisty, postfeminist packaging that obscures the continued underlying sexism” (Gill, 2012, p. 737).

The critique of the discourse of sexual empowerment, then, is that it upholds principles of gender inequality, while dismantling the figure of feminist emancipation. McRobbie (2008b, p. 226) calls out the “...faux feminist language of empowerment and entitlement, which flags up that women in the West have now (more or less) won equality with men”. While not ignoring that winning the right to sexual freedom is, indeed, a victory, what both McRobbie and Gill point out is that this is not the final victory and that it came at a price. Most notably, the price of inscription into a broader neo-liberal discourse of choice. The discourse of sexual empowerment, then, has turned out to be a Trojan horse by means of which the broader feminist project of emancipation is dismantled:

The figure of the autonomous, active, desiring subject has become—I suggest—the dominant figure for representing young women, part of the construction of the neo-liberal feminine subject. But sexual subjectification, I would argue, has turned out to be objectification in new and even more pernicious guise. (Gill, 2003, p. 105)

From the point of view of the feminist critique, then, pole dancing and similar expressions of an active feminine sexuality are not empowering. Instead, they dismantle the prospect of feminist emancipation and subject women to new technologies of the self, new forms of discipline and regulation (Gill, 2008; Gill and Orgad, 2015). The discourse of sexual empowerment is not emancipatory; to the contrary, it produces “easily marketable, organizationally idealized gendered subjects” (Duffy et al 2017, p. 261).

The two extremes of the theoretical pole against which current trends towards the mainstreaming of sex and sexuality are usually measured see these trends as either empowering feminine sexuality or dismantling feminist emancipation. While these theoretical arguments could be positioned against each other, we read McRobbie and Gill as calling for closer engagement; neither accepting the present uncritically nor longing for a golden past, but looking ahead to new modes of emancipation. Similarly, our encounters with recreational pole dancing and pole dance instructors suggest that in practice things may be more ambiguous, blurred, and messy than a dichotomous reading of postfeminism and its critics might suggest. Being able to see and explain such ambiguities, however, demands that we take a step back and position our theoretical poles within a broader spectrum knowledge production. Thus, we provide a brief reflection on the situated nature of knowledge before presenting our methodological and analytical strategies for positioning pole dancing as a constructive site of feminist knowledge production.

### **Methodology: Situating feminist knowledge production**

In her seminal work on situated knowledges, Haraway (1988) discusses how feminist scholars have sought to navigate the dichotomous extremes of objectivism and relativism:

In our efforts to climb the greased pole leading to a usable doctrine of objectivity, I and most other feminists in the objectivity debates have alternatively, or even simultaneously, held on to both ends of the dichotomy [...] It is, of course, hard to climb when you are holding on to both ends of a pole, simultaneously or alternatively (Haraway, 1988, p. 580).

This leads Haraway to suggest that we switch metaphors, abandoning the attempt to reach the top of the pole of knowledge and, instead, insisting on the situated nature of all knowledge, the particularity of the perspective from which knowledge is produced: “I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into the conquering gaze from nowhere” (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). Vision, reclaimed as a particular practice of seeing and a partial perspective on what is seen, may highlight the relations between mind and body in the production of knowledge (Haraway, 1988, p. 583), underscoring that the seeing subject is not in a position to represent without being represented.

Could we perform a similar move and collapse our theoretical poles, as presented above, into one field of vision? In attempting this move, it is imperative to remember that seeing is also – or rather, should always be – about being seen; it is about the situated relationship between the subject and the object of knowledge:

Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as a slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of ‘objective’ knowledge (Haraway, 1988, p. 592).



We must, then, position ourselves in relation to our ‘objects of knowledge’, exploring the interrelated methodological issues of our role as researchers vis-à-vis the pole dance instructors’ identity constructions and the relationship between the material and discursive dimensions of pole dancing as a site (sight) of knowledge production.

### *The empirical study*

Clearly, we are not ‘objective’ observers of the pole dance instructors, but view them from a certain position that is both shaped by our personal opinions and theoretical inclinations – and, importantly, the entanglements of these. We have already provided indications of our personal starting point in the introduction and sought to nuance our theoretical stance with the presentation of the two feminist positions, but let us repeat: we begin from a feminist position critical of the hyper-sexualization of society. Like Levy, Halse and Wright (2016) we are, however, finding it increasingly difficult to stick to this position in empirical encounters, and what is more: we explicitly sought to challenge our preconceptions by asking pole dance instructors to describe their experiences with and perceptions of pole dancing.

Thus, our empirical study includes interviews with nine pole dance instructors (all anonymized in this paper) as well as observations of their classes and the informal social interactions that took place in breaks between classes. Some of the instructors were interviewed multiple times. We contacted all studios in the Greater Copenhagen area (11 at the time) and got positive responses from eight. The ninth instructor was based on the island of Funen, 150 km from Copenhagen, and was selected because she had participated in the Danish version of ‘Who’s got Talent’, stating that her motivation to join the show was to demonstrate that pole dance is more than a strip club activity. Further, she directly brands her studio as a place for ‘normal women’. Except for the instructor in the introductory narrative, none of the instructors were former strippers; all came to pole dancing from either other sports or arts/theatre and were attracted by its combination of physical strength and aesthetic expression. Besides teaching classes in fitness studios, they also (to various degrees) performed in theatres, art installations, night clubs, festivals, private parties, etc. At the time they were interviewed, the first national Danish championship in pole dance also took place, and most of our informants took part in this event and/or other national and international competitions. Thus, they were both instructors, performers, and athletes. The instructors were all women. Although there are male dancers (particularly on the international art/performance scene), the studio instructors tend to be all female – attracting all-female students – but some of the studios arrange occasional workshops with internationally renowned male pole dancers – and most accept the occasional stag night party for one-off classes/performances, similar to the hen night with which we introduced the paper.

In sum, we sought informants most likely to speak to our initial question of whether and how pole dancing might be empowering and most likely to draw on the anti-strip, pro-sexualization discourse of postfeminism. Had we interviewed (former) strippers, we might have met entirely different practices and accounts (see e.g. Mavin and Grandy, 2013), but our study is delimited to a concern with the mainstreaming of pole dancing in popular culture as undertaken by studio owners and instructors.

All interviews were taped and transcribed and field notes were systematically recorded. All the material was shared and discussed between the authors in order for us to be able to explicate and reflect upon our personal interpretations of the data as well as to develop the analytical strategy in close proximity with our informants’ experiences with and perceptions of pole dancing.

### *Analytical strategy*

In seeking such proximity, we were aware of the “...serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions” (Haraway, 1988, p. 584). Thus, our analytical strategy does not aim to see things from our informants’ point of view, but to zoom in on how they talk about what and how they see. That is, we focus on the rhetorical strategies of the pole dance instructors’ accounts to us, detailing the ways in which discourse and materiality are woven together as they talk about how they manage the taint of their bodies, the pole, their studios, etc. In focusing attention on the interrelations of discourse and materiality, we draw on what has been termed a material rhetoric; one that attends to the ways in which all utterances are shaped by their material conditions, just as the meanings of materiality are shaped by how we speak about it (Biesecker and Lucaites, 2009). And further, one that sees materiality as rhetorical in and of itself (Cloud, 2009), just as rhetoric is inherently material (Greene, 2009).

Thus, we seek to connect what might be termed the apparatus of rhetorical production<sup>1</sup> with Haraway’s notion of the apparatus of bodily production. She explains this concept and its analytical application thus:

Like “poems”, which are sites of literary production where language too is an actor independent of intentions and authors, bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their *boundaries* materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; “objects” do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. Siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice. (Haraway, 1988, p. 595)

We will focus specifically on sighting the boundary of language and body, engaging in the risky act of traversal. That is, we ask how apparatuses of rhetorical and bodily production both diverge and intersect, giving shape to and taking shape from each other.

More particularly, we are interested in the relationship between feelings and bodies as articulated rhetorically: how bodies feel in the sense of the body as an actively feeling participant in socio-material encounters *and* in the sense of the body as an object of feeling; how we feel about the bodies we encounter. What we seek, then, is insights into how the pole dance instructors *figure* themselves and their bodies in relation to how they feel. Thus, we shift attention from the substance of identity positions to the very expression of such positions and, more particularly, to the form of such expression (Just, 2006).

Coming back to the question of whether it is possible to collapse the theoretical pole of empowerment/dismantling, we can now explicate that identifying and explaining figurations that (seek to) accomplish this very feat will be at the centre of our analysis. Reconfirming our commitment to situated vision, such figurations may be of the duck-rabbit kind that at any one moment or for any one viewer appear as one or the other, but nevertheless contains both. Thus, the

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<sup>1</sup> Haraway draws her notion of apparatus of bodily production from King’s concept of an apparatus of literary production. It is this latter concept that we rework as apparatus of rhetorical production; the ways in which everyday speech relies on the stylistic tools that also produce great literature and powerful orations. The vernacular speaker may not be as conscious of rhetorical/literary choices as the orator/poet, but vernacular speech is no less rhetorical *and* literary for that matter.

idea is not that these figures may dissolve tension, but that their inherent tensions may be productive.

### **Analysis: Knowing/seeing pole dancers**

In their accounts to us, the pole dance instructors referred explicitly to and sought to negotiate the extreme perceptions of their profession as either empowering feminine sexuality or dismantling feminist emancipation. In so doing, they were very attentive to the ways in which the latter perception taints pole dancing, but they did not simply embrace the former as, perhaps, they felt this would only reinforce the taint. Rather, they sought figurations that might include both, thereby labouring emotionally and rhetorically to manage the taint of pole dancing.

We have identified three such figures of which the first works by severing the ties between pole dancing and stripping, thereby removing the taint by rejecting the idea that pole dancing is a particular, and particularly aggressive, expression of feminine sexuality and re-inscribing it in a context of athletic and/or aesthetic performance. We call this figure substitution. The second figure operates by re-interpreting pole dancing as an untainted practice, either by focusing on its potential for physical and/or emotional personal empowerment or by placing sexualized practices at the service of such empowerment. That is, even if and when sexualization is re-introduced, it is placed in the service of a higher goal. We have labelled this figure sublimation. The third figure relies more fully on the discourse of sexual empowerment and insists that expressions of feminine sexuality can be tainted *and* powerful. Here, the notion of the taint, rather than that of sexualization, is renegotiated. We name this figure subversion.

While some of our informants use one figure more emphatically than the others, they are not mutually exclusive, but constitute the apparatus of rhetorical production as articulated by the pole dance instructors who we interviewed; their particular ways of installing boundaries and re-establishing connections between discursive perceptions and material experiences of pole dancing.

### ***Substitution: Removing the sexual taint***

All of our informants work from the assumption that pole dancing is commonly perceived as a form of stripping, and all are concerned with disassociating the two. For instance, Maya both talks of the joy she experiences when pole dancing and of the pain from others' judgements:

*Many of the responses I get are about how it represses women. And I'm just 'no, no, no, how can you say that'. I feel freer than I've ever felt before in my life, and more conscious about how I am as a woman. Then people say that it's like porn and question why we have to use 'stripper tools' to be able to do gymnastics. But it's art! And it hurts me, because that's when they relate it to strip clubs.*

Even if her experience tells her that people's perception are wrong, Maya cannot free herself from these perceptions and, hence, is put under strain by them.

Further, the pole dance instructors often encounter false expectations of what pole dancing is. As Jenifer explains:

*People expect that it's something like you lick the pole, right. Which means they get pretty surprised when you do a split on the pole without holding on with your hands.*

*And then they think 'wow' because they see the other aspect. And that is what I want to bring out.*

Here, material experience overcomes discursively expressed perceptions; if only people see pole dancing properly, they will judge it for what it is.

Reflecting the particular situatedness of these instructors, both quotes express an inherent acceptance that if pole dancing were stripping, it would be dirty; the point being to distance pole dancing from such taint. The meaning of pole dancing – and not of oppression/empowerment – is renegotiated here, and while stripping is left in the category of oppression, pole dancing moves to empowerment by means of disassociation and redefinition.

The starting points and end goals of this move are the same for all our informants, but they get from A to B in different ways. That is, in turning away from stripping, pole dance instructors may turn to (and turn into) different forms, aesthetics and athletics being the two predominant figurations.

When emphasizing the artistic or aesthetic dimension of pole dancing, our informants are particularly concerned with demarcating this dimension from that of the sexy. Jenifer puts the point thus:

*If we go back to the artistic aspect, then it's just that I don't think there is any personality in just playing up the sexy element. Anyone has that and everyone can express that if we want to. But it takes an emotional effort, and you have to open yourself and put yourself out there and create something inside if you want to do a choreography that really gets to people, and that's where I think the artistic element comes through.*

Here, the particular affective force of pole dancing is positioned as different from that of strip and other sexualized practices. Such practices, Jenifer implies, do not take an emotional effort, whereas the art of pole dancing is more demanding. Pole dancing, then, is figured as enabling a deeper emotional bond between performer and audience than 'the sexy element', which does not have 'personality'.

Jenifer goes on to explain how the artistic quality versus the sexiness of the dance is not only related to how one feels inside, but also to what one wears:

*I think that just something like stilettos, it disturbs the picture. Because I don't think you can look tender, or I don't feel that I can look tender in stilettos [...]. And I love stilettos, but just not when I pole dance, because for me pole is about a form of expression and a way for me to bring out aggression [...] an emotional and mental tool that allows me to overcome the things I have inside. And stilettos limit the emotional spectrum I can use.*

Contrary to stilettos, which connote strip in Jenifer's account, the pole is 'an emotional and mental tool', not a prop in a sexualized performance. Thus, Jenifer works intensely to distance herself from the idea that the pole is for 'licking', introducing a wider range of aesthetic practices and a broader emotional repertoire around it. As an art form, in sum, pole dancing turns from plain sexy to the enactment of other and more nuanced emotions.

In turn, those who see pole dancing primarily as a sport, focus on the strength it takes and the technical skills needed. As Julia explains:

*We want it to be a form of exercise, and yes, it creates a bigger awareness of what you can do with your body. When you've been doing it for a while you suddenly realize that you can do some things that you never ever thought were possible.*

To her, some of the aspects that people associate with stripping are justified by what they contribute in terms of exercise:

*If we do something that could have a sort of stripper element, then it has a function. For example, if you have to get up from the floor and you do it with your butt first, then it is because it enhances flexibility and strengthens your back. It teaches control.*

Here, the figuration does not involve emotional investment or nuance, but, instead, emotional distancing through the language of technicality. Through a reversal of cause and effect, the 'stripper element' becomes a means of gaining flexibility and strength, a functionality rather than a goal.

Catherine, however, goes further in dividing pole dancing, the sport, from any references to stripping. For instance, she intervenes when students sexualize their moves:

*When I have had students who do extra body roles on their moves, I have really had to have an internal dialogue with myself. At first, I thought that of course they can do that, this class is for everyone, they come here, they pay, I teach. But I just couldn't handle it, and at the end I said, Ok, I have to ask you to try and end your moves differently, make them strong, make them powerful [...] If everything has to have extra 'uuuhhm', I could just feel how that is against everything I do because then the pole becomes a phallus.*

In a similar vein, Julia (de-)selects instructors for her studio based on their looks and performance styles:

*Obviously, if someone goes about in tiny, little shorts and has to do everything as sexily as possible, then that's not someone we want as instructor, because that's not what we're about.*

Here, informants account for material and social practices (correcting students, selecting instructors) that are explicitly geared towards removing the sexual taint. Catherine's point about the pole becoming 'a phallus' is especially poignant (and echoes Jenifer's aversion to the idea of 'licking the pole'); this is what the pole/pole dancing must never become (again), what she (and the other instructors) labour so hard to substitute with less tainted images and feelings.

Some do include 'sexy' in the affective repertoire of pole dancing, but then work towards redefining what feeling sexy might mean. Interestingly, Catherine, who spoke so vehemently against the figure of the 'pole-as-phallus', is among the instructors who do not mind if her own performances are perceived as sexy:

*When Ida, one of the instructors, and I performed at Café Park, we did so in bras, no shoes and with black skirts and big underwear, like little shorts, right. And that was very gipsy- or troll-like and a bit wilder. And it wasn't sexy. Or I think it was sexy, but it wasn't normal sexy.*

Significantly, Catherine does not focus on others' perceptions, but on her own feeling of sexiness, putting the pleasure she takes in dancing before that of the spectators. Thereby, she points towards the sublimation of sexiness as empowerment, the figure to which we now turn.

### ***Sublimation: Replacing the sexual taint***

Those who seek to reposition pole dancing as a sport are particularly emphatic about the physical aspects of pole dancing; the literal power it takes. However, the articulation of pole dancing as a highly specialized and demanding practice, requiring physical strength, agility, technique, and many hours of training, is common to all – and commonly used as a warrant for the claim that pole dancing is not a sexualized form of oppression. As Maya says:

*I feel like this is the first time that I can combine the danger of strength with something feminine [...] And that's why I was so bothered by the reaction that [...] 'oh, this oppresses women'. And I'm like, no, and I have 40 women who practice with me, and I can see them grow stronger and more confident. How can that be oppressive?*

Connie echoes this sentiment, referring back to the anti-strip argument, but adding an explicit reference to empowerment as well:

*So, let's not forget that maybe this is stripper-like to men or to people of the older generation, but I call it confidence. Actually, I call it self-worth. And I can see it in my students.*

Here, pole dancing is not only exonerated from charges of suppression, but actively promoted as an empowering feminine practice. Whilst not completely indifferent to the sexual taint, the point here is not just to remove this taint, but to replace it with something else; something stronger and better. Whereas the perception of pole dancing as stripping was experienced as 'hurtful' in the first figuration, in this second rhetorical move it calls forth defiance. Similarly, the first figure seeks to simply remove the stain, whereas the second goes on to replace it; what is perceived by others as oppressive sexualization, then, is refigured as liberating empowerment.

In pursuing this refiguration, the informants' accounts differ from each other. Some, like Jenifer, continue unfolding the notion that pole dancing can be about more, and more nuanced, emotional expressions than mere sexiness:

*It just doesn't give me anything to stand there and play sexy up against a pole, it doesn't give me anything. I don't have to look at myself in the mirror to get the confirmation that I am sexy [...] Or I get more out of seeing myself at a 90-degree angle from the pole or doing a shoulder mount [...] When I do choreography I attach a lot of feelings to what I do, and it's rarely 'wow, I'm hot'-feelings. It's more often intimate, tender or power or some sort of happy.*

Very clearly, pole dancing thus viewed, is about the dancer and her feeling of self, with no regard for any other gaze than the one she is met with in the mirror. In Jenifer's account, the emotional work turns from minimizing the effect of negative perceptions to maximizing her own positive experiences; pole dancing, to her, becomes an affective practice of self-care and self-expression.

Other pole dance instructors, however, figure sexiness into empowerment, seeing the former as a means to the latter. Pam expresses the point directly:

*If you want men to think that this is nice and good and more than just tits and ass, it requires that women get more confident and more in touch with their sexual and feminine side. And I think pole dancing definitely helps with that.*

Here, practicing pole dancing becomes a means for women to gain confidence; it is not performed for the sake of the male gaze, as a show of 'tits and ass', but as a way for women to get in touch with 'their sexual and feminine side'.

Connie elaborates how she uses sexiness as a mode of empowerment in her pole dancing classes:

*We start every class with a bit of warm up, then we do something called the Tyra Banks concept, which is like a cat walk back and forth on the floor, where they get to move their hips as much as possible, and where I yell and scream at them: 'no, much more stripper, hoochy mamma', and I turn off the music and say, 'this is not nearly enough, girls, you'll never be strippers'. And this gives them knowledge of their bodies, they get to know the mirror, and the other girls [...] And it's really difficult, because I've noticed that they're thinking something like 'I'm not going to behave like a hoochy mamma if that other one doesn't do it'. And 'what does that one think about me if I behave like a stripper'. And that's what I have to make them let go of.*

Here, the internal focus on the women's expressions of sexiness as an empowering practice is even clearer than in the previous quote. Contrary to Pam, Connie makes no reference to a male audience or to men's opinions; instead, it is the women themselves who look at each other as they enact sexiness. Interestingly, this female gaze is perceived to restrict sexy behaviour and, hence, to limit the flow of empowered sexualization. In Connie's use of 'the Tyra Banks concept', as she explained it to us, the participants in her class have to overcome their own preconceptions; they become empowered as they 'let go' of their reservations and let the 'hoochy mamma' loose. Sexualization, here, is not removed but re-purposed. Acting out, even exaggerating, 'the stripper' is re-figured as a means to the end of empowerment.

As indicated, not all the pole dance instructors go this far. All believe that pole dancing is empowering, but only some explicitly articulate its force as stemming from the enactment of an aggressive feminine sexuality. Eventually, however, everyone has to bring sexy back.

### ***Subversion: Embracing the sexual taint***

Some, like Meghan, invoke sexiness, bluntly and unapologetically:

*I think it's a shame that people who do this kind of work have to make constant excuses for their work – both to themselves and others. I think it's a shame that it's not OK to say, 'I like the fact that many men think I am really sexy, and I would like to be a front figure for letting women be a little sexy when they feel like it'. Why is that not OK?*

In posing this question, she both recognizes the general perception of a taint and reverses its direction: pole dancing is not shameful; rather, this perception of it is 'a shame'. Further, she shifts the burden of proof: pole dance instructors should not have to distance themselves from sexualized practices, nor should they have to justify themselves; instead, critics are put on the spot, challenged to explain why being sexy is not OK.

Similarly, Pam says:

*The studio should be a place where women can come and explore their sexuality and feel sexier and feel more feminine and just embrace this sexiness.*

The pole dancing studio is a 'safe space' for women to 'explore their sexuality' without being concerned about potential consequences and judgements. But even so, she goes on to qualify her position:

*I like it better when we as women feel sensual from the inside and work with it as a mental aspect of us compared to if we would do it because it is something we have seen on MTV or something. The latter is just not interesting.*

What should be brought forward in her studio, then, are feelings 'from the inside' rather than external images and expectations; it is the women's own perceptions of their sexuality, not societal or popular cultural expectations.

In a similar move, and following up on her strong anti-sex position as explored in relation to the first figuration, Jenifer seeks to broaden the scope of what might count as sexy:

*I think it is fine to include some sexy, feminine moves in the classes, so the women can get that boost [...] Also, because I think there is a need for women to have a place in which to be free and feel sexy. But I also think that people should know that they can be free and sexy without wearing stripper stilettos.*

In the safe space of the studio, then, women can 'be free and feel sexy', but Jenifer adamantly dissociates such feelings from 'stripper stilettos', thereby seeking to install her own norms of sexiness, norms that are free of what she perceives to be the marks of oppression. The point, here (and above), is to be sexy for one's own sake and not in the attempt to please an Other.

This turn from male to female sexuality constitutes the pole dance instructors' common strategy for redefining sexualization as an untainted practice – or, perhaps, re-appropriating the taint as a mark of pride rather than shame. In and through pole dancing, they argue, women may be refigured: they can move from being the objects of someone else's desire to being the desiring subjects themselves. In Catherine's words:

*The way we alter sexuality is, perhaps, a general reflection of society, where women have gone from being submissive to more powerful. Of course, there is a sexual expression in what we do, but it becomes powerful instead of sexy for you.*

The sexual expression, here, is powerful in and of itself, but as Meghan points out there is no escaping the relationality of sex:

*But it's ridiculous to say that it is not about sex! That's not what they [the other instructors] do when we dance, and it's not why the students seek it [pole dancing] either. We sell sexuality.*

As such, pole dancing finds its meaning – and its attraction – in the very tensions that its practitioners seek to smooth over. No matter how hard they work to make pole dancing 'respectable' (or 'mainstream'), it is interesting only in so far as it maintains its 'seediness' (or 'edge'). And conversely, no matter how freely they embrace their 'inner stripper', this is only possible because she is not 'real'. The more they say, that it is not about sex, the sexier it becomes. The more it is about caring for the self, the more it becomes about an (unseen, imagined) Other.

## **Discussion: Making ends meet?**



We started this paper by asking how pole dancing is constructed as an empowered/empowering practice of feminine sexuality and how an analysis of the material and discursive dimensions of this construction might further feminist theorization of empowerment. The first question was answered empirically in the analysis of how the pole dance instructors' apparatuses of rhetorical production relate to their apparatuses of bodily production. Through the three discursive-material figurations of substitution, sublimation and subversion they labour emotionally to re-work the taint of their sexualized profession. Thus, the taint of sexualization is, first, substituted for more socially accepted and acceptable connotations of artistic and/or athletic performance. In the second figuration, the taint is sublimated; sexy moves are no longer just sexual, but instead invoked and performed in the service of a higher purpose. Here, the process of sexualization is detached from the male gaze, and sexual energies come to fuel female empowerment. In the last instance, the pole dance instructors complete this process of detachment and repurposing, figuring pole dancing as a subversive practice that undoes prevalent figurations of feminine sexuality as tainted and, instead, approves of sexualization. However, this subversive figuration is, in turn, destabilized by its very reliance on the taint; if there were no tension between sexual empowerment and feminist emancipation, no rabbit and duck, pole dancing would not hold any particular attraction. At the pinnacle of their own discourse of empowerment, then, the pole dance instructors return earlier materialities of (female) objectification under a (male) gaze, thereby complicating the choice between one or the other end of the theoretical pole – 'empowering feminine sexuality' and 'dismantling feminist emancipation'. Instead, if we are to further discussions on how to manage the taint associated with the sexualization of pole dancing and similar lines of work (Tyler, 2011, Sullivan, 2012) we have to consider both ends.

The analysis, then, brings nuance to – and complicates – the notion of empowerment through the active performance of a strong female sexuality that runs through the postfeminist discourse of mainstreaming sexuality, porn chic, and raunch (Atwood, 2009; Levy 2005; McNair 2002; Paul 2005). While postfeminism establishes a dichotomy between an empowered female sexuality, on the one hand, and the feminist emancipatory project, on the other, claiming that the former renders the latter obsolete, our study shows how empowerment is an ongoing process – a continuous struggle for recognition, self-determination and freedom, rather than a goal that can be reached once and for all. Thus, all three figurations are specific apparatuses for holding on to both ends of the pole, for dealing with the tensions of sexualization as empowered *and* tainted. In identifying such strategies for making ends meet, the analysis opens up avenues for reclaiming female sexual empowerment for a feminist project of emancipation. What we learn from the pole dance instructors, in short, is that for the discourse of sexual empowerment to be and continue being emancipatory, we need to actively and continuously counter its tensions and dilemmas, to question the bounds as well as the freedoms of sexualization.

Identifying the material and discursive dimensions of our informants' positioning of pole dancing as an apparatus of empowerment, then, serves as a bridge to discussing how this analysis might further a project of feminist theorization; how can the analytical sightings of the nuances and ambiguities of taint management of pole dancing further feminist knowledge of sexuality and sexualized labour? Again, the task is not to dissolve the tensions, but to make productive use of them. Just as the pole dance instructors work at removing, replacing, and re-embracing the taint, finding productive tensions within and between the discursive and material dimensions of each move, we should find theoretical means of simultaneously celebrating and criticizing what they do. Specifically, the notion of empowerment must be reclaimed as a source of feminist engagement rather than a mechanism for defusing feminist critique and dismantling the emancipatory potential of feminism. Here, the analysis makes clear to us that while the claim to empowerment, as it figures

in our informants' accounts, is, indeed, criticisable for its underlying neoliberal, postfeminist ideology, we cannot accuse the pole dance instructors of being victims of false consciousness – and, indeed, raising such accusations would mean reverting to a 'view from nowhere', which would posit our situatedness as being above theirs. To the contrary, and in keeping with the idea(l) of situated knowledge production, we have shown how they labour to make discursive sense of their material practices and to achieve an emotional transformation from passive sexualized objects to active sexual subjects.

Thus, the pole dancers discursively resist sexualization whilst materially performing sexuality. The pole dancers labour – materially and discursively – to produce their own bodies of/as knowledge; to attach positive value to the practice of pole dancing. In the process, they draw on figurations and identifications that are made available in and through the tension between the discourse of empowered feminine sexuality (e.g. Atwood, 2009; Levy 2005; McNair 2002) and the critique of this discourse for dismantling feminist emancipation (e.g. Gill, 2003, 2008; McRobbie 2008a, 2008b, 2009). As such, they offer resources for engaging productively with the tensions of body and mind that figure our knowledge of what it means to be a (sexual) woman. As Thomas and Davies (2005, p. 711) argue "feminist theory problematizes but ultimately enriches and revitalizes conceptualizations of resistance". Thus, rather than being caught in a deadlock, the pole dance instructors show us that being rhetorically stretched between the extreme positions on the (post)feminist pole, creates opportunities for resisting sexualization while performing sexuality. Ultimately, pole dance instructors may provide the necessary rhetorical and bodily apparatuses for holding on to both ends of the pole and, hence, for pushing feminist engagement with postfeminism beyond critique.

### **Conclusion: Empowering/emancipating**

To conclude, we return to our initial aim of analysing how the ambiguous relationship of empowerment and taint management in sexualized work can help inform and bring forward a feminist critique of the postfeminist discourse. In doing so, we will not disregard the feat of resisting sexualization while performing sexuality, but instead explore how it may inspire us in our own attempts to make ends meet. While the discussion focused on the pole dance instructors' work to manage the empowering and exploitative dimensions of sexualized labour, this conclusion will consider how we may hold on to female empowerment and feminist emancipation in our conceptualization of sexualization. As Gill (2012) says, rolling back sexual freedom is neither an option nor would it be desirable; rather, we need to consider how to push beyond current notions of female sexual empowerment. Thus, the way ahead lies in de- and reconstructing the apparatuses of rhetorical and bodily production on which such empowerment currently operates. Simply criticizing pole dancing for being a neoliberal postfeminist power technology would be to neglect the feminist progress inherent in the very fact of its transformation from the strip club to the dance studio. Rather, what must be criticized are the mechanisms of control and the technologies of self that are operative within this transformation.

Specifically, the concept of empowerment with and within which the pole dance instructors figure themselves is problematic. Bound up with the neoliberal conceptions of choice and individuation, the empowerment which they feel when performing – and which they can offer to their students – is, as McRobbie (2008a, 2008b, 2009) has made clear, bereft of feminist solidarity. While the individual dancer may feel empowered through her expressions of feminine sexuality, the individuality of this feat makes a critical analysis of its underlying sexist structures difficult. She may choose to embody sexuality through pole dancing, but she cannot control the reactions of her

audience. As our informant Pam said, if pole dancers want men to think pole dancing is “nice” and “good”, they need to actively work on their performance of feminine sexuality. However, by making the response of the audience the individual dancer’s responsibility, the structural sexism that undergirds this reaction is left untouched.

Rather than abandoning pole dancing and other current popular expressions of a powerful feminine sexuality, then, we should deconstruct the power relations inherent to present notions of empowerment. In other words, by bringing power (analysis) back into the theory and practice of empowerment, we will be able to address the way sexism intersects with sexuality – regardless of its particular expression. It is not the responsibility of the individual dancer to perform femininity in a way that men might get “right”. The problem, here, is not the pole dance. It is the normalization of the sexist response to it. Thus, claiming sexual empowerment must include a critique of such normalization. Here, the ends might meet: individual empowerment and collective emancipation will not be one and the same, but their tensions can become productive if and when the power of the one is used to free the many and vice versa.

In furthering feminist critique of the postfeminist discourse, we cannot ignore the emancipation felt by the pole dance instructors. Instead, we must explore how their emancipation is constantly interrupted by an objectification beyond their own control, critiquing not the particular forms that female empowerment may take but how such empowerment in all its many forms is subject to anti-feminist backlash (Faludi, 1991). Only by holding on to both ends of the pole can we hope to reclaim sexual empowerment for a project of feminist emancipation. Any feminist agenda must, therefore, include the right to active female sexualities while continuously criticizing how such sexualities are – and probably will continue to be – understood within a patriarchal and sexist society. It is not the actions and interpretations of the pole dance instructors (or other performers of sexualized labour) – and their claim to the right to be sexy – that should catch our critical attention. Instead their intense emotional labour may help us zoom in on – and call out – the sexist structures within which they are discursively and materially embedded. Thus, we have to reach back to earlier feminist critiques of sexual objectification while holding on to current claims to sexual empowerment and reaching forward towards sexual emancipation. When placed on this continuum, the limits of the discourse of sexual empowerment may be clear, but it also becomes possible to reclaim this discourse for a project of broader and more radical feminist emancipation.

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