

THE POLES ARE IN: EXPLORING WOMEN'S SEXUAL IDENTITIES
AND THE RISING POPULARITY OF POLE-DANCING FITNESS

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ABSTRACT

THE POLES ARE IN: EXPLORING WOMEN'S SEXUAL IDENTITIES AND THE RISING POPULARITY OF POLE-DANCING FITNESS

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This thesis explores pole-dancing fitness classes and women's identities. Examining the ways in which pole-dancing fitness is empowering and/or oppressive to women is of central importance to this thesis. The theoretical approach derives from contrasting postmodern sexuality and liberal feminist theories on sexualized western culture with radical feminist criticisms of the sexual objectification of women's bodies. In order to examine the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the women who participate in pole-dancing fitness classes, 14 semi-structured interviews and one focus group were conducted. Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis within an interpretive phenomenology perspective. This thesis argues that pole-dancing classes encompass many empowering elements that allow women, in some respects, to reclaim pole-dancing from an activity originally meant for male pleasure to one that benefits women. There still remain oppressive and exclusionary aspects to pole-dancing fitness however, and the classes can add to the objectification of women in popular culture.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Western culture has become increasingly sexualized over the past few decades (McNair 2002). This trend has been clearly evident through the media portrayals of women's bodies in advertising, television, magazines, movies and so on (see Amy-Chinn 2006; Bartky 1993; Bordo 1995; Gill 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Lazar 2006). Many of these portrayals of women's bodies have been deemed objectifying to women because they place women as the object of the male gaze (Bordo 1995). Amy-Chinn (2006) explains that recent advertisements display sexualized women's bodies that are not simply passive recipients of the male gaze, but in fact invite it. An example she gives is an advertisement for Playtex Wonderbra in which the model stands in a black lacey bra facing the camera with the caption "Hello Boys" (Amy-Chinn 2006; McRobbie 2004). However, the upsurge in sexually explicit material has also allowed for an increased openness in the sharing of information related to issues of sexuality, which can be beneficial to women. For example, the openness in western society regarding a variety of topics related to sex has led to increasing acceptance of a variety of sexual identities and has opened doors for more individuals to feel free to express their sexuality (Attwood 2006; Bauman 1998; Weeks 1998). For example, McCormick (1994: 4) argues that the "sexual revolution" that North American media has undergone has benefitted women by increasing their access to sexual materials and information, which is important to women's sexual development. An example of this would be Attwood's (2006) discussion of the availability of pornography and erotic novels that cater to women's desires and are made for their sexual pleasure, whereas previously the pornography industry has been centered on male pleasure.

Based in these opposing perspectives of sexualized culture as detrimental or beneficial for women, it can be hypothesized that the sexualization of western culture can have a profound influence on the way individuals view their own sexuality and can influence their sexual attitudes and behaviours. Therefore, research in this area is very important to better understand individuals' psychological well-being and changing social patterns of sexuality. In North America, one area in which a change in women's sexual behaviour and attitude has been obvious is in the influx of women who have been participating in sexual dance classes, such as pole-dancing fitness. This thesis explores participants' perceptions of pole-dancing fitness classes and the effect the classes have on their sexual identities. In particular, I will focus on the potential that pole-dancing fitness classes have to be a means of empowerment for women, or conversely, if the classes contribute to gender oppression.

However, before I go further in this discussion of pole-dancing fitness and its importance to women's sexuality, it is necessary to clarify what pole-dancing fitness classes are and what groups of individuals are involved. There are no published or accessible academic works available yet on pole-dancing fitness, therefore the following description of pole-dancing fitness is based on online research and my own participant-observations of the classes in a Canadian pole-dancing studio¹.

What Is Pole-Dancing Fitness?

Studios and classes specifically dedicated to teaching women how to pole-dance can be found in many large cities across North America and the United Kingdom. The

¹ For confidentiality reasons, the name of the studio where I conducted my research is not being released.

industry is a recent phenomenon that has been rapidly growing and expanding. In North America, pole-dancing classes are offered at studios specifically dedicated to teaching pole-dancing and also at some fitness centers which teach a wide variety of fitness classes. From primary research of reading studio websites, blogs and discussion boards regarding pole-dancing, the majority of pole-dancing classes appear to be women-only environments. This was also the case for the studios I studied in my research. There are some pole-dancing classes that accept men as clients, however this does not appear to be a common practice at the majority of studios or in classes. Pole-dancing fitness is not performance based, meaning the women in the classes are not expected to perform for anyone and outsiders are not welcome to watch the classes (Aradia Fitness Canada Inc. 2009; Cheeky Girls Inc. 2005-2006; Flirty Girl Fitness 2007). Although, the main studio in which I completed my research, and possibly others, held an open house where students could volunteer to demonstrate their skills as a group. The audience was composed mainly of friends and family of the women performing. Finally, there is no removal of clothing during pole-dancing fitness classes, which has been the case for traditional forms of pole-dancing in strip-clubs.

The studios in my research were very similar in appearance to dance studios. Furnished with hardwood floors and a wall of mirrors, the only difference was the addition of at least half a dozen poles bolted into the floor and ceiling. Studios usually offer classes in pole-dancing at graduating levels; the studios I researched offered levels one to seven. Each class ran for an hour once a week for six weeks. The studios also offered other regular classes that focused on specific skills related to pole-dancing, such as flexibility or strength-building. Finally, the studios offered specialized workshops every few months and often hosted birthday and bachelorette parties. For my research, I

focused on participants enrolled in the level classes, although the other types of classes also worked their way into the interviews and discussion. A typical level class involved 40 to 45 minutes of warm-up strength exercises and stretching, which was completed mainly on mats on the floor. The last 15 to 20 minutes of class was spent learning pole-dancing moves. The warm-up, thus, did not involve poles; however, it still involved sexualized movements. For example, there was significant focus placed on the movement of the hips and chest (which many find to be sexual movements). The instructors also frequently encouraged women to “let your hands travel”, which referred to moving your hands over your body or legs to increase the feeling of sexuality during the warm-up. These sexual elements of the classes are important to understand because they were a significant part of the women’s experience during the classes, and they appeared to often have an equal or sometimes greater effect on the women’s sexuality than did the time the women actually spent pole-dancing.

Ultimately, pole-dancing studios and classes are not meant to be training facilities for women to work as exotic dancers, but instead are marketed to women as fitness classes aimed at strengthening and toning the body. In fact, there appears to be a distinct attempt on studio websites to separate pole-dancing fitness from its original origins in the sex trade where it was performed in strip-clubs. Rather, the focus for these companies appears to be the benefits pole-dancing holds for women. For example, some of the goals of teaching women to pole-dance that are listed on the Cheeky Girls’ website include: increased self-confidence, body awareness, self-healing, and balance (Cheeky Girls Incorporated 2005-2006). Similarly, another website stated that: “Aradia [Fitness] takes a holistic approach to fitness offering benefits that serve a woman's mind, body and soul. Students gain confidence as they build physical strength, flexibility and conditioning.

Students also gain a sense of wellness as they learn to adore, celebrate and flaunt every curve of their body” (Aradia Fitness Canada Inc. 2009). This thesis attempts to determine the validity of such claims from the perspective of participants.

The Exclusion of the Historical Context of Pole-Dancing

Within the body of this thesis, very few articles or books are cited that discuss traditional pole-dancing, that is the paid activity which occurs in strip clubs. When people hear the words “pole-dancing”, an erotic dancer in a strip club is usually the image that comes to their mind because, until very recently, this was the only place where pole-dancing was known to occur. Since the late 1960’s, many academics have conducted research on erotic dancing and the experiences of the dancers themselves (Lewis 1998). Some recent research on exotic dancers includes: the negotiation of identity (Wesely 2003); forms of resistance to sexual objectification (Spivey 2005); socialization experiences (Lewis 1998); and the experiences of migrant women and how they have claimed respectability (Bott 2006). Although these articles offer interesting insight into the experiences of many women who pole-dance, the pole-dancers researched in this thesis are located within a completely different context. An important aspect of the analysis of women who pole-dance in strip clubs is the fact that these women are performing for male clients in return for set wages and tips, meaning it is their job to please men, often making their work exploitive and objectifying. Another important aspect is the fact that there are often structural and personal issues deeply woven into the women’s experiences as erotic dancers, which often lead to women feeling forced to begin dancing and why they have difficulty leaving the profession (Bott 2006; Lewis

1998; Spivey 2005; Wesely 2003). This is very different from the environment of pole-dancing fitness classes.

There are three major differences between pole-dancing fitness classes and pole-dancing as a paid activity in an adult-entertainment club that should be highlighted. First, the women in pole-dance fitness classes are paying to be there; therefore, it can be assumed the women are not there out of financial need. Second, the women are usually enthusiastic and excited about participating in the classes, meaning it does not appear as though the women have been overtly coerced in some way to participate, which can sometimes be the case for women who work as pole-dancers. Third, the women are not forced to perform for anyone and the classes are meant to be for the women's own personal enjoyment. Thus, the classes are not meant to please men, at least not directly, nor do they directly objectify or exploit women. Consequently, literature regarding pole-dancing as paid work offers little information regarding the topic of this thesis. The stigma that is attached to women who pole-dance as a profession affects the public's perception of pole-dancing fitness classes and therefore will be addressed throughout this thesis. However, the actual experience of pole-dancing classes is very different and therefore literature on the history of the pole-dancing profession will not be discussed.

The Relevance of Pole-Dancing to the Study of Women's Sexuality

The trend of pole-dancing fitness classes is a phenomenon that exemplifies the current dichotomy in the sexualization of western culture regarding women's sexual oppression and sexual freedom. Pole-dancing began as a form of sexual entertainment for men performed by female dancers in strip-clubs. It has therefore been considered a practice that objectifies women's bodies by making them objects of the male gaze. For

this reason as well as others, traditional pole-dancing has been a stigmatized activity in society. Today, however, the context in which certain versions of pole-dancing exists has changed. Within pole-dancing fitness classes, women are no longer required to perform for men. Most studios are owned by women and the classes are taught by women. As well, pole-dancing fitness classes are far less stigmatized than traditional pole-dancing, and can therefore be considered a mainstream version of sexually-explicit dancing. This does not, however, erase the origins of pole-dancing and it is possible that the entertainment of men still remains the underlying purposes of the activity. Further, negative opinions of mainstream pole-dancing are rife on the Internet, evidence that the activity has not completely escaped stigmatization. Therein lies the dichotomy of pole-dancing fitness classes: they can be viewed as empowering or objectifying depending on an individual's perspective. This thesis is concerned in determining which position holds more merit when describing pole-dancing fitness from the participants' perspective and, ultimately, which position offers a more accurate portrayal of how the sexualization of western culture impacts women's identity.

To explore the debate surrounding pole-dancing, I wanted to understand the motives women have to initially attend and then continue pole-dancing classes. In addition, I sought to explore the influence other individuals have on women's experience of pole-dancing. Furthermore, how the classes affect the women's identity, focusing on their feelings about themselves, their bodies, and especially their sexuality, as well as how their participation in pole-dancing classes affects their behaviours are important to explore. These research interests gave rise to the following research questions:

1. What are the motivations of Canadian women who join pole-dancing classes as a form of recreation?
 - a) How do these women explain their motivation for enrolment?

- b) What are the main factors that lead to women's participation in pole-dancing?
- 2. How do certain individuals/groups of individuals affect women's involvement in the classes?
 - a) How do women's partners, friends and family influence their participation in and feelings about pole-dancing classes?
 - b) How does the instructor influence the class?
- 3. How are pole-dancing classes changing and/or reinforcing the sexual identity of the women participating?
 - a) How have pole-dance classes changed women's sexual attitudes and behaviours?
- 4. In what ways does the growing popularity of pole-dancing empower women and/or contribute to their objectification/oppression?
 - a) How do the classes make the women feel about themselves and their body?
 - b) How do women use and discuss their pole-dancing experiences outside of the classroom?

The final research question is the most important and encompassing of the previous three, because determining whether pole-dancing classes are creating new issues relating to women's objectification or are instead presenting a new model of female empowerment is of central importance to this thesis.

Thesis Structure

Chapter two of this thesis serves as both a literature review and an explanation of the theoretical framework guiding the thesis. There have been very few studies completed on pole-dance fitness, likely because it is such a recent phenomenon, and there are no published academic articles available. Therefore, the discussion of the relevant literature focuses on theories of sexuality, mainly addressing the changes in women's sexuality that have been evident within contemporary western culture due to a perceived increased sexualization. This chapter first discusses what has been deemed to be the "Empowerment Perspective" that is, literature and theories relating to the empowerment and liberation of women's sexuality that can be connected with pole-dancing fitness

classes. Next, chapter two addresses postmodern sexuality theory, including discussions of postfeminism and the sexual citizen, as well as liberal feminist theory. Finally, there is a short discussion of the claims of non-academic literature regarding pole-dancing, as these are the only sources which address pole-dancing directly. Following this, the “Oppressive Perspective” is discussed, which examines literature relating to women’s sexual objectification and the control of women’s sexuality by normalized patriarchal values. It begins by looking at radical feminist arguments regarding women’s sexuality which relate to pole-dancing fitness, then moves into a discussion of sexualized women in the media, and finally addresses issues relating to diversity, or lack thereof, regarding women’s sexuality.

Chapter three describes the methodological perspective and the methods used to complete my research project. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is the perspective that framed my research and analysis on pole-dancing fitness, which aims to create rich, in-depth descriptions of phenomena. IPA also considers both the participants’ opinions regarding the phenomenon in question as well as those of the researcher to be crucial in the analysis of the results (Smith and Osborn 2003). The methods that were used for this research project are then explained, including a discussion of how my participants were recruited for various methods. Finally, the chapter discusses the use of thematic analysis within an IPA framework to analyze the data and create the themes that are the results regarding the oppression and empowerment that women experienced in pole-dancing fitness classes.

Chapter four follows, which outlines each theme in detail that was discovered, including the use of quotes from the participants. These themes are explained in relation to the four main research questions. Chapter five is a discussion of the results and

conclusion to the thesis. This chapter discusses the thematic results of the research and relates them to the hypotheses made based on the “Empowerment Perspective” and the “Oppressive Perspective”. Because of similarities and overlap between themes, the chapter has collapsed all the themes together to discuss their meanings, and it works towards creating a balanced perspective regarding the oppressive and empowering elements of the classes. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the research, suggestions for future research on pole-dancing fitness, and the implication this research holds for the study of women’s sexuality as a whole.

CHAPTER 2: THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

What makes the pole-dance fitness phenomenon an interesting sociological issue is that participating in sexual dance classes is contradictory to the traditional sexual scripts of women in North American society, which have heavily monitored and regulated women's sexuality (Harris 2005; McCormick 1994)². Because of the negative stigma attached to pole-dancing, women who participate in pole-dancing classes for fitness appear to be challenging women's traditional sexual scripts.

In general, modern western culture has estranged itself from the erotic as it is viewed as sinful and seen as a test of moral discipline (Simon and Gagnon 1986). In particular, western culture has not been accepting of women who are overly and/or overtly sexual. The predominant discourse of feminine sexuality has been characterized by the Madonna/whore dichotomy in which women's sexuality is seen as threatening and dangerous (Ussher 1989). The Madonna characterizes "good" women who are pure and virginal, while the whore characterizes "bad" women who seek desires of the flesh and try to tempt men with their sexuality (Ussher 1989). More recent research on women's sexuality echo this mindset. Bryant and Scholfield (2007) describe society's notion of a "good" woman as based on her sexual passivity and her responsiveness to masculine desire, and that a "bad" woman is one who initiates sexual activity. Similarly, Firth and Kitzinger (2001) discuss how women's sexual scripts have dictated that women should demonstrate very passive sexual behaviour by waiting for a romantic partner to initiate a relationship rather than seeking one out, and that women should require a degree of persuasion to engage in sexual activity. These sexual norms manifest themselves in

² Also see Foucault's 1990 repressive hypothesis

society in a way that means women who have sex with “too many” men, who flirt with “too many” men, who dress “too” provocatively, or are “too” outspoken about their desires are labeled negatively as “slags” or “sluts” (Cowie and Lees 1981). In short, there have been significant social limitations on women’s sexual behaviour and what is considered acceptable of “good” women’s sexuality.

A variety of other feminist work has also discussed the repression of women’s sexuality. Hollibaugh (1996) argues that women’s sexuality has been oppressed in many ways, such as living in fear that others will discover their sexual desires and feeling as though engaging in sexual thoughts and fantasies is forbidden. Tolman (1994) echoes this argument with her own discussion of repressed adolescent female desire. She argues that women’s desire is often silenced in patriarchal society. Tolman (1994), who interviewed adolescent women about their sexual desire, found that a major theme across many of the girls’ stories is that they fear being labeled as a “slut” (1994). Some of the young women gave accounts of stopping or refusing to engage in sexual behaviour out of fear of ruining their reputation as “good girls” (Tolman 1994). According to Simon (1996: 117), women who are interested in experiencing their sexuality and sexual pleasure are seen as threatening by many men and women because he suggests, “sexual deviance might be defined as the inappropriate or flawed performance of conventionally understood sexual practices”.

Therefore, based on the traditional and long accepted view of women’s sexuality, engaging in a highly sexualized activity, particularly one associated with the sex trade such as pole-dancing classes, would label these women as bad, deviant and even threatening. They have broken social norms and should therefore be stigmatized. This is what has happened to women who have become strippers or engaged in a variety of

forms of erotic dance for pay, including pole-dancing (see Bott 2006; Egan and Frank 2005; Lewis 1999; Spivey 2005); therefore, we could logically conclude that women in pole-dancing fitness classes would suffer similar stigmatization. However, this does not appear to be the case. As increasing numbers of women are enrolling in pole-dancing classes for exercise and studios dedicated to teaching women pole-dancing are opening in numerous major cities across North America, pole-dancing classes appear to have become accepted in mainstream North American society as a legitimate fitness activity.

Therefore, the questions of how and why some women are able to break social norms by participating in pole-dancing classes are important. A significant issue that the pole-dancing phenomenon calls into question is whether this change in some women's sexual behaviour is an example of the freeing of women's sexuality from restrictions that previously existed, or conversely, a new manifestation of the control of women's sexuality and their sexual objectification.

There are two main theoretical stances I will use to unpack this question. The first perspective, which I will refer to as the "Empowerment Perspective," argues that North American society is developing a more open and accepting view of sexuality that grants women the sexual freedom to challenge and change previous notions of female sexuality (Attwood 2006; Bauman 1998; Weeks 1998). On the other hand, what I will refer to as the "Oppressive Perspective," argues that women are not changing social norms, but conforming to new ones regarding women's sexuality that have been created by a patriarchal society (Amy-Chinn 2006; Gill 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Levy 2005).

The Empowerment Perspective

The Empowerment Perspective draws from postmodern sexuality theory including the concept of the sexual citizen and a version of postfeminist thought, as well as liberal feminist theories of female sexuality. These various streams of thought offer theories about women becoming more sexually liberated and empowered, using examples such as pornography for women. Although these theoretical standpoints do not directly discuss pole-dancing, likely because it is such a recent phenomenon, their arguments can be extended to include pole-dancing. Offering support for the Empowerment Perspective, I also discuss non-academic research found in newspapers, online articles and online discussion boards which have argued that pole-dancing classes are empowering for women.

Postmodern Sexuality

The study of sex has undergone a significant change in the last quarter of the 20th century, and the perspectives of feminist and queer theorists have dramatically disturbed the conceptualization of sex and sexuality (Attwood 2006). Recent academic writing has been focusing on the notion of sexualization and the study of “sexualized culture”, a term that includes in its definition the shift towards: “...more permissive sexual attitudes...the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules...” (Attwood 2006: 79). It is these postmodern ideas about sexuality and our sexualized culture that are important to the study and theorizing of the pole-dancing fitness phenomenon.

According to Attwood (2006), late modern cultures have been experiencing a change in sexual discourses, more permissive attitudes towards sex have been developing, and postmodern narratives about sexuality have been emerging. Postmodern

views of sexuality are moving away from categories and identities that define and limit sexuality and beyond heteronormative definitions, toward more diverse and flexible ways of looking at sexuality that are not articulated by expert authority (Attwood 2006). Bauman (1998) explains that sexuality is becoming more free-floating, that men and women's sexual identities are more flexible, and that individuals are being allowed to experiment sexually. Therefore, from this perspective, women's participation in pole-dancing classes would be an example of a postmodern sexual experience and/or expression. These women are breaking free of traditional sexual sanctions and rules that restricted their sexual desire and expression and are choosing to experiment with a wider variety of sexual experiences. In fact, with respect to pornography, Attwood (2002) explains that in recent contemporary culture, there has been an attempt to not only represent the common identity and experiences of women, but also their differences, including an increased emphasis on women's sexual agency and pleasure. Therefore, although pole-dancing may not be an activity all women wish to take part in, the fact that it is an option available for women who may find it sexually liberating is an important part of postmodern attitudes toward sexuality that encourage accepting sexual differences.

Furthermore, according to postmodern sexuality theory, sex has been removed from being concerned exclusively with kinship and reproduction and moved into a realm of sex and the self (Attwood 2002, 2006). Bauman expands on this idea, explaining that in the past the erotic had to be justified through its connections with love or sex. In other words, erotic expression and feelings were acceptable only if they were connected with feelings of love for a partner or if they were connected with one's desire to reproduce (Bauman 1998). Postmodern sexuality, however, has freed eroticism and allowed

individuals to enjoy erotic experiences merely for the sake of them (Bauman 1998). This is important because it means it is now more acceptable for women to engage in sexual behaviour that does not have the goal of producing a child or pleasing one's partner; instead, it is about experiencing sexuality for the self. In fact, postmodern sexuality offers a new sexual discourse that includes the "therapeutic" culture in which there is an emphasis on sexuality and the self as a means of personal development (Attwood 2006), which for some women may be participating in a pole-dancing classes.

In addition, Attwood (2006) explains that, in postmodern society, the line between what is considered mainstream and what is restricted sexual behaviour has been blurred. Pole-dancing classes could serve as an example of the blurring of lines of cultural acceptability because in North American society pole-dancing has shifted from being considered a taboo behaviour that was associated with strippers, to being considered a fairly mainstream and legitimate form of exercise when placed in the context of pole-dancing fitness. In short, postmodern theorizing on sexuality describes a movement away from limiting views of sexual behaviour towards an acceptance of more diverse sexual behaviour. This change is allowing some women to begin to subvert traditional sexual scripts and possibly engage in classes such as pole dancing, as a form of sexual self-expression.

Attwood (2006) also explains that the new sexual narratives that are part of postmodern culture are closely tied to mass media. She argues that contemporary media developments have caused, "...a recontextualization of our understanding of sexual representation, discourses of sexuality and the construction of sexual identities" (Attwood 2002: 99). For example, issues and debates regarding sex and sexuality have become popular mainstream topics, and sexual categories that have previously been labeled as

obscene and restricted are now found in mainstream media. Attwood (2002) characterizes this in the spread of pornography through Internet technology. The increase in discussion about the sexual pleasures of women and queer-identified persons in a variety of mainstream media sources is another appropriate example. This movement of previously restricted topics and material into the mainstream reveals inconsistencies in the construction of sexual meaning, it breaks down sexual regulation, and it increases public debates surrounding the topic of sexuality (Attwood 2006). Similarly, McCormick (1994: 4) claims that the sexualization or “sexual revolution” (as she refers to it) that North American media has undergone, has been of benefit to women’s sexuality because it has significantly increased women’s access to sexual materials and information. Thus, the increase in sexually-explicit material found in contemporary media has significantly widened ideas about sex and sexuality, making it more acceptable for women to take part in activities such as pole-dancing.

Attwood (2006) then draws attention to the fact that the version of women’s sexuality displayed in the media through idols such as Madonna or the Spice Girls are easily criticized by feminists as poor examples of women re-engaging with femininity and sex. To do this, Attwood (2006) argues, ignores a discussion about how active female sexuality can be shown in culture and defines these feminists as unhelpful, unimaginative and anti-sex. Attwood (2006) then goes on to explain how women are increasingly seen as sexual subjects in our postmodern culture, which has been achieved by attaching aesthetical value and “class” to sexual objects and experiences (Attwood 2006). For example, the extreme popularity of literary erotica among women depends on its distinct separation from pornography which is achieved through the way it is written as well as its location in bookstores (Attwood 2006). Attwood (2006) also cites ads for lingerie and

erotic dramas on television as examples of how sexually explicit material is being made more available for women through the media. For Attwood (2006), pole-dance fitness classes would also be part of these new “classy” sexual options available to women.

Attwood (2006: 86) summarizes her arguments for “classy” representations of sex and sexuality stating that:

This sophisticated form of presentation makes use of aesthetic distinctions in order to create access for an audience that has traditionally been excluded from consumption of sexually explicit material. In the process, a whole series of signifiers are linked to connote a new, liberated, contemporary sexuality for women; sex is stylish, a source of physical pleasure, a means of creating identity, a form of body work, self-expression, a quest for individual fulfillment.

Thus, “classy” sex is seen as progressive by Attwood (2006) because it is meant to greatly increase women’s options regarding their sexual practices. In this postmodern era, not only are new sexual materials and practices being made available for women, but sex and sexuality is recreated and presented from an angle that is pleasing to women. It should be noted however, that all women are not treated equally in western society. This means all women do not enjoy the same amount of sexual freedom that Attwood (2006) advocates for, however that is the ultimate goal of the postmodern sexuality perspective.

Postfeminism

Attwood (2006) classifies the idea of “classy” sex as part of postmodern and postfeminist theory. In fact, the idea that participating in pole-dancing classes can be sexually liberating for women also fits well with the perspectives of postfeminism. Postfeminism has been defined in a variety of ways. In general, it has been defined as either a progression of feminism within a postmodern context, or as anti-feminism because it has created the false impression of gender equality (Budgeon 2001; McRobbie 2004). This latter version of postfeminism will be discussed in the Oppressive

Perspective section of this chapter, while the first version of postfeminism will be focused on here. Budgeon (2001) argues that postfeminism can be seen not as a break from feminism, but it represents a transformation of feminism's conceptual and theoretical framework. It is a shift from a focus solely on gender inequality to include addressing issues of differences among women (Budgeon 2001). Postfeminism critically engages with patriarchal discourse as well as the hegemonic assumptions of early feminists' ways of thinking, which did not acknowledge the diversity among women (Budgeon 2001).

Budgeon (2001) identified postfeminism as ultimately creating women who use their agency as a form of resistance. In particular relevance to my research, in her interviews with young women she identified postfeminist attitudes as including women becoming more assertive especially with men, a more individualistic "do what you want" attitude, and a move towards more sexualized role models such as Madonna (Budgeon 2001). A focus on women's changing sexual attitudes has been identified by a variety of writers who discuss postfeminism. Gill (2007: 153) argues: "Notions of choice, of 'being oneself' and 'pleasing oneself', are central to post-feminist sensibility..." Similarly, for Sonnet (1999), postfeminism allows women to engage in "feminine pleasures" such as feeling sexy, without these behaviours being viewed as inferior. Further, Kim (2001) defines a postfeminist woman as one who is confident and comfortable with her sexuality and sexual difference.

An example of postfeminist sexual ideals can be seen in the television series *Sex and the City*, most clearly through the character Samantha: "She is a sexually free, sexually indulgent, smart, successful woman...she represents women's full and passionate desire, unleashed and unpunished. Her post-feminist pleasure is wild as well

as sated” (Kim 2001: 329). Similarly, McRobbie (2004) identifies postfeminist character traits regarding women’s sexuality as women who avoid relationships with aggressive and/or overly traditional men, enjoy their sexuality without fear of the sexual double standard, and exude sexual self-confidence. Furthermore, Duits and van Zoonen (2006: 112) use Madonna in her early pop career as an example of postfeminist ideals: “The overt presentation of sexuality is thus laid down as a marker of independence, or liberation from repressive sexual codes”. Madonna as a postfeminist icon is echoed by Buszek (2005), who draws attention to the fact that from the beginning of Madonna’s career, she has appealed to marginalized audiences such as women and gay men; subverted the traditional idea of white women’s sexuality and beauty; brought the topic of women’s sexuality into public discussion and made it distinct from men’s sexuality; and introduced themes relating to the idea of women’s sexual diversity. In short, Madonna’s postfeminist sexual image can be seen as a symbol of women’s sexual liberation. Overall, what these examples reveal is that the postfeminist perspective of women’s sexuality would likely acknowledge pole-dancing fitness classes as an example of sexual freedom and empowerment.

The Sexual Citizen

One important postmodern concept that further explains the freeing of sexuality is the idea of the sexual citizen. The sexual citizen refers to the idea of having sexual equality and justice for all people and creating new forms of belonging (Weeks 1998). It is about accepting sexual diversity, acknowledging and respecting alternate ways of being, and realizing that everyone has a right to equal social status regardless of their sexual identity or behaviour (Weeks 1998). According to Weeks (1998: 35), the sexual citizen, “...arises from and reflects the remaking of the self and the multiplicity and

diversity of possible identities that characterize the late or post-modernist world.” In other words, the goal of the sexual citizen is to challenge the status quo (Weeks 1998).

Therefore, it could be argued that women in pole-dancing classes are engaging with the concept of the sexual citizen by challenging the traditional idea of women as sexually passive or non-sexual beings, and thus creating new female sexual identities. Attwood (2006: 91) also points out that articulations of sexual citizenship, “...reveal how central sexuality has become in the late modern world, and how sexualization has become such an important focus for social and cultural change...” Thus, the sexualization of western culture, of which pole-dancing is a part, is an avenue for social change which could include transformations in the conceptualization of acceptable female sexuality.

Weeks (1998) notes that women have been at the forefront of many sexual battles leading to changes in accepted sexual behaviour and that new stories about gender and sexuality, such as empowered and independent women, have led to the emergence of the sexual citizen. As well, Giddens (1992) acknowledges that revitalizing the erotic is no longer seen as the behaviour of “bad”, “impure” women, but as a sexual quality that is formed through equal power in social relations. From this perspective, the emergence and popularity of pole-dancing classes can be seen as a result of women’s battles for sexual equality and liberation.

Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminists have also made similar arguments to those of postmodern sexuality theorists regarding women’s sexuality. There are many aspects of the increasing sexualization of North American culture that some liberal feminists argue is helping liberate and sexually empower women. An example of such an argument is made by Buszek (2006) who details the history of the pin-up girl, a long-standing example of the

sexualization of women's bodies. Buszek (2006) makes the argument that the pin-up girl can be seen as a feminist symbol of liberated women's sexuality, which is a position that can also be extended to include today's pole-dancing fitness classes.

Buszek (2006) acknowledges that the sexualized representation of women has caused huge debate among feminists. Because sexualized images of women have made them sexual objects for men and therefore have been a site of their oppression, feminism has demanded that women's sexual attributes be downplayed (Buszek 2006). However, at the same time, western society has traditionally portrayed women as uninterested in sex, which is closely connected with the above discussion of women's sexuality as restricted and "good" women as sexually passive, which has deprived women of sexual pleasure and a sense of autonomy that is crucial to a woman's self-esteem (Buszek 2006). Therefore, some feminists have argued that a focus on women's sexual freedom and pleasure is a solution to this problem (Buszek 2006). Buszek (2006) claims that an example of this sexual freedom and pleasure of women has been exemplified through the pin-up. In order to understand this view we must look very briefly at the origins of the pin-up girl.

In the mid 19th century, burlesque dancers expressed a female sexual agency and self-awareness that was normally considered taboo behaviour for women (Buszek 2006). However, this highly sexualized behaviour of women was considered acceptable under the guise of burlesque theatricals (Buszek 2006). Burlesque dancers then began capturing their version of women's sexuality in photographs, which became the start of the pin-up (Buszek 2006). Burlesque dancers and their photographs were very popular among bourgeois men and women and, by juxtaposing and manipulating this popularity (see Buszek 2006), the dancers were able to construct, control and promote a subversive

female sexual agency and awareness. Eventually, period feminists considered this part of modern women's emancipation (Buszek 2006). In summary, since the first wave of feminism, anticensorship and pro-sex voices of women have hypothesized that women's agency over their sexuality and their right to express their sexuality is a challenge to male supremacy, and that certain sexualized images of women found in pin-ups over the last century have been examples of this (Buszek 2006). Thus, if a sexualized image of a women's body such as a pin-up can be considered a form of women's sexual expression that challenges men's power, then so too could a woman who participates in a pole-dancing class.

Furthermore, the pin-up reveals a postmodern focus on the diversity of women's sexual desires and what they find pleasurable (Buszek 2006). In fact, there is a clear connection between Buszek's (2006) liberal feminist stance and the arguments of the postmodern sexuality theorists outlined above. Buszek's (2006) liberal feminist perspective on the pin-up has led to a constructionist idea of women's sexuality, focusing on many feminist sexualities, and it gave licence to women to explore sexualized imagery of other women. Anti-porn feminists' arguments against the pin-up were countered by arguments of anti-censorship feminists who claimed sexualized imagery was liberating and the language of self expression, as many women wanted to access popular sexual imagery (Buszek 2006). Indeed, Buszek (2006: 29) finds connections between the historical burlesque performances with the goals of feminist artists today, for whom, "the construction, fluidity and politics of sexuality [is] a focus of their work and identity." In short, feminist thought on sexuality and its expression has grown to embrace the notion of women's sexual pleasure, fantasy and diversity, and is accepting of certain sexualized images of women in the media (Buszek 2006). This is relevant because participating in

pole-dancing classes could also be seen as a part of this diverse view of women's sexual expression.

As well, some liberal feminists have argued for women's right to be sexual subjects even if they then appear to also be the objects of desire for others (Buszek 2006). Shrage (2005) makes a similar argument in her analysis of MacKinnon and Kant's criticisms of pornography and sex workers. Shrage (2005) highlights a women's right to experience pleasure from having her body be sexually desired, as long as it is not harmful or dangerous to the woman; in short, a woman should be allowed to desire to be desired. This would then apply to those women whose motive for taking pole-dancing classes is to attract another person, be that their husband, lover, or potential partners.

Another example of liberal feminist arguments that encourage similar views of women's sexuality is seen in the work of McCormick (1994), who advocates for increased diversity in experiences related to sex and sexuality for women. McCormick (1994) states that there is no such thing as the average woman and, therefore, we should accept a wide variety of sexual experiences that women can choose to engage in. Also in favour of diversity, Anne Peplau argues that feminism is about helping women and men lead better lives by escaping the restrictions of arbitrary traditions (cited in McCormick 1994: 3). This could involve women breaking free of traditional rules governing their sexual practices which limit them through the expectations of women to be "good girls". Peplau also states that feminism is about choices, and that to have sexual freedom we need to embrace diversity and accept that not all women will make the same choices regarding their sexuality and sexual practices (in McCormick 1994: 250). Similarly, Faderman (1991: 250) claims that, "until women are free to explore their sexuality any way they wish, they will never be truly free". In general, McCormick (1994) argues that,

traditionally, women's sexuality has been very limited and controlled and this has done a significant disservice to women who are very sexual beings. She encourages women to explore a wide variety of options to help them get in touch with their sexual feelings (McCormick 1994). Therefore, according to McCormick's (1994) theory, pole-dancing classes would be an example of expanding choices for women that allow them to engage with and express their sexuality. These classes, then, are part of the sexual freeing of women.

Hollibaugh (1996) shares a similar liberal feminist belief that draws on the postmodern concept of difference and diversity in sexual expression. Hollibaugh (1996) argues that women's sexuality and sexual expression has been limited and repressed as women have been taught to fear their own sexual feelings and desire. For example, she criticizes anti-porn feminists, claiming that the only thing they have taught women is to think sex is filthy (Hollibaugh 1996). This is similar to Vance (in Cossman and Bell 1997), who argues that anti-pornography feminism's sole focus on the danger pornography poses to women ignores the creative, disruptive and empowering force sexual pleasure can have on women's lives. As well, McNair (2002) highlights the feminist position that argues for the need to reject sexism in pornography, but not the entire realm of pornographic sexual fantasy which has potential to be beneficial to women's sexuality. Hollibaugh (1996) condemns the limiting of women's sexuality by stigmatizing certain sexual preferences and choices, for example her time working as an exotic dancer. Instead, Hollibaugh (1996: 229) advocates for feminists to, "seek to create a society limited only by those desires themselves". Expanding ideas of women's sexuality and allowing them to experiment with different desires, passions, and sexual interests and allowing women to define their sexuality on their own terms is needed for

women's sexual liberation (Hollibaugh 1996). And within this all encompassing view of women's sexual expression, Hollibaugh (1996) would certainly include women's choice to engage in pole-dancing classes and view it as an example of women claiming their rights to explore their sexuality.

Non-Academic Research

There has been minimal academic research conducted on pole-dancing fitness classes, and there appears to be no published academic articles on this topic. Therefore, the only research directly on the pole-dancing phenomenon is found in newspaper articles and various online sources, such as the student newspaper at the University of British Columbia where pole-dancing classes are held on campus. The problem with the arguments made by these sources is that because their information is not drawn from academic work, issues such as sample selection bias influence what information is conveyed which may often be inaccurate or a one-sided, uncritical portrayal of the actual situation. That being said, I believe a brief discussion on what has been written about pole-dancing fitness is important to consider. Thus, from non-academic sources it appears as though the majority of women who participate in pole-dancing classes and the instructors who teach them find the classes enjoyable and often sexually empowering and liberating.

The main themes discussed in these sources are female bonding, physical strength building, and creating sexual confidence in women. The creation of a positive, woman-centred atmosphere is important to many of the women who participated in the classes. For example, one journalist who participated in a class herself found that it encouraged bonding among the women and referred to the atmosphere of the class as "female-positive" (Ingle 2008). She also felt the classes were accepting of a wide variety of

women as she saw women of various ages, stages and sizes participating in the class (Ingle 2008). Ingle (2008) says of her experience that the class did not seem to be about getting the moves perfect or quickly: “What I’ll remember is being more comfortable in my own skin and being surrounded by positive female energy for the entire two hours”. Therefore, this support of women by other women is arguably an empowering attribute of the classes.

Another empowering aspect of the classes that is identified is how they help women build their muscular strength, a quality that is usually labelled as masculine. Wade and Graham, instructors at pole-dance studios in Halifax, both claim pole-dancing is an excellent workout (Legge 2007). Wade found, “most of the girls are laughing the whole time and most people say its (a) much better (workout) than the gym” (Legge 2007). As well, one student who was apprehensive about taking pole-dancing fitness initially, eventually became an instructor because of her enjoyment of the physical benefits of the classes, particularly how the classes built up her upper body strength (Claussen 2008). Finally, a student of the classes claims she does not feel sexy while pole-dancing, but instead likes the classes for the workout (Diebel 2008). In particular, she is pleased with the significant amount of strength she has built up in her arms and enjoys the challenge of mastering the acrobatic moves (Diebel 2008).

Finally, the most prominent theme that was discussed in these articles was the confidence they gave women, in particular confidence in their sexuality. Graham, a woman who teaches the classes out of her home in a Halifax neighbourhood, says: “It brings them [the women] out of their shell... and puts them in touch with their sensual side” (Legge 2007). The opinions of her students on the classes included the fact that regardless of a women’s age, size, or personality, everyone is welcome (Legge 2007).

Furthermore, in an article in an University of British Columbia student paper, an instructor explains how the classes build women's self-esteem and confidence: "The classes helped her [a student] build her confidence and self-esteem: not because of knowing she could swing around a pole or move sexy, but just by becoming in touch with herself and her sensuality as a woman, and realizing that she is beautiful" (Keller 2006). The instructor also claims that through the pole-dancing classes we can see changing views of women's sexuality because women are becoming more open and accepting of their own sexuality than past generations (Keller 2006). Similarly, a journalist who took a two-hour introduction class at the S factor pole-dance studio in San Francisco claimed that pole-dancing allows women to feel more comfortable with their sexuality (Ingle 2008), while another journalist explains that the goal of the classes is to unleash the confident, sensual side of women (Diebel 2008). As well, one student of the classes explains: "When I first tried pole-dancing, it was very empowering...It was surprising, because I didn't expect that from pole-dancing" (Kolenich in Ash 2008). And finally, another student explained: "These classes are about the women and not about men or sex. The classes help women to come together and appreciate the beauty of the female form in all its shapes and sizes and see how real women can be beautiful and sexy" (Joanne in Head, 2006).

In summary, the portrayal of pole-dancing fitness in newspaper articles and online media support the notion that the classes are liberating and/or empowering. Women in these sources claim to enjoy pole-dancing because of the physical strength they gain, the connections and support they experience with other women in the classes, and because of the sexual self-confidence that the classes help develop.

Summary of the Empowerment Perspective

Ultimately, postmodern and liberal feminist views of female sexuality argue that North American society is beginning to offer more flexible ways of constructing female sexuality and suggest that women need a wide variety of outlets through which to express their sexuality. Pole-dancing fitness can be seen as an example of this new form of women's sexual expression, which therefore supports the idea of pole-dancing classes as empowering and liberating. This is an argument that is supported by feedback from pole-dancing participants that can be found in mainstream media sources.

The Oppressive Perspective

There is a body of literature beginning in the first wave of feminism that has been modified over the years to adjust to cultural changes, that discusses the patriarchal control of women's bodies and behaviour, especially in terms of creating women that are more sexually appealing to men. This literature offers an alternate explanation for the current popularity of pole-dancing fitness by drawing upon theories that discuss the ongoing sexual objectification and oppression of women.

Radical Feminism

To begin, theories regarding men's power over women suggested by Foucault (1990), Blood (2005), Bartky (1990), and Orbach (1988) explain how women have learned to monitor their bodies and behaviour to fit with patriarchal expectations. According to Foucault (1990), power comes from and produces knowledge, and most knowledge is created by white men. Therefore, it is white men that hold the most power in society which, according to Foucault (1990), is exercised through language. Language controls what can be known and therefore creates one's sense of self or individual

consciousness (Foucault 1990). Consequently, for Foucault (1990), language or, in a more broad sense, discourse, is of central importance in society. It is a range of discourses that constitute and regulate women's bodies (Blood 2005). These discourses cause women to self-discipline their bodies to conform to the dominant social ideals, thus maintaining men's power over women (Blood 2005).

Bartky (1990) uses Foucault's work and his ideas of self-discipline and self-surveillance, arguing that they are, "...a form of obedience to patriarchy" (Bartky 1990: 38). A woman is under surveillance in a way that men are not, and as a woman she learns to see herself as an object meant to "please and excite" men (Bartky 1990: 80). Similarly, MacKinnon (1987) argues that men construct women's meanings of sexuality, such as how they recognize, experience and express their sexuality, and ultimately, what male desire requires for arousal is what is defined as female sexuality and female sex. As well, Bartky (1990) highlights the idea of compulsory heterosexuality that is imposed on women, meaning women are only meant to have sex with men, and that women are taught to be sexually passive and men sexually aggressive. Bartky (1990) further argues that even in the current cultural climate in which some women appear to be growing more independent and sexually self-determined, these experiences are only placing women further under the gaze of patriarchy, which is addressed below in the work of Gill (2007a, 2007b, 2008). What this then suggests is that pole-dancing classes may be a result of women self-disciplining their bodies to conform to the norms of female sexuality constructed by men.

In the 1970's, Orbach (1988) offered a similar perspective, showing how patriarchal ideas often define female behaviour. Orbach (1988) conducted research through the process of "consciousness-raising" with groups of women who investigated

their struggles for the ideal body type. She concluded that all women's experiences were a product of patriarchal society that oppresses women, and that their struggle was an attempt to seem more sexually appealing to men (in Blood 2005: 44). Getting a man was seen as crucial for a woman and she had to learn to see herself as a "sex object" in order to achieve this goal (Blood 2005: 45). Therefore, women's thoughts and behaviours were shaped by a desire to please men, determining women's relationships with men and also with how they viewed themselves (Blood 2005; also see Luria and Rose 1979). Orbach (1988) and Blood (2005) would therefore argue that because pole-dancing classes are a sexualized exercise program, the classes can easily be seen as a patriarchal construction that aims to create more sexually-skilled women with sexually appealing bodies.

According to these theorists, women who believe that pole-dancing classes are empowering have internalized patriarchal values and use them to define how they see themselves. Thus, pole-dancing classes are not an example of women's sexual freedom, but of their oppressed position in society and lack of power to define their sexuality on their own terms.

Sexualized Women in the Media

In more recent feminist work, Susan Bordo (1995) highlights the influence of the media on women's bodily behaviour. Discussing women who choose to get breast implants, Bordo (1995) explains that women change their bodies, not necessarily because they have been duped into conforming to media ideal, but because they realized their potential lovers and employers have accepted this media portrayal of women as the norm and, therefore, conform to please these individuals. Orbach (1988) adds to Bordo's (1995) argument stating that cultural representations of femininity, created by men, have a profound influence on how women judge themselves and that women try to emulate

these images. In fact, the media has become a main source that defines what is acceptable sexual behaviour, especially for women (McRobbie 2004). Bordo (1995) also uses Foucault's concept of normalization, arguing that media images of women are homogenized, which then create a normalized ideal of women. The women depicted on billboards and in magazines, newspapers, and on television come to be seen as the ideal (Blood 2005), and today many of those images emulate pornographic images of women's bodies (McNair 2002). McNair (2002) highlights that as North American media creates new images of sexualized women, the normalized view of regular women's sexuality changes and new expectations of women's bodies and behaviour are created. For example, for Orbach (1988) sexualized women in the media were passive recipients of the male gaze. However, today there is a new image of the sexualized woman; she is a woman who has sexual agency, who no longer needs men's approval and is focused on her own pleasure, who is confident and active in her sexuality, and above all who makes her own sexual choices (Gill 2008; McNair 2002). Therefore, based on the arguments by Orbach (1988), Blood (2005) and Bordo (1995), pole-dancing classes may be interpreted as an example of the new values that women have internalized due to media that have been depicting increasingly sexually active and sexually dominant women.

This image of sexually-powerful women has been labeled by media sources as the new or modern "feminist" or postfeminist (Amy-Chinn 2006; Gill 2007a; Gill 2007b; Gill 2008; Kim 2001; Lazar 2006, Levy 2005; McRobbie 2004). For Gill (2007a), the term postfeminist carries a very negative meaning, as it can be defined as a move past feminism, or even a rejection of feminism. Gill (2007a) associates postfeminist beliefs of women's sexual freedom and empowerment with the idea that western culture has made it a normative requirement for women, especially young women, to present themselves as

possessing a certain kind of sexual knowledge, sexual practice, and sexual agency. She goes on to say that, “‘porn star’ is no longer just a slogan on a t-shirt – it is a vital component of many young women’s CVs, at a moment in which pole-dancing classes are the biggest ‘fitness’ craze sweeping the UK and young women’s magazines instruct on ‘how to make love like a porn star’” (Gill 2007a: 72). Gill (2008: 53) further argues: “...heroines must no longer embody virginity but are required to be skilled in a variety of sexual behaviours and practices. The performance of sexual agency...is central to this new disciplinary technology of sexiness.” In short, women are expected to display themselves as highly sexual and have the skills to back it up, which can easily be argued to be a discourse created by heterosexual men. Therefore, according to this argument, pole-dancing can be seen as an attempt by women to live up to these new expectations of their sexuality, and are therefore part of patriarchy’s control of women’s sexuality not women’s sexual freedom.

Ariel Levy (2005) parallels this argument, stating that the increased sexualization of western culture, as demonstrated through the media, is creating expectations of sexualized self-performance from women. To support her claims, Levy (2005) interviews many of the creators and editors behind shows like *Girls Gone Wild* and magazines like *Maxim* and *Playboy*; it is these versions of sexualization in the media that she calls “Raunch Culture”. For these authority figures, Levy (2005: 4) says, raunch culture is proof that feminism has been achieved and now women can enjoy, “the frat party of pop culture” that men have always enjoyed; now miniskirts, feminist strippers and looking at *Playboy* magazine are considered empowering. For Levy (2005), to be empowered in

today's raunch culture, women must display their sexuality publically and overtly.³ It is likely then, that Levy would also include mainstream pole-dancing classes as part of this raunch culture.

However, Levy (2005) goes on to say that the sexuality expected of women is not that they are truly enjoying sex more, but that they simply appear more sexy. An example she gives is the internet-circulated pornography video of celebrity Paris Hilton, in which Paris appears to enjoy posing for the camera in sexy ways, but does not actually appear to enjoy the sex act itself (Levy 2005: 30). Further, Levy (2005) notes that this appearance of sexiness or "hotness" is no longer just about being alluring, but it is what gives a woman her worth. One example Levy (2005: 32) gives is when Katie Couric guest-hosted the *Tonight Show* wearing a low cut dress and had a hole cut out of her desk so people could look at her legs. Levy (2005: 32) explains that even the highest paid woman on television feels she has to, "...dabble in exhibitionism to feel as though she's really made it today". Levy (2005: 32-33) also cites the *Playboy* issue in which female Olympic athletes posed naked or almost naked to further demonstrate her point. What these examples show is that in order for a woman to be considered "hot" she must be open to this kind of attention: "Proof that a woman actively seeks approval is a crucial criterion for hotness in the first place...For women, and only women, hotness requires projecting a kind of eagerness, offering a promise that any attention you receive for your physicality is welcome" (Levy 2005: 33). Finally, Levy (2005) explains that raunch culture is not about providing sexual options for women because there are only really two: a woman is either

³ Levy does not make a point of differentiating between various groups of women in her analysis of raunch culture based on factors such as age, race, classes and so on, although it can be said that many of the examples she uses tend to describe younger women, particularly college- and university-aged women.

comfortable in her sexuality and sexually “empowered” by joining in with raunch culture, or she is a prude who is embarrassed of her sexuality if she refuses to engage with raunch culture. Thus, from Levy’s (2005) perspective, pole-dancing fitness classes would be another element of raunch culture, meaning women participate in the classes not because of their free choice and desire to do so, but because it is a way for them to achieve “hotness” and, therefore, worth as a woman.

Levy (2005) concludes by stating that women are not sexually freed or empowered by raunch culture, but instead have merely been given a new sexual role to play. Instead of the virginal “nice girl”, women are now expected to present themselves as highly sexualized and to enjoy the attention they get from exhibiting their bodies (Levy 2005: 200). Therefore, if we consider pole-dancing classes as part of raunch culture, the phenomenon is not an example of sexual empowerment and freedom, but merely a new form of sexual limitation for women.

Levy’s (2005) perspective can be expanded on by Gill (2007a; 2007b; 2008), who observes that the move in western culture towards the sexually “empowered” woman has been constructed within a very narrow view of female sexuality and is limited by heterosexist notions and rigid body ideals (Cordes 2007; Gill 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Amy-Chinn 2006; Lazar 2006). For example, Gill (2008) argues that the new images of sexually “liberated” women in the media are narrowly defined in terms of body image because it is only the young, thin, attractive women who are seen exercising sexual power (Gill 2007b, 2008; Amy-Chinn 2006). For example, Lazar (2006: 511) points out that the tough and powerful images of women, like Laura Croft⁴, are still slim and attractive women. Women who are outside the narrow female body ideal, such as overweight

⁴ Laura Croft is the heroin of the popular *Tomb Raider* video games and movies.

women, older women, and disabled women are excluded from the new image of the sexually powerful woman (Gill 2008: 44). Gill (2008: 44) exemplifies this by highlighting the ridicule of sexually “desperate”, “ugly” women found in the media. Whether the notion that only “beautiful” women can be sexually “empowered” directly translates into pole-dancing classrooms is not yet known; however, the fact that the classes are heavily marketed as a great form of exercise shows that there is a strong connection between taking pole-dancing and achieving the beauty ideal of a thin body. This ideal also comes with an upper elite image and following, which will be addressed in more detail below.

Aubrey’s (2006; 2007) work on the impact of sexually objectifying media on women’s self-perception, supports Gill’s (2008) hypothesis and highlights the dangers this portrayal of women’s bodies presents. Aubrey (2006) highlights the cultural norm that thinness is essential to sexual attractiveness for women, and that this message is found in a variety of media sources, particularly in popular television and magazines. Possibly one of the most dangerous ways media emphasizes physical attractiveness is through the display of objectified bodies (Frederickson and Roberts 1997), which is the focus on the body or body parts as separate from the person (Bartky 1990). It can be argued that although women in the advertisements that Gill (2007a; 2007b; 2008) and McRobbie (2004) discuss are not the traditional versions of objectified women whose bodies are passively offered to the male gaze, by actively inviting the male gaze on their bodies (Gill 2008; McRobbie 2004), it can still be considered objectifying. In short, the thinness ideal is promoted through the sexual objectification of “empowered” women’s bodies in the media today. This is significant because in a study of undergraduate students, Aubrey (2007: 14) found that exposure to sexually objectifying media is

positively correlated with body surveillance, body shame and appearance anxiety. As well, in another study Aubrey (2006: 381) found that exposure to sexually objectifying television increases self-objectification. For women, “self-objectification is the result of internalizing the sexually objectifying male gaze” (Calogero 2004: 17), and the anticipation of the male gaze in young women leads to significantly greater body shame and social physique anxiety (Calogero 2004: 19). What these findings mean is that the images of “empowered” women in the media today likely have a negative affect on women’s self-perceptions and may increase pressure on women to conform to the narrow beauty ideal portrayed in the media. Therefore, pole-dancing fitness classes may merely be a new way women are trying to achieve this ideal and, therefore, are not part of women’s sexual liberation.

Furthermore, sexually “empowered” women in the media are defined within a heteronormative framework, which clearly appeals to men (Amy-Chinn 2006; Gill 2007b, 2008; Kim 2001). Gill (2008: 43) argues that in the media: “...power, pleasure and subjectivity are all presented in relation to heterosexual relationships.” Kim (2001: 325) adds that in the media, women’s sexual empowerment is always defined within their relationship with men. As well, many advertisements depict women in typical male fantasy scenes (Gill 2008: 45) and images of women in the media have been reminiscent of pornography, creating what Gill (2007b: 151) refers to as “porno chic”. Even in ads that show lesbian women, the women and scenarios are constructed in a way that is meant to be appealing to men. For example, ads only depict lesbians who conform to the beauty ideal and often engage in the process of “doubling”, which is the sexualized depiction of two very similar looking women and is reminiscent of soft porn (Gill 2008: 50). As well, heteronormativity is directly connected with pole-dancing classes because

pole-dancing originated as a form of sexual pleasure for men performed by women. From this perspective, by taking a pole-dancing class women are not challenging but in fact reinforcing a heteronormative practice meant to please men, once again showing their position as obedient sexual objects to male desire.

Overall, Gill (2006: 53) summarizes what these arguments suggest about women in today's society, especially within the media: "Power operates here not by silencing or suppressing female sexual agency, but by constructing it in highly specific ways." McNair (2002) adds to this argument, by discussing feminist perspectives that criticize the sexual images used in advertising and fashion as circulating images that distort and damage views of both masculinity and femininity, and that create unrealistic comparisons and overheated sexual aspirations. Therefore, although women who take pole-dancing classes may argue that the classes are allowing them to become sexually liberated, it could also be hypothesized that the classes may only allow women to do so within a very limited definition of female sexuality, which is also one that is unrealistic and potentially damaging. As well, a variety of feminist perspectives, as were discussed above, argue that women's behaviour is controlled by patriarchy and is aimed at creating more sexually-appealing women for the benefit of men (Blood 2005; Bartky 1990; Mackinnon 1987). Thus, women's participation in pole-dancing classes may not be freely chosen, but indicative of pressures women feel or have internalized, which cause them to conform to the images of sexually "empowered" women in North American media today.

In fact, in an article criticizing authors who argued that girls' autonomy in their choice of clothing needs to be recognized, Gill (2007a) questions the idea that women and girls who present themselves in specifically sexualized ways do so because of their free choice and agency. Gill (2007a) analyzes girls who claim that they freely choose to

wear “hyper-sexualized” clothing, such as visible g-strings and belly tops, and that their choices are not because of pressures they feel to conform to sexualized ideals of women and girls in western culture. Gill (2007a) points out that it is impossible to separate our individual preferences from the influence of our culture, as cultural and social factors are inherent in shaping our tastes, desires and what we define as attractive or beautiful. In fact, the idea that choices can be freely made, separate from external influences:

eschews psychological complexity by refusing to address how power works in and through subjects, not in terms of crude manipulation, but by structuring our sense of self, by constructing particular kinds of subjectivity. It avoids all the important and difficult questions about the relationship between the psychic and the social or cultural – how is it for example, that the socially constructed ideals of beauty and sexiness are internalized and made our own? That is, really, truly, deeply our own, felt not as external impositions but as authentically ours (Gill 2007a: 76).

What this suggests is that the influence of media images of “empowered” women, that is, of highly sexualized women, would undoubtedly encourage girls’ choice of clothing to be highly sexual, such as the belly top, or women’s choice of activity to be highly sexual, such as pole-dancing. Gill (2007a: 75) supports her argument by stating that advertising companies have found that a language of autonomy and empowerment are key to selling products to young women. This means it is a marketer’s goal to make women and girls feel as though they are being empowered and making a free choice by buying a certain product, and in this case, it is increasingly sexualized products and services.

The Exclusion of Diverse Sexualities

Sexual Orientation

Gill (2008) has argued that the acceptable sexuality of women that has been portrayed in the media is that of the heterosexual woman, as discussed above. The manifestation of this heterosexist ideal (see Adams 1997) in young women is seen clearly

in a study conducted by Tolman (1994) on young women's sexual attitudes and experiences. It was found that girls with non-heterosexual sexual orientations have a significant fear of expressing or being open about their non-heterosexual desires (Tolman 1994). In an interview with a self-identified bi-sexual girl named Megan, feelings of compulsory heterosexuality are expressed (Tolman 1994). When she is asked to discuss her feelings towards women, Megan explains that the first time she felt attracted to another girl, acting on her feeling was, "...impossible, I think I just like blocked it out, I mean, it could never happen...I probably first mentally just say no, don't feel it..." (Tolman 1994: 334-335). As well, another young woman in Tolman's (1994) study named Melissa often finds it difficult being a lesbian. She shows her fear associated with her sexual orientation when she explains that expressing her sexual desires has gotten her in some "trouble" and says: "Well I'm really lucky that like nothing bad has happened or no one's gotten mad at me so far..." (Tolman 1994: 336). Melissa makes it clear that, although she has told people she is a lesbian, her desires are kept fairly quiet and she considers herself lucky to have escaped any major conflicts "so far", implying that there is a very real chance that this may occur.

Through Megan and Melissa's stories, it is obvious that many girls and women who do not hold heterosexual identities have been sexually repressed and even made to fear their sexuality, and it is a sexuality that does not benefit men. Therefore, because our heterosexist society has taught many non-heterosexual women to hide their sexual feelings and repress their desires, it is likely that they feel far less free to engage in semi-public acts of sexual expression such as pole-dancing classes. Therefore, this potential exclusion of a group of women from pole-dancing contradicts arguments that the classes are sexually liberating for all women.

Race

Similarly, women who are part of visible minorities have often suffered from racist constructions of their sexuality compared to that of white women, which may restrict the participation of visible minorities in pole-dancing. For example, black female sexuality has been defined as overly sexual or even hypersexual (Weeks 2002), and therefore is seen as deviant. According to bell hooks (1996: 217): “One has only to look at American television...to learn the way in which black women are perceived in American society – the predominant image is that of the ‘fallen’ woman, the whore, the slut, the prostitute.” Meanwhile, white women are seen as the women who possess the acceptable sexuality.

According to postmodern sexuality, it is becoming acceptable for women to be active in their sexuality. However, this has led to the construction of the “white sex goddess” which leaves out all other races (Attwood 2006). The idea of the white sex goddess implies that accepting women as active sexual beings and even seeing their sexual expression as ideal behaviour is the privilege of white women only (Attwood 2006). Clearly, this has negative implications for non-white sexuality. Many studies have shown that non-white women have concerns regarding their sexual identity. For example, a study on the construction of black sexual identity that looked at the narratives of 29 African-Caribbean girls found that black girls avoid and even fear their own sexuality (Weeks 2002: 52). The girls in the study were very concerned with monitoring their behaviour in order to escape the stereotypes of the over-sexual, black female. They did this by downplaying their own emerging sexuality and adhering to the sexual values of purity (Weeks 2002). There was a strong need within the group of black girls to remain “respectable”, “clean”, monogamous and non-sexual (Weeks 2002: 256). What this

suggests is that the inequality and injustice women face based on race is yet another way in which women's sexual freedom is restricted. Thus, many black women and, likely, women of other visible minorities who have had their sexuality stigmatized, may avoid taking pole-dancing classes to distance themselves from the deviant sexual stereotypes that have been placed upon them, which dispels the notion that pole-dancing is a site of sexual freedom for all women.

Class

Class is another social variable that relates to the question of which groups of women feel they are allowed to engage in pole-dance classes and which do not. Appropriate female sexual behaviour has been redefined in the middle and upper classes, and a much more active and explicit female sexuality has been created and accepted for women who can afford it, as mentioned in the previous section.

As noted, Attwood (2006) has introduced a new concept relating to women's sexuality called "classy sex". "Classy sex" is a bourgeois sexuality that has been defined by juxtaposing it to the idea of the low class slut (Attwood 2006: 85). Active female sexuality has been legitimized by defining it as "classy" and connecting it with the notions of style, taste and the search for self-improvement and self-care (Attwood 2006). The idea of "classy sex" is seen in shows like *Sex and the City*, in which sexually explicit material is defined as stylish, and classy women are portrayed as glamorous, sharp-witted, and promiscuous (Attwood 2006). In short, society has developed the idea that a highly sexualized woman, in which her sexuality is a major part of her identity, is stylish. Classifying a woman's sexuality as stylish or classy, however, depends on her ability to maintain a fairly affluent lifestyle and is therefore limited to middle and upper class women. For example, the women of *Sex and the City* are all successful, well-paid women

who dress in expensive clothing and eat in expensive restaurants; their promiscuous and highly sexual behaviour is acceptable because it is connected with their lifestyle as upper class women. Therefore, based on Attwood's argument of "classy sex", women who engage in the pole-dance classes likely have fairly high-class lifestyles. Therefore, pole-dance fitness may be an activity that is reserved for affluent groups of women, thus excluding a large majority of women.

As well, the financial ability to engage in fitness classes holds connection to class, as fitness activities are often very expensive and thus a privilege of higher-income groups. This has led to slender and toned bodies becoming a symbol of affluence, as was mentioned above. Bordo (1995) discusses the history of the slender body as a sign of high class and adds that today it is not only a thin but also toned body that signifies high class, as the products that help individuals remain thin and toned require a sizable income. For example, gym memberships, personal trainers, exercise equipment, health food, diet pills, and diet programs are all fairly high priced items and few individuals can afford all, if any, of these products and services. Thus, pole-dancing classes are likely another example of a high-price fitness activity which only upper class women can afford, excluding many others from participating.

Age

Age is another important social factor that should be considered when examining women's sexual behaviour. The sexual norms and values that have been accepted by different generations often significantly vary. As well, the limited portrayal of older women in the media has resulted in the idea that older women are not sexually attractive or active sexual beings (Gill 2008).

The generational differences between older and younger women's sexual values and behaviour are demonstrated through the work of Bryant and Schofield (2007). The researchers conducted life history research on women between the ages of 19 and 79, looking at the connection between discourses of feminine sexuality and women's actual sexual practices (Bryant and Schofield 2007). Bryant and Schofield (2007) exemplify the differences they find between generations of women by comparing the sexual history stories of an older woman, Deidre, who was 79 years old at the time, with that of a young woman, Nicole, who was 26 years old. The comparison highlights the difference between their sexual values and ways of defining and discussing sexuality. For example, Deidre held traditional values of "proper" sex and sexuality which consisted of sex being connected to romantic love and a commitment to one's husband (Bryant and Schofield 2007). Although Deidre eventually gave up her long held beliefs that "good women" only have sex within marriage after her divorce, for most of her life Deidre held a traditional view of feminine sexuality (Bryant and Schofield 2007). On the other hand, Nicole was very active in her sexuality; she was sexually aggressive and rejected "respectable sexual femininity" (Bryant and Schofield 2007: 328). Thus, from these women's life histories and their perspectives on women's sexuality, it appears that the younger woman would be far more comfortable engaging in pole-dancing classes.

As well, there is the general view in North American society that older women are not meant to engage in sex and are not sexually appealing (see Gill 2008). Rostosky and Travis (2000) explain that stereotypes of women over the age of 40 are overwhelmingly negative. These older women are seen as more frail and sick than younger women, and this idea has manifested itself in the minds of many older women and may be the reason Rostosky and Travis (2000) found a general decline in sexual interest as one ages. Older

women also may engage in a more limited range of sexual activities, argues Anderson and Cyranowsk (1994), due to sexual maturation, intact long-term relationships, and established sexual patterns. Furthermore, aside from sickness or loss of partners, many older men and women stop having sex because they feel they look ridiculous (Rostosky and Travis 2000). Koch et al. (2005) adds to these findings by stating that for many women the majority of their sexual feelings are closely tied to their body image. Therefore, as women age and their perception of their body image decreases, it thereby decreases their sexual desire, enjoyment, and frequency of sexual activity (Koch et al. 2005). Finally, Shrage (2005) draws attention to the fact that there has been a desexualisation of older women in North American culture (also see Schaie and Willis 1991; Strong and DeVault 1997) paralleling the argument of Gill (2008) regarding the exclusion of sexually “empowered” older women in the media. Therefore, because of western society’s devaluation or dismissal of older women’s sexuality and the effect this has on older women’s perceptions of their own sexuality, it is likely that few older women would feel free to engage in pole-dancing. This means the classes cannot be seen as a form of sexual liberation and empowerment for all women.

Summary of the Oppressive Perspective

Ultimately, for the Oppressive Perspective, a variety of theorists argue that women’s behaviour has been controlled by patriarchy and has aimed at creating more sexually appealing women for the benefit of men. Recent images of sexually powerful women in the media are narrowly defined, and offer women a false sense of “empowerment” and sexual “freedom”. Internalizing these notions of “empowered” women then, has arguably led to the recent popularity of pole-dancing classes in western culture. Further, it is likely that many women are excluded from participating in pole-

dancing classes because of social restraints placed on women's sexuality based on sexual orientation, race, class, and age.

Theoretical Application

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the utility of these two theoretical frameworks in understanding the role of pole-dancing fitness classes in the lives of women. More specifically, the Empowerment and Oppressive Perspectives are used to examine the following questions: Why do women begin taking pole-dancing classes? Why do they continue taking them? How do individuals' affect women's participation in the classes? How do the classes affect the women's sexual identity? Finally, how do the classes affect women's feelings about themselves and their behaviour outside of the classroom? Through in-depth interviews with students and instructors, one focus group as well as participant observation, I examine these questions in an attempt to determine if pole-dancing fitness supports women's sexual oppression or empowerment.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Methodological Theory

My thesis uses a phenomenological approach to examine the research questions. The main goal of phenomenological research is to create a detailed description of the personal meanings behind first-hand experience of a certain phenomenon (Grbich 2007). As well, a phenomenological study is meant to describe "...the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon" (Creswell 1998: 51). Phenomenology does not attempt to define a phenomenon using a set number of variables and control the context in which it is studied; rather it attempts to remain true to the experience of the phenomenon and the context in which it is experienced (Bogdan and Taylor 1975; Giorgi and Giorgi 2003). Therefore, my research aims to develop a rich description of the experiences of women who are participating in pole-dancing classes and to understand the meanings behind these experiences.

Specifically, I use interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as my methodological theory. The phenomenological aspect of this methodology is that it seeks a detailed exploration of personal experiences and the way in which the persons involved perceive the event being studied (Smith and Osborn 2003). What makes IPA distinct from other phenomenological research, however, is the acknowledgment of the interpretive element when understanding the meaning of a phenomenon. The researcher must take an active role in the research process when conducting IPA, meaning the researcher must attempt to understand the phenomenon being studied from the participants' viewpoint, in other words, gain an "insider's perspective" (Smith and Osborn 2003: 51). At the same time, this is never entirely possible because of the

researcher's own conceptions of the phenomenon (Smith and Osborn 2003). This means a two-stage interpretation process, or a "double hermeneutic" is occurring: first, the participants are trying to understand the phenomenon for themselves; second, the researcher is attempting to understand how the participants understand the phenomenon (Smith and Osborn 2003: 51; also see Eatough and Smith 2008).

Further, studying a phenomenon from both the participants' and the researcher's point of view combines empathic hermeneutics with questioning hermeneutics.

Empathetic hermeneutics is concerned with understanding a phenomenon from the point of view of the participants and obliges the researcher to "take their side" (Smith and Osborn 2003: 51). On the other hand, questioning hermeneutics involves the critical questioning of the texts of the participants themselves (Smith and Osborn 2003), such as

asking, "Do I get the sense that there are other reasons why women take pole-dancing lessons other than fitness, that perhaps the participants themselves are less aware of?"

This is a critical element to my research project as the Oppressive Perspective, as outlined in the previous chapter, argues that women are often unaware that their behaviours are influenced and shaped by patriarchal culture (MacKinnon 1987). Therefore, a system of analysis that allows me to draw out these more hidden meanings is important.

As well, in general, allowing for both elements of inquiry helps to develop a richer analysis and do greater justice to the person as a whole (Smith and Osborn 2003). IPA acknowledges that human beings are extremely complex when attempting to analyze their thoughts and feelings and how these processes interconnect. There may be reasons why certain participants withhold information or do not express all that they think or feel, and it is the job of the researcher to interpret their mental and emotional state based on what they say (Smith and Osborn 2003). This is also of particular relevance to my

research because some of the questions I asked during the interviews were personal and it would not have been unusual for individuals to have difficulty expressing their thoughts and feelings about intimate matters regarding their sexuality.

Creswell (1998: 31) explains that using a phenomenological approach to studying a problem follows a basic pattern of inquiry which includes: “entering the field of perception of the participants; seeing how they experience, live, and display the phenomenon; and looking for the meaning of the participants’ experiences”. Applying this process of investigation, I created the structure of my research project. I began by using participant observation to enter the field of study and personally experience the phenomenon of pole-dancing. I then used a short survey to develop a better understanding of the social demographic of the women in the classes. Next, I conducted key informant interviews with pole-dance instructors, and following this I began my in-depth interviews to discover the meanings women attach to pole-dancing. Both groups of interviews were semi-structured which was important to the phenomenological process, which will be discussed in more detail below. I ended my research process with a focus group of women who I had previously interviewed. This structure of methods allowed me to begin with developing a general understanding of pole-dancing fitness and then move towards acquiring more specific and in-depth data.

Gaining Access to the Sample Population

To conduct research on particular phenomena, phenomenology requires that the researcher seek out participants who have first hand experience of the phenomenon so they can describe the experience as it actually took place in their lives (Giorgi and Giorgi 2003). This allows the researcher to capture, as accurately as possible, the experience of

the phenomenon in its original context (Giorgi and Giorgi 2003). Thus, I began my study in search of a pole-dancing studio that would allow me to take part in pole-dancing classes, as well as recruit participants for interviews. According to Smith and Osborn (2003), IPA research uses very small sample sizes, as the goal is not to generalize the results but to create a detailed analysis of the perceptions and understandings of the participants about the phenomenon. In order to do this, the rigorous and time consuming process of analyzing transcripts is necessary and therefore larger sample populations are not as manageable (Smith and Osborn 2003). This is true for my research, as I conducted 14 interviews in total and one focus group. As well, IPA research often studies fairly homogeneous samples. This is because the sample is small, and therefore it is not logical for the researcher to attempt to achieve random or representative samples (Smith and Osborn 2003). Instead, IPA searches for a group of similar individuals to whom the research questions will be most significant (Smith and Osborn 2003). Again this is true to my research, as most of the participants were from one studio in one city, although another sister studio was used to supplement my research. Nevertheless, it remained a very homogenous group.

To begin my research, I contacted a pole-dancing studio in an Ontario city and spoke with the studio manager, who was also the head instructor at the studio. The studio manager was interested in my research and appeared excited at the prospect of research being conducted at the studio. However, to gain access to the classes, the studio manager and myself had to hold a brief meeting with the studio owner to explain my research. These women were the gatekeepers to the population I wished to study (see Bogdan and Taylor 1975). Both women were open to all components of my research, which was to distribute surveys, recruit participants and conduct participant observation, under the

condition that I paid the regular price for the classes and on the first day of my class I was required to introduce myself to the instructor and students as a researcher. I was to explain that I was conducting research on pole-dancing fitness and that I was attending the classes as a participant observer. The studio owner then provided me the consent to attend the classes, to hand out surveys and to recruit participants for my key informant and in-depth interviews. Once given the verbal consent from the studio owner, the studio manager wrote me a letter of permission to conduct research at the studio, which was immediately sent to the Ethics Review Board. The studio manager also spoke with all the instructors in the studio to make them aware that I was a researcher.

Gaining access to the studio was fairly simple with few obstacles; however, I found recruiting women to participate in the in-depth interviews a challenge. Many women were apprehensive about participating in the study, possibly because I am researching a topic many women would find personal. As well, because of the time constraints of the classes, I was not able to speak with as many women as originally intended to explain my research or the need for interview and focus groups participants. This meant many women were uninformed about the nature of my research and the need for their participation, which may have also led to the women's apprehension at agreeing to participate when presented with a survey. Finally, many women were working mothers who had minimal spare-time for interviews. Therefore, eventually I found it necessary to expand my population by also recruiting women from a sister studio in a neighbouring city. To gain access and recruit at this studio, I once again spoke with the studio manager and requested permission to distribute surveys to women as they entered and exited the classes and to ask if they would be willing to participate in an in-depth interview. I received a letter of permission from the studio owner to do this, which I once again

submitted to the Ethics Review Board. Expanding the population I was recruiting from allowed me to recruit enough participants for in-depth interviews to make a satisfactory phenomenological study.⁵

I was granted ethics approval for my research on April 18, 2008 and began my research shortly thereafter. In terms of my ethical responsibilities, all personal information regarding the identities of the participants' was kept confidential, for example names were disguised through the use of pseudonyms. The consent forms signed by all interview and focus group participants guaranteed that all identifying factors would be changed when my results were written up. Consent forms were not required for my participant observation; however, I maintained the same level of confidentiality for these women as well. None of the women who participated in my research were offered monetary compensation for their participation, although the women who participated in the focus group were entered in a draw to win a 50 dollar gift certificate to Starbucks.

Methods

Participant Observation

An important aspect of the phenomenological approach involves truly grasping the essence of a phenomenon, meaning that one's own experience of the phenomenon can be important to the research (Creswell 1998). For this reason, I chose to begin my research on pole-dancing classes with participant observation. According to Bogdan and Taylor (1975: 5), participant observation involves the researcher immersing him or herself in the research setting, participating in activities of the setting, and most

⁵ I did not need to use this second studio to conduct participant observation or recruit participants for my key informant interviews.

importantly it involves an, “intense social interaction between the researcher and subjects”. Because the phenomenon I was studying was an intense physical activity, the social interaction between the participants and myself was only minimally verbal, and I focused heavily on body language, facial expressions, and my own thoughts and feelings as a participant in the classes. I participated in a total of six pole-dancing classes: one hour-long class, once a week for six weeks, at a pole-dancing studio in an Ontario city. At the studio I attended, they offered level one to level seven in pole-dancing. Each level was six-weeks long and every woman had to complete each level in succession. Students could repeat levels if they felt it necessary or take non-level classes that aimed more at fitness rather than pole-dancing skill.

My experience taking the first level of pole-dancing significantly increased my personal understanding of how a typical class runs and allowed me to learn the language used by the instructors within class. Also, I was able to observe how the students in the class appeared to feel about pole-dancing fitness, and observe their interactions with each other and the instructor. Finally, it gave me the opportunity to personally understand how it felt to be a pole-dancing student. I wrote field notes about my personal feelings, experiences, and observations immediately after each class, which is typical of participant observer researchers (see Bogden and Taylor 1975). These notes were later typed up and analyzed. By using participant observation I was able to develop my knowledge and understanding of pole-dancing classes and learn about the key, and possibly controversial, aspects of the classes.

By using participant observation as my first method, it allowed me to develop a better understanding of the classes which later assisted in the interviews I conducted for various reasons. First, because I engaged in participant observation as my first method, I

was able to understand certain terms or moves that the women referred to during their interviews without needing detailed explanations or demonstrations. This also allowed more time for discussion about the women's thoughts and feelings surrounding the classes, rather than being concerned with terminology. As well, because I had taken the classes, I believe it put some women at ease and they felt they could talk more freely about their feelings surrounding the classes instead of concerning themselves with explaining the technical details of taking a class.

However, this comfort level of my participants may have also been a limitation of conducting participant observation. Because most of the women I interviewed knew I had taken the classes, they often assumed I understood their experiences or their feelings associated with pole-dancing with little need of detailed explanations. Therefore, it was sometimes difficult to draw out the detailed descriptions and personal anecdotes that are key to phenomenological research. This idea is supported by Padfield and Procter (1996) who state that certain characteristics of a researcher heavily influence the identities that are presented by the participants. What Padfield and Procter's (1996) observations suggest is that, aside from the participants' knowledge that I had participated in pole-dancing classes, my gender, race, age, education level and/or other qualities that were observable or known about me by the participants influenced the identity they presented to me during their interviews and the focus group. For example, the fact that I was observably younger than the majority of my participants may have affected how comfortable they were when sharing personal details that related to their age. However, the fact that I was a woman interviewing other women, likely helped my participants feel more comfortable about sharing details that specifically related to the female body or common experiences of women. In short, the identity I presented to the women

influenced the information I was able to gather, and a researcher with a different identity would likely accrue slightly different results.

Survey

When I first gained access to the studios, I also began asking the women in my class and other classes to fill out a short two-page survey which aimed at documenting the social demographics of the women taking the pole-dancing classes, such as their age, race, sexual orientation and education level (See Appendix A). The surveys were anonymous, however, there was an additional contact information page attached to the end of the survey asking if the woman would be interested in participating in further research about pole-dancing classes. This page was to be torn off and placed in a separate folder from the survey; this allowed the survey to remain completely anonymous. Having access to the second studio was helpful for handing out surveys, as I had a larger population to which I could distribute.

To distribute the surveys, I spoke to a number of pole-dancing classes from level one to four to explain the goals of the survey, interviews and my research in general. I then handed out the surveys for the women to fill out if they chose to do so. I made it clear that the survey was voluntary and that they did not have to fill it out if they did not want to, nor did they have to answer any question(s) they felt uncomfortable answering, which was also stated in writing at the top of the survey. For the most part, I handed out the surveys to students in the classes, waited at a distance while they filled them out, and then allowed them to place each section, the survey and contact information sheet, into their respective folders. However, for some classes at the main studio which I used for my research, I had to leave surveys to be filled out by the women once they were done their class. In these cases, I also left the envelopes so that their information could still be

handed in separately. The instructor of the class was asked to leave the envelopes in the studio office for me to pick up. As well, a small pile of surveys and two labeled envelopes were left in the main studio office at all times so that women could fill out a survey at any time if they were interested in doing so.

The survey portion of my research was not intended for statistical analysis. Because the surveys were only handed out to a small group of women in two pole-dancing studios in the same general geographic area, the results were not generalizable to all women who take pole dancing classes. The main purpose of the surveys was to develop a general idea of the demographic of women being researched, so they could be described according to race, class, sexual orientation and so on.

Key Informant Interviews

After several weeks of my participant observation, three instructors at the studio agreed to an interview. The first instructor I conducted a key informant interview with was the studio manager and main instructor at the studio who I originally approached about my research. I then interviewed two more instructors who taught at the main studio.

It should be noted that the key informant interviews, as well as the in-depth interviews which are discussed below, were semi-structured. According to Smith and Osborn (2003) most IPA research has been conducted using semi-structured interviews and, indeed, is the most effective method because it allows participants to somewhat guide the direction of the interview. Participants are able to bring up topics the researcher may not have thought of, allowing for deeper probing into important areas of the phenomenon that may have been overlooked within a structured interview. This allows for a more detailed understanding of the participants' perspectives. As well, IPA regards participants as experiential experts on the phenomenon being studied and, therefore, they

need to be given maximum opportunity to tell their own story (Smith and Osborn 2003). In my research, the instructors and students are regarded as the experts on the subject of pole-dancing classes

The key informant interviews began with questions regarding the instructors' backgrounds as pole-dancing teachers and they were asked to describe how they run their classes. Next, they were asked about their observations of the students in their classes with regard to outward appearance as well as personality and attitude. The final section of the interview asked the women why they became instructors, how they taught their classes, what their goals were as instructors and what kind of impact they wished to have on their students (See Appendix B).

The key informant interviews were helpful because the instructors were enthusiastic about discussing the classes. As well, the instructors were able to speak about the experiences that they had observed in their students, as well as their own experiences as both instructors and students in pole-dancing classes. However, one limitation of the key informant interviews was that, because the women worked for the studio, they likely felt the need to present the studio in a positive light to encourage business, which clearly biases their opinions. In the end, I conducted three key informant interviews which were recorded with a digital recorder and transferred to my computer for transcription and analysis.

In-Depth Interviews

The in-depth interviews with the participants were semi-structured interviews as well, and the main method I used in my research. The in-depth interviews helped to explore the essence of the women's experiences of pole-dancing fitness, which is important in a phenomenological approach. In fact, according to Miller and Crabtree

(2004: 188), in-depth interviews are personal and intimate and the focus is on “depth, detail, vividness, and nuance”. Similarly, Bogden and Taylor (1975: 7) find that open ended interviews are a good way to, “...gain an intimate view of organizations, relationships, and events from a perspective of one who has experienced them him- or herself, and who may have a different premise about the world than we [researchers] have.” The majority of the in-depth interview participants were recruited through the contact sheets that were distributed with the surveys to both studios. I also recruited some participants by individually asking women in my class if they would be interested in participating in an interview. Finally, one woman I interviewed was referred to me by another participant. In the end, I conducted 11 in-depth interviews that were recorded with a digital recorder and then transferred to my computer for transcription and analysis. Most of the interviews were conducted in local coffee shops, which I was granted oral permission to use as was suggested by the Ethics Review Board. A few interviews, however, were conducted in participants’ homes or offices.

In general, the focus of the interviews began with a discussion of why the women were taking pole-dancing, including their motivation, what they enjoyed about the classes, and their reservations when first starting, if any. The next section of the interview focused on how the classes might have influenced the women’s identities by exploring how the classes made them feel about themselves and influenced their sexual thoughts, feelings and/or behaviour. Finally, the outside influences on the women’s experiences of the classes, such as friends, family, romantic partners and social pressures were discussed (See Appendix C).

Focus Group

The final method I used in my research was a focus group. According to Morgan (2004), focus groups are good for drawing out a range of experiences and perspectives from a given group regarding a particular topic. The discussion between the women in the focus group allowed them to build upon each other's ideas as well as offer opposing opinions. In fact, knowledge is formed in group contexts such as focus groups because of the ability to allow participants to question each other, laugh at or challenge each others' comments, or ask for clarification from one another (Allen 2005). This interaction is important in phenomenological research because it can help achieve more nuanced descriptions of the feelings and meanings attached to the phenomenon being studied.

I was the moderator leading the focus group. I recorded it using a digital recorder and then transferred the focus group interview onto my computer to be transcribed and analyzed. I recruited the women for my focus group through the in-depth interviews. At the end of each in-depth interview, I asked the participant if she would be willing to participate in a focus group. Ultimately, five women participated in my focus group. It was very difficult to schedule a date and time for the focus group that was convenient for all the participants; therefore, as an incentive to attend the group, I purchased a 50 dollar gift certificate to Starbucks which all the women who attended had a chance to win if their name was drawn. Because of the difficulty in scheduling the date of the focus group, it was conducted approximately two months after the last in-depth interview was completed.

A number of the women who attended the focus group recognized each other from their studio or had taken classes together. This appeared to help the women feel comfortable and at ease during the focus group, which in turn helped facilitate discussion.

In fact, according to Allen (2005), participating in focus groups with friends can be beneficial because it helps participants feel more comfortable, especially when discussing matters relating to sexuality. I did not intentionally encourage the women to participate with friends as Allen (2005) did in her study of men's sexual identity, however, the fact that this occurred was beneficial to my focus group because most of the discussion flowed naturally and required minimal facilitation on my part.

In the focus group, there were three women that I recruited from the main studio and two I recruited from the secondary studio. As well, at the time of the focus group, two of the women who I originally conducted in-depth interviews with had recently gone through training to become instructors of pole-dancing fitness classes. Both had begun teaching beginner levels while still participating in upper level classes themselves. These two women were an asset to the focus group because they easily discussed their various experiences as pole-dancing students, but could also offer additional information about the students they had taught or offer insight into the instructional side of pole-dancing.

The focus group discussion centered on issues such as why they began taking pole-dancing classes; why they felt the classes were (and continue to be) so popular in western society; how the women felt about outsider opinions of the classes; and how the women felt about the instructors of the classes (See Appendix D). The women in the focus group were very talkative and, as a result, I was not able to follow my focus group question guide closely; there were often long periods where the women carried on the discussion themselves without my assistance. This allowed many of the topics I wished to address to be covered without needing to ask the questions directly, however it also meant, at times, the focus group went off topic. Ultimately, a great deal of information

was generated out of the focus group and it served as an asset to my phenomenological study of pole-dancing fitness.

Analysis

To analyze my data, I applied thematic analysis within an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework. To organize the data, I used the computer program NVivo 2007. As Boyatzis claims, “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic” (in Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). Thematic analysis is a flexible method for analysis that can be used within a variety of frameworks; however, Braun and Clarke (2006) note its particular compatibility with IPA and the belief in drawing out the meanings behind individuals’ experiences of phenomena. According to Smith and Osborn (2003), meaning is central, and understanding the depth and complexity rather than the frequency of those meanings is the focus of IPA. Similarly, according to Creswell (1998), in the data analysis stage of phenomenological research, the job of the researcher is to analyze specific statements and themes in search of all possible meanings. Therefore, when transcribing my interviews every sentence was written verbatim so as not to lose the words of the participants or unintentionally change the meanings of their statements.

I also aimed to create a rich description of my entire data set as opposed to a detailed account of one aspect of pole-dancing. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this is often useful when investigating an under-researched area, such as pole-dancing fitness. Therefore, my interview schedule included a wide range of questions related to

pole-dancing that generated a number of themes, some of which did not relate to my research questions and are not included in this thesis. Further, I used an inductive approach to my analysis (see Braun and Clarke 2006) and did not apply a pre-existing coding frame to the data. That is, after transcribing the last interview, I then read the entirety of the transcripts and created the codes and thematic categories based on what I saw in the data, instead of looking for preconceived themes. Finally, because this is a sociological research project, the meaning of the phenomenon for the participants was considered to be socially constructed. Therefore, my analysis involved analyzing the actions and consciousness of individuals who were working towards constructing and understanding reality within the life-world (see Schutz in Swingewood 2000). I embraced the perspective that there was not a reality to be captured, but a social world consisting of multiple realities which were given meaning through language, rules, roles, and statuses (Schutz in Swingewood 2000). That is, I assumed there were multiple realities of pole-dancing fitness based on each woman's subjective experience.

In phenomenological research, there are basic steps that must be followed when analyzing transcripts to ensure a thorough analysis. I will outline these steps according to Giorgi and Giorgi (2003), Smith and Osborn (2003), and Braun and Clarke (2006) and explain how they were applied in my research. The first step was to read the entire transcript from each participant interview (see Giorgi and Giorgi 2003). Smith and Osborn (2003) make a similar suggestion regarding the analysis process for IPA: the first stage of analysis in IPA is simply reading and rereading the transcripts so that the researcher becomes as familiar as possible with the participants' accounts of the phenomenon. Familiarizing myself with the data was particularly important to IPA because of the double responsibility it requires of researchers. The researcher must

engage in an interpretive relationship with the transcript where, on the one hand, the researcher is attempting to capture and do justice to the participants' meanings of their experiences and understand their social and mental world (Smith and Osborn 2003). On the other hand, the participants may not be aware of or choose to voice all of the meanings the phenomenon holds; therefore, the researcher must engage in a process of interpretation through a thorough dedication to the reading and analysis of the transcripts (Smith and Osborn 2003). Thus, a transcript must be carefully read several times. Braun and Clarke (2006) support this idea stating that in the first stage of thematic analysis the researcher must immerse him or herself into the data to become familiar with its depth and breadth. The first step of my analysis actually occurred during the transcription of my interviews. It was a strategic decision to write my theory and methodology chapters prior to transcribing because these chapters described in detail the approaches I used in my analysis. Therefore, by transcribing after writing these chapters, the transcription process itself became a first read-through of the data. Also, after I finished transcribing each interview, it was read over again to check for typing mistakes and, more importantly, to remind me of the topics that were discussed in the interview.

According to Giorgi and Giorgi (2003), in the second step of phenomenological analysis the researcher must re-read the transcripts making marks where there is a change in what the participant is describing and new meanings occur. For Smith and Osborn (2003), this involves the researcher making notes in the margins as he or she reads through the text, commenting on any thoughts and feelings they have about what was said. Eventually, similarities and differences, contradictions, echoes and amplifications become apparent to the researcher and are the focus of what is being noted (Smith and Osborn 2003: 67). For Braun and Clarke (2006: 88), this process is referred to as

“generating initial codes”. Codes identify areas of raw data that are interesting and can be analyzed for meaning regarding the phenomenon (Braun and Clarke 2006). For my research, these notes were first made within the documents on my computer. I would make short notes in a red font when a specific statement seemed particularly important or a similar idea was repeated several times. I also kept a separate document with a list of codes based on patterns I had begun to notice. I then printed off two full interviews and made more detailed notes on these by hand to code my data more thoroughly. I then created basic coding trees based on my research questions using the notes I had made from reading through my transcripts. These coding trees were then put into NVivo 2007 as tree nodes, and my transcripts were also added to NVivo.

In the third step, the marking of meaning must then be made relevant to the discipline in which it is being studied (Giorgi and Giorgi 2003); in my case, this was sociology. For Smith and Osborn (2003) this step in the analysis encompasses two stages which assist with the creation of themes. First, the researcher has to go through the transcripts again, this time making more detailed notes regarding themes that are becoming apparent (Smith and Osborn 2003). Second, the researcher lists the themes that have been found within the text and begins to analyze them looking for connections that lead to the clustering of themes (Smith and Osborn 2003). In my research, this process involved reading through all of my transcripts again in NVivo and placing quotes into different codes. Many more codes were created through this process and easily added to the various tree nodes. There were also some codes that did not initially appear to fit within any tree, so they became free nodes in NVivo. During the reorganization of the codes into themes, many of these free nodes were combined with the tree nodes, which is discussed in more detail below. As I sorted my data into codes, I made notes by hand

about the themes I felt they displayed, as well as contradictions and problems I needed to address when I organized my themes and/or wrote my discussion of the findings.

For Braun and Clarke (2006), the third step in the analysis of phenomenological research is broken down into multiple stages of searching for and refining themes. First, they suggest researchers begin “searching for themes” by analyzing and combining the different codes they have generated (Braun and Clarke 2006). Next, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest “reviewing themes”; this refers to the refinement of the initial group of themes created by the researcher. For example, reviewing the themes allows the researcher to see where certain themes can be collapsed together, where others need to be broken down into multiple themes, and when initial themes are not themes at all and can be discarded (Braun and Clarke 2006). Finally, there is the process of “defining and naming themes” (Braun and Clarke 2006: 92). This is a further refining of the researcher’s themes to ensure that one can fully define each theme, explaining the “essence” of each theme including what it is and what it is not (Braun and Clarke 2006). For my research, this process occurred in NVivo, as the program facilitated the organization of the various codes into clear themes. Themes were created by grouping similar codes that related to specific research questions; having already placed most codes into tree nodes made this process easier. Also, as themes became more clearly defined, most of the free nodes could be integrated into different themes and/or subthemes. There was often overlap between the themes for each research question, as codes could be applicable to more than one research question, which is dealt with in Chapter Five of my thesis. As I created my themes, I made notes by hand about issues I wanted to address in Chapter Five during the analysis and discussion of my findings. Once I had created all my preliminary themes and subthemes, I then read through all the

quotes in each theme and I edited and rearranged some of these again to create more clearly defined themes. As well, I made notes in NVivo attached to each theme on how the theme was defined, clarifying what it included and what it did not encompass. A number of themes and subthemes were combined together, others discarded, some reorganized.

As an important note, Braun and Clarke clarify that the process of creating themes has often been referred to by researchers as allowing themes to “emerge” from the data. This is a misleading expression because the term “emerge” suggests that the themes have been there the whole time and that the researcher is simply picking them out of the transcript (Braun and Clarke 2006). Themes, in fact, come from the researcher not the transcripts of the participants, and therefore themes represent the researcher’s understandings of his or her participants’ words (Braun and Clarke 2006). This is an important element to IPA because it highlights the difference between the way in which the participants explain the meaning of the phenomenon to the researcher, which is what is written in the transcripts, and what the researcher interprets as the participants’ meaning of the phenomenon based on the transcripts.

The fourth and final step in phenomenological analysis is linking the themes to sociology in an explicit manner (Giorgi and Giorgi 2003). This is similar to Braun and Clarke’s (2006: 93) final stage which is “producing a report”. This step involves the researcher writing up their final report, which explains the data in a way that convinces the reader that the researchers’ themes are justified, representing a valid analysis of the phenomenon (Braun and Clarke 2006). This report must also go beyond simply reiterating and defining the themes the researcher has created, it must make an argument relating to the researchers’ original research question (Braun and Clarke 2006). This final

step is my description of the themes found in Chapter Four, and then my discussion of their meanings and relevance in Chapter Five. Overall, the process I used when analyzing my data allowed me to remain true to interpretative phenomenological analysis. It was a very meticulous and time-consuming process, but one that was necessary to achieve the most rigorous analysis of the data.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter outlines the findings of my research, which were found using the process of thematic analysis within an interpretive phenomenological analysis framework. The chapter begins with a summary of the findings from my survey and then outlines the main themes generated from the raw data based on my four main research questions. Each section is labeled appropriately based on these research questions. The labels are: Motivations, Influence of Others, Affect on Sexual Identity, and finally, Empowerment versus Oppression.

Description from Surveys

The survey provided demographic information about women in the two studios from which I recruited participants. In total, 17 participants completed surveys were returned to me. Some surveys were filled out by the women I interviewed, however, most were from participants who only participated in the survey portion of my research. The following is a summary of the results.

Women ranged in age from 15 to 55 years. The two most common age groups were 21-25 and 31-35, with four participants in each. Seven women were single, one was divorced, and nine were married or in a common law relationship. The education level of the women ranged from high school, partially or fully completed college and university degrees, to a Master's degree. The majority of women, (eight of the 17), had college or university listed as their highest level of education. As well, what the women did for a living widely varied, with few similar responses. Those responses that were most common were women who were university or college students at varying levels and three

women who identified themselves as mothers. The occupation of the women's spouses varied widely as well. The only common answer was "Construction" which two women responded. Twelve of the women did not have children and of the five women who did have children, all had two or three children ranging in age from 18 months to 35 years old. Finally, all the women answered "No" to the question "Are you a member of a visible minority" and all the women selected "heterosexual" as their sexual orientation.

Overall, the women tended to vary based on age, education level, their occupation and partners' occupation, and the results were almost evenly split between women in and outside of a relationship, nine and eight respectively. However, the fact that there were no women of a visible minority or any women that were not heterosexual was a telling result. The lack of visible minorities in the classes was also something I noticed during my participant observation. As well, I heard many women in my classes discussing their husbands which means they identified as heterosexual, although sexual orientation was not as easily observed as race.

It should be noted that these survey results represent a slightly younger demographic than the women interviewed. Many of the women revealed their age as well as employment and relationship status during the interviews, which allowed me to deduce that only one of my interviewees was a university student, whereas the rest were working professionals or stay-at-home mothers. The most likely reason for this difference would be because a large portion of the surveys were filled out at a studio which was located near a university; however, most of the women I interviewed were from a city with no major college or university.

Motivation

The motivations that women described which led them to first join and then continue with pole-dancing fitness classes varied. The following is a description of reasons the participants specifically identified for why they joined, as well as reasons they gave for continuing the classes. However, many of the themes found in subsequent research questions will highlight other aspects of the classes that the women enjoyed and/or benefited from. These themes were highly likely to be additional reasons why women were motivated to continue participating in pole-dancing fitness classes, even though participants did not specifically identify them as such.

Physical Benefits

One motivation that was both a reason women joined pole-dancing classes and continued to take them was for the physical benefits. Many women claimed that they began pole-dancing because they were looking for a new exercise routine, and then once they began the classes they found them to be a superior workout to many others that they had tried. Overall, my participants identified four main physical benefits that pole-dancing classes provided: better posture, more energy, improved health and improved fitness. First, many of the women found that taking the classes helped them develop better posture in their everyday lives, as good posture was a specific focus during the classes. Alli explained how pole-dancing improved her awareness of her posture: “I really keep in mind the posture when I’m just walking, when I’m going upstairs, that sort of thing. Throughout the day, just paying attention to the fact that I should be supporting myself and even when I do notice if I’m hunching at the computer, it’s like, ‘ok!’ [demonstrates sitting up].”

Second, many of the women discussed feeling higher energy levels since starting pole-dancing. For example, Debra explained: “I think all exercise will affect you in a certain way because you have more energy or you’re out and about more, and maybe you’re more energetic to go visit people.” Here Debra points out that the reason the classes often give participants more energy is because they are a form of exercise. However, for some participants, their increased energy levels were specifically related to taking the pole-dancing rather than any other form of exercise. For example, Pat explained how the classes made her feel: “The classes make me feel happy and energetic [...] energetic because a lot of the stuff that you learn, the strength building [...] It’s just fun to do, it’s just different.” Pat had stated earlier that she had tried a number of different fitness activities recently but that pole-dancing was the only one she felt motivated to continue, which appeared to be at least partly due to the classes’ ability to energize her.

Third, a number of women discussed how pole-dancing classes benefit their health. According to interviewees, participating in a regular exercise routine increased their focus on their health, such as eating healthy, and some felt the time exercising was a good stress reliever. However, one of the most poignant examples of the health benefits was seen in women who found that illnesses they had been battling were drastically improved by participating in the pole-dancing classes. For example, Gretchen, who had been participating in belly-dancing and pole-dancing, explained the pain relief she felt from taking both classes:

Before I was taking the belly dancing and this, I was going to regular chiropractor visits, I was getting acupuncture in my knees, I was sore all the time, like [in] my neck. I felt like somebody had pressed down on the top of my head and it was just sore every single day. And since I’ve been doing this [...] what a difference. Like I can sleep at night [...] I feel healthier, it makes me feel like I want to be healthier. I’m even eating better. I’m choosing a better lifestyle now health-wise totally because of the classes.

In her interview, Gretchen attributed her pain relief as well as the healthier lifestyle choices she made to taking belly-dancing and pole-dancing classes. Whether another form of exercise would have offered similar health benefits for Gretchen is difficult to determine, however pole-dancing and belly-dancing were the first activities she found that offered relief, and therefore she stayed with them.

Fourth, fitness is the term I used to refer to the women who discussed the exercise and/or work-out component of pole-dancing as a main reason they initially signed-up for the classes and a reason they continued taking the classes. The participants focused on how physically exhausting pole-dancing workouts were. Alli explained that when her friends asked her if the entire class was learning moves on the pole she responded: “Are you crazy? You’d dread that (laughs). I’m exhausted after 10 minutes, it’s really hard.” Thus, the pole-dancing appeared to be very intense workout. As well, along with discussions of fitness, many women specifically focused on taking pole-dancing to improve their flexibility, improve their strength, and decrease their weight. Developing their strength, particularly upper-body strength, was the most talked about physical benefit that the participants identified. For example, Jamie explained the difficult upper-body workout found in pole-dancing:

If you’ve tried to lift yourself on a pole and you haven’t done it before, it is hard, *hard* work, I’m telling you, you’re sweating. And I mean, as you progress you can see people’s arms getting stronger and getting more definition and so it’s completely different from what we see in a magazine.

Jamie’s explanation demonstrated how pole-dancing helped participants gain upper body strength, and interestingly, she highlighted that muscular arms are not an attribute often seen on women in magazines.

For many women, these four physical benefits were motivations to both begin and continue taking pole-dancing classes. Arguably, the women could have found these benefits in any number of fitness classes, however many of the women did find pole-dancing to be a superior workout compared to many other types of exercise they had tried, particularly in terms of strength building. However, it should also be noted that the women's motivations for taking the classes were often a desire to exercise combined with any number of other interests, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Furthermore, many women explained that their confidence levels were improved because of the fitness benefits they experienced from taking pole-dancing classes. This experience was usually explained by the women using the expression "It makes me feel good (about myself)" or some similar variation. For example, when Jill was asked about how the classes have changed her feelings about her body, she responded:

I like it a lot more. I can actually see definition in my arms and in my stomach, and my bum's totally new, it's up where it should be. I've never lost any weight doing it, but I've noticed I've toned up a lot and it makes me feel really good [...] my self-esteem has gone way up.

Earlier in the interview Jill explained that she had tried a variety of exercise activities previous to pole-dancing, but found none were as effective and therefore able to boost her confidence in the way that pole-dancing could. Pat expressed similar feelings to Jill, as she had also had difficulty finding an exercise program she could stick with. She explained how pole-dancing helped her get in shape and feel happier:

I found that it has toned my body, so my arms my legs and my abs, so that makes me feel better. Because you can physically see that there's a change, and when you can physically see that there's a change then that just automatically makes you feel happier.

Finally, Leigh closely connected the exercise component of the classes with her positive feelings towards herself: "But again, my final thing is, I love it, it makes me feel good,

and it's a great workout [...] So, personally, I think all women should do it." Therefore, for many women, the physical changes the women observed in their bodies as a result of the fitness elements of pole-dancing, increased their feelings of self-confidence. Again, these women could have found similar physical results from taking another form of fitness, however most seemed to find pole-dancing was more effective and enjoyable than other exercises they had tried.

Enjoyment

Another popular reason women chose to engage in pole-dancing classes was because they expected them to be "fun", and then continued to sign-up because they found them to be even more enjoyable than expected. The enjoyment expressed by participants was characterized through their enthusiastic discussion of the classes as "fun" and the use of the expression "I love it". These words were used so pervasively throughout the interviews it is necessary to mention it as an important theme. The reasons for the women's enthusiasm varied and were often not entirely clear; however, within the focus group, the sexual element of the classes was identified as a main contributing factor to why the women found the classes so much fun:

Meghan: Ok, so the sexual side is kind of what helps make it really fun I guess?

Participant #1: For sure. Oh yeah, I mean because when you're doing the pony and you're spanking your butt, it's like, "ok, no one will ever see me doing this outside of this room. It's just not going to happen," right?

Thus, one explanation for the "fun" the women found in the classes was because of the sexualized moves that the women felt they could not, or would not, engage in any place else. Another reason for the amount of enjoyment the women experienced during the classes was connected with the opportunity to have fun and laugh with other women:

Participant #1: I think, generally, women are very supportive of each other, do you know what I mean? I think our lives are so consumed with family, and

working and everything, that when we get to these classes everybody wants to have so much fun, and I think that spirit creates that whole atmosphere in the room, I find that a lot. It's a lot of fun.

Participant #2: Yeah, yeah.

Participant #1: I've never laughed at any kind of exercises for any length of time accept for this.

All: Yeah, yeah.

Participant #3: I feel exactly the same way.

Therefore, spending time with other women and laughing at themselves during class was another contributing factor to women's enjoyment of the classes. These were not the only reasons that women found the classes enjoyable; however, they appeared to be two of the obvious "fun" elements that women discussed most often.

Another factor that contributed to participants' enjoyment of pole-dancing was because of their intrigue and expectation that the classes would be unique or "different". In response to the question of why pole-dancing was chosen as a form of exercise over other fitness classes, a large majority of the participants responded by citing the uniqueness of the classes, referring to them as "different" and comparing them to other "boring" types of exercise. For example, Jill explained how she and a friend decided to first take pole-dancing: "We loved the idea that it was so different, and not a lot of people know about it or do it." Jill later expanded on her enjoyment of the novelty of pole-dancing: "I did yoga, pilates, I found it very boring. This [pole-dancing] was so much fun, so much fun." Thus, the uniqueness of the classes was a reason Jill both began and continued with pole-dancing. Rachel also highlighted her enjoyment of the classes because of how "different" they were, attributing this uniqueness to the fact that the classes were, as she put it, "less of a norm". Finally, Lynn explained that she had never been able to stick with any other type of exercise class except for pole-dancing: "I've had a history of [signing] up for yoga and you pay for the whole 14 weeks and you go twice.

And the fact that I'm sticking with this, and I have for a long time, that speaks volumes for me personally. Yeah, I love it." Lynn had been taking pole-dancing classes for over two years and she attributed part of her success to the novelty found in pole-dancing compared to other forms of exercise that she had tried.

Along with the uniqueness and fun aspects of the classes, the participants highlighted that learning new ways to move their bodies and learning dance moves for their own personal pleasure were also factors that added to their enjoyment of the classes. Jamie explained that: "We're learning how to move our bodies in a way that we've never been able to move them before." As well, Kelly described the changes in her body movement since taking the classes:

I have noticed through pole-dancing, the way I move is different. I have a different focus on my movement [...] There's certain ways of walking and carrying yourself that has made me conscious of the way I carry myself. So I think I carry myself differently, in a very positive way.

Therefore, learning new body movements was a reason many women chose to continue taking pole-dancing classes. In particular, women highlighted learning how to move their hips or simply move in more sexual ways as movements that they had not been able to do prior to taking pole-dancing, and as a factor that contributed to their enjoyment of the classes.

Self-Improvement

A desire to improve themselves was another factor that contributed to the women's motivation for remaining in pole-dancing classes, and for a few, it was a reason they began the classes in the first place. The feeling of self-improvement was characterized by the women's desires to persevere and improve in the classes. This was shown through Leigh, who explained her struggles in the classes: "I actually enjoy doing

the classes [...] I just work and do what I can do, and I try everything, even if I'm a little bit of a disaster doing it (laughs), I do it, I work towards doing that." Therefore, working through her difficulties with pole-dancing technique was an important element of the classes for Leigh. As well, an important aspect of self-improvement was that the women often regarded the classes as a challenge, usually a physical challenge. This was seen in the women's discussion of their initial intimidation or difficulty with what they were expected to do in class, yet their determination to succeed. For example, Leigh explained her challenge of learning how to invert herself on the pole:

And so I keep telling myself, "We're doing inverts now," and everybody in the class can do it, and I did it once. And it's a really challenging thing, but I don't get down on myself about it [...] I'm going to get it, I know that. So, I just think, "Yep, the day is coming." I used to think that about some of the other things that we did, even in level one it was like, "Oh my gosh, how am I *ever* going to do that?", or it freaks you out to do it. So, yeah, you just carry on, you do what you need to do.

Similarly, Sarah, a pole-dancing instructor, shared her feelings about how she found teaching the classes to be a welcome physical challenge:

It's tested me. Umm...well it's challenged me more than anything, to be more involved in my own technique because you're up there showing them, you have to be the one that's doing it properly. You know I still struggle, I'm not huge up on the levels and I still have level three spins I need to work on.

Many women described the classes as challenging and physically difficult, but regarded this as a positive feeling in their lives. It was clear that this challenge was a motivating factor in continuing the classes for many women.

Furthermore, a number of women explained that they were nervous and uncomfortable at the beginning of the classes because of the sexualized movement; however, this discomfort was also seen as a challenge that needed to be overcome. For example, Lynn discussed growing up in a family that was very reserved and serious,

where matters relating to sex or sexuality were never discussed. This prompted me to inquire as to why she had been interested in even taking a pole-dancing class considering her upbringing:

Meghan: So coming from that background, what was the draw to the classes for you? What made you want to do the classes?

Lynn: I think it was, like I said before, I think it was stepping out of my comfort zone.

Thus, exploring the new experiences that pole-dancing classes allowed and challenging themselves to “step out of their comfort zone” with regard to their sexuality, were reasons many of the women participated in pole-dancing classes.

To Feel Attractive

Another factor that the women identified as a motivation to take pole-dancing was to feel more attractive. The women explained this motivation as wanting to be “sexier”. Jamie illustrated this theme when discussing what she felt women wanted to achieve by taking the classes: “[...] we’re all there for the same reason and we all want the same outcome, physical fitness, we want to feel prettier, we want to feel sexier.” Many women also claimed that feeling more attractive was not their personal goal, however they did feel it was the goal of some other women in the classes. For example, Debra explained that some women might take pole-dancing because they believe it will help them achieve the beauty ideal promoted on television, and that studios use this idea in their advertising:

Because everyone wants to look like the people on TV and stuff like that, and have that sexy side to them, and that’s why I think when they [pole-dancing studios] advertise this stuff, they kind of push that side of it...because everybody wants to be viewed that way [...] I think that that’s probably why they [the studio] have a studio manager who looks that way, because that’s what people want to look like.

Earlier Debra had commented that the studio manager looked like a model, therefore, her reference to this instructor fits with her explanation that women in the classes are trying

to achieve a certain level of attractiveness, which appeared to be based on beauty ideals found in the media. As well, the youngest woman I interviewed, who was 21, admitted that, initially, appearing attractive to the opposite sex was one of her reasons for taking pole-dancing: “[...] it’s funny because at first I was totally like, I’m going to take it and boys will be like, ‘Oh, that’s so hot’, and they’ll think it’s sexy [...] I wanted to do it because I thought it would get a little bit of male attention, you know?” Rachel further explained that these feelings started to change after she began taking the classes. Her comments reveal, however, that some women do join pole-dancing classes as a direct result of wanting to make themselves more attractive, or at least appear more attractive, to men. Rachel was the only participant who admitted that this was a reason for her initial interest in the classes. As well, from these excerpts it appears as though women defined attractiveness or “sexiness” either through the mainstream ideals of female beauty that are frequently depicted in the media and are created to appeal to men, or simply through men’s attraction towards them.

Independence

Conversely, for a number of women, a motivation to begin and continue pole-dancing was that the classes were a source of independence. Often the women framed this need for independence in reference to having lost a part of themselves or spent a large amount of their time caring for others; the classes provided time in which the women were able to focus on themselves. The phrases, “I do it for me” and “it’s time for myself” were used by a number of women. For example, Alli explained that the classes offered a good atmosphere for her to find time for herself after a busy day:

Alli: I’m talking all day, so I don’t really have a lot of quiet time, because that [pole-dancing class] is basically my time where it’s like we put on music and I move around and I kind of like that.

Meghan: Ok, so just time for yourself, I guess?

Alli: Yeah, so I don't really feel any reservations about it, just because I'm just doing it for me, nothing else.

Alli's example illustrated that the atmosphere found in pole-dancing classes was a reason she enjoyed them as time for herself. Overall, there was a clear need by a number of the women to have an activity which allowed them to escape their daily responsibilities and focus on themselves. For many women, pole-dancing classes appeared to be an ideal place for them to do this. As well, Leigh explained that she didn't take pole-dancing with a friend or relative because: "I wanted to do it on my own, it was my own personal journey that I wanted to do for me." Because of the sexual element of the classes, many women viewed them as fairly personal experiences and an opportunity for growth, which was seen in Leigh's reference to her "personal journey". This accounts for why pole-dancing classes offered a particularly good environment for women to find time for themselves.

In addition, the women who were mothers also found the classes particularly important to their independence by providing them with space away from their families where they could relax and not worry about household duties. The theme of independence for mothers was described by an instructor, Julie, who explained her observations of the women she taught:

[...] the only thing I find consistent, a little bit consistent, is that these women who come here are in the stage of their life that they've lost a bit of their identity, whether it be from getting married, being in a relationship for a long period of time, having children, that's kind of the main thing right there is having children. And they've stayed home, they've been home for three or four years, they're cooking and cleaning and taking care of kids and the person they knew five, four-five years ago has been buried under responsibilities of a household. And so they come here and instantly have one hour that nobody's hanging off them, asking them for something, looking at them, getting sick on them, you know, anything! And you see this, it's almost like this beautiful butterfly that's transforming again. Umm...they get their life back. And it's one hour, maybe once a week, that they

get to be themselves and no one's judging them, and no one's asking them questions, they're just doing their thing, and it's incredible, it's why I wanted to be an instructor. Because that was me two years ago, that's how I got into it was that very thing. I needed my hour a week where I wasn't going to pull my hair out (laughs) [...]. Because I was the stay-at-home mom, married and stuff. So that's what inspires me to teach these women, it's this little step into regaining your independence and your identity again after having children.

This observation and experience that Julie described was also reflected in a number of the students' stories about their own experiences of the classes as outlets from their household responsibilities and finding time for themselves. Jamie, who had two teenage children, explained her thoughts regarding pole-dancing as an outlet for her own independence: "I think when we're older we're just happy to get out (laughs). We've already had our kids, we've been through the marriages, whatever the case may be, we just want to take care of us now. Honestly, that's how I feel, I'm here to take care of me now." Finally, Melanie, a mother who worked from home and whose husband frequently traveled, shared similar feelings when asked if she liked the opportunity pole-dancing classes provided to get out of her house: "Outside of the house? Oh yeah. Because you know, you go through so many years of not doing anything, and then you know, you lose yourself [...] I haven't worried about myself in 12 years, so you forget. So for that, it's nice." Clearly, for many of the women, the classes provided a much-needed outlet from the stresses of motherhood. Arguably these benefits could be found through any number of recreation activities. However, the woman-only and supportive environment, as well as the opportunity to engage with their sexuality, all of which are themes that are discussed below, are what made pole-dancing a particularly enticing activity for women to use as an outlet from motherhood.

The Influence of Others

The participants' experiences of pole-dancing were influenced by four main individuals or groups of people: the instructors, the other students, the women's romantic partners, and finally their friends and family. For a number of the participants, the influence of these individuals or groups added to the reasons why women began and continued taking pole-dancing classes; however, this was not directly stated as a motivation by the participants and was instead an interpretation I made from their commentary.

Supportive Instructors

The instructors had a significant impact on the women's experiences of pole-dancing class. For the most part, women liked their instructors; some felt admiration towards them because of their abilities, but most described them as very supportive and/or encouraging during the classes. Many of the women felt that the instructors were dedicated to making the classes a comfortable and welcome environment for anyone who wished to join, and did not feel the instructors were judgmental or discouraging to any student. For myself, during my participant observation, I was impressed with the support offered by my instructor who regularly encouraged the students by telling us we were all doing "really great". Alli also described the instructors as supportive: "[...] I haven't felt any pressure to really do well and get it right on the first time, and I think it's part of the environment they have there, they really don't stress, they're just like, 'Just try it out,' they're very, very supportive in that way." Alli also explained how the instructors attempted to make the classes enjoyable for women of a wide variety of skill levels. She described her instructor in particular:

Well she's pretty good. She takes it easy and she paces it well, so she has taken into consideration where everyone is in the class, so it's challenging enough for me, but for people that may not be as flexible it's adapted well for them as well. And I've noticed no one really feels left behind in any of the classes that I've been in either, even if they can't get something they [the instructors] are like, "Don't worry, you can just work on it."

The support and encouragement of the instructors was a positive experience that every participant described, and was one that significantly increased the enjoyment of the classes for many of the women. Therefore, this could also be argued to be one of the motivations women had to continue the classes.

However, there were a few women who had experiences with instructors that were poor teachers and created an uncomfortable environment in class. None of the participants described experiences in which the instructors were rude or discouraging to the students, their criticisms were based on poor teaching ability. For example, some women felt instructors rushed through moves or did not give enough explanation of how to do a move. Gretchen described her negative experience with one instructor, stating that:

She was inconsistent, she didn't look comfortable herself...I didn't *get* what she was saying [...]. Everybody in the class was like, 'What is going on? I don't know what you're doing, you need to explain it'. It was almost like it took the whole class to explain the whole thing because nobody got what she said in the first place. So, thankfully we didn't go through that level with just her.

This instructor was later replaced after a number of the women from the class complained about her teaching style. Therefore, although a few women had bad experiences with instructors who they felt were not competent to teach the classes, the participants also felt they had a voice to say something about their negative experiences and action was taken based on their opinions. In short, the overall influence of the instructors on the participants was overwhelmingly positive with minimal accounts of negative experiences,

and therefore the instructors were likely a factor that encouraged women to continue with the classes.

Fellow Students and Female Bonding

The other students in the classes were another large influence on the women's experience of pole-dancing. In particular, the friendships and bonds that the participants developed with other women in the classes were a huge influence on their enjoyment of pole-dancing, and therefore, a likely reason many women were motivated to continue taking the classes. For example, for Lynn, the connection and time she spent with other women was the primary reason she continued taking pole-dancing classes:

I think my favorite part of taking the classes is the relationships actually. I mean yes there's a fitness element, obviously. But I think the relationships that you develop over time are definitely the most important thing [...]. Its just nice because you get to see that familiar face time and time again and you start to get to know them, and you're cheering them on if they finally got through a move that they haven't been able to do, or they've lost weight. And it's been really great, it's been really great in that way. I think as you age, you really truly realize how much women need women [...]. And I think that's what you really find there at class, I mean it's so much more than just pole-dancing.

Thus, in Lynn's example we see that her sense of bonding with the women in her class was a strong motivating factor for her participation and reason for her enjoyment of the classes. Additionally, many of the women experienced female bonding in class through the support the women provided each other. Leigh detailed her experience of this support: "It's a very encouraging class. We all work at making it joyful. And if somebody had a challenge doing something, and they do it, everybody's like, 'Yay!' and claps." Lastly, all the women in the focus group agreed that pole-dancing was a particularly good environment for fostering female bonding. This was exemplified during a discussion in which some of the women described the awkward amusement they experienced while trying to do some of the sexual moves in class, which then prompted me to ask:

Meghan: Do you think that because it starts off a little uncomfortable and you're doing things you're not entirely comfortable with, that increases female bonding at all?

Participant #1: Absolutely!

All: Yeah. (Murmurs of agreement)

Participant #1: You're all dealing with the same level of uncertainty, "What the hell am I doing?" You know?

Participant #2: Not to mention, it's still not an expected activity by the masses, *especially* women.

All: Mmhhh, yes. Yeah, that's true.

Thus, the feelings of unease that pole-dancing classes created by asking women to step outside their comfort zone in terms of their sexuality, appeared to be a key factor that helped initiate the bonding between the women. This bonding created feelings of belonging and attachment for many of the women in the classes and was likely a major reason why they were drawn to pole-dancing classes over other fitness activities. Overall, many of the positive feelings that the participants felt towards pole-dancing were largely due to their experiences of female bonding and support from fellow students.

Partner Involvement

Twelve of the 14 women I interviewed were married or in long-term heterosexual relationships and most of these women described their partners as supportive of their participation in pole-dancing. This support was usually described in a manner which alluded to the assumption that all men would be happy if their female partner were to take pole-dancing lessons. Kate, an instructor, explained this perspective: "I think he's pretty happy about it. I don't think that any person that says, 'Honey, I'm going to take pole-dancing,' is going to go, 'No, don't do it'. So yeah, he supports me [...]". Therefore, most women felt it was obvious that their partners were happy they were taking pole-dancing. However, many of the women described their partners' enthusiasm about the classes as supporting their choice to participate, not as a pressure to participate in the class in the

first place. For example, Lynn explained that her husband was, “Completely encouraging. Yeah, he thinks it’s great. He’s proud of me for sticking with it, for finding something that I have passion for [...] and reaching my own personal goals, he’s just really proud of me, and that feels great, it really does.” Therefore, Lynn’s husband was in support of the classes because of how they benefitted her. There was no evidence among any of the interviews that the women were participating in pole-dancing solely for their partner’s enjoyment. For example, Jill explained her partner’s reaction when she first installed a pole in her house:

When I first got it he was interested in seeing what I could do because he hadn’t seen it before, and when I do learn something new I’m like, ‘Hey, check out what I can do now.’ But most of the time because of his work hours, I’ll do it before he even gets home and then I’m exhausted.

Jill’s description shows that her partner was interested in and benefitted from her participation in the classes because she did demonstrate for him. However, clearly her main goal in taking pole-dancing and setting up a pole in her house was not to perform routines for him, as she explained she normally would practice before he arrived home.

Furthermore, some of the women explained that the classes helped improve their romantic relationship with their partner, which was a benefit to both parties. For example, Jamie explained: “I mean, life becomes mundane, and if you can throw something like that [pole-dancing] into the fire, then I think it’s a really good thing. I think it creates a lot of excitement, so yeah, that’s a pro for sure.” Thus, for some participants, pole-dancing offered what many women described as a much-needed twist to their romantic relationship. This need to increase excitement in their sex lives appeared to be a desire the women felt, however determining the amount their partners affected this desire was

difficult in many cases. For Leigh, taking pole-dancing classes clearly affected her sexual feelings and behaviour for her own benefit, and there was little mention of her husband:

Meghan: How do you find it's changed your relationship with your husband?

Leigh: Umm...I would say, I would say yes, definitely. And I would say definitely in bed too. Yeah, again, I feel less inhibited, just more free to put forth, or to do different things and try new things. That goddess, she's coming out (laughs).

Meghan: I don't want to pry, but do you mind giving a few examples of how it changed your relationship maybe?

Leigh: Well I would say, that...what if I just said I don't feel as intimidated to, um...I don't want to say take control, but taking um...no I could say take control, I could say that. Or even just through expression, you know?

Leigh had some difficulty discussing how her sexual behaviour had changed because of pole-dancing, however, her lack of reference to how her husband reacted to this change could mean Leigh's new sexual behaviour was more about finding pleasure for herself.

On the other hand, Melanie seemed much more concerned with her husband's opinion as she explained his enthusiasm about the classes: "He thinks it's great [...] He wants to get a pole for the house just to spice things up, make things different. We've been married 12 years so things kind of get to be boring and stuff, so he would like to have a pole and see what I can do." In Melanie's case, it appears that her participation in pole-dancing is heavily connected with her husband's desires and pleasure. Overall, for most women, their partner's pleasure was not the focus of their discussion and did not appear to be their primary motivation to take the classes. However, in these examples we see that many of the women's partners did benefit in some way and were enthusiastic about their wives' participation in pole-dancing, and this may have been a reason the women began and/or continued with the classes.

Support and Disapproval of Family and Friends

Overall, the participants referred to their families and friends as supportive and interested in their participation in pole-dancing classes. The most direct effect some friends and family had on the women's participation was to encourage the women to take the classes. For example, a participant in the focus group explained that she found out about pole-dancing classes through her daughter, who encouraged her to take them. She explained that her daughter said to her, "You should try that [pole-dancing] [...] no mom, really, you should try it'." As well, about half of the participants originally signed up for the classes with a friend or relative. This was the case for Debra, who explained that she had been looking into joining a pilates or yoga class, when a co-worker suggested they join pole-dancing classes together. Therefore, the participants' friends and families were often a reason they joined pole-dancing classes.

As well, many of the women found their friends and families to be supportive of their participation in the classes. Jamie explained her sister's reaction when she demonstrated some of her pole-dancing moves: "And my sister goes, 'Wow Jamie! Oh my god, this is awesome, I can't believe what you can do!' So I love showing my family what my strengths are and what I've learned." As well, the women felt support when their friends and families were interested in learning about the classes. For example, Rachel explained that one of her friends was particularly interested: "I have one friend who I talked about it [pole-dancing classes] in more detail with because she wanted to take them. She was like, 'What do you do? How do you do it?' So we actually did some of the moves." Thus, the majority of women found their friends and family to be supportive of their participation in pole-dancing, and this often helped increase the participants' enjoyment of the classes. However, it should be noted that most of the women described

this support as coming from their female friends. Men's reactions appeared to create a different feeling in the women.

Many of the participants found that their male friends or acquaintances were encouraging of their choice to pole-dance, but it was often an unwelcome encouragement. Based on a number of the women's stories, men tended to immediately associate the classes with strippers and the women sometimes felt a need to defend their choice to participate in pole-dancing. For example, Kelly explained her experience with men's reactions to her participation in these classes: "They totally associate it with strippers, and so I sometimes find myself explaining, 'It's pole-fitness classes.' It's always like, 'Oh, are you looking for a career change?' I'm like, 'Nooo'. So men, tend to just attach a completely sexual connotation to it." Similarly, Rachel expressed concern over telling her male friends that she was participating in pole-dancing because of the negative sexual connotations that are attached to this form of dance: "I loved talking about it with my girlfriends and stuff, but when it was guys I got a little bit reserved about it, and then if the guy that I did tell were like, 'You're taking pole-dancing?!' [...] I'd get more defensive [...] I didn't want them to think that it was slutty." Lynn also explained her fear of being labeled as "slutty" because of taking pole-dancing, however this fear was not specifically attached to male reactions: "There's such a negative connotation, I think that when people hear about pole-dancing they assume that you're easy, slutty, whatever. And you know, it's like, 'No, no, it has nothing to do with that, it's actually pretty beautiful to watch'." Thus, many of the women felt defensive of their participation in pole-dancing classes, which appeared to be closely linked with their fear of being labeled as a "slut".

Likewise, many women explained their hesitation and concern about sharing the fact that they pole-danced. For example, Pat stated that she didn't share this information

with many people: “I limit who I do talk to [about pole-dancing]. For example, I don’t talk about it with my grandmother. But my mom is aware and close friends of mine are aware that I do it. There’s certain people, such as coworkers, that I wouldn’t discuss it with [...]” Therefore, participants’ practice of not sharing the fact that they pole-danced with certain people, with specific emphasis on less familiar individuals and men, was often a result of the negative stigma connected with pole-dancing and judgment based on that stigma which the women wanted to avoid.

Similarly, because of the negative stereotypes that are attached to pole-dancing, some participants experienced negative reactions from their friends and family. For example, Leigh explained that, “I have a girlfriend who thinks it’s absolutely whorish to do that [pole-dancing]. And she’s voiced that.” However, Leigh went on to explain that she is not overly concerned with changing her friend’s opinion, and Leigh was happy to continue with the classes despite her friend’s disapproval. Another, more extreme example of the negative opinions of friends and family was found in Lynn’s narrative. She felt her family was too reserved to be accepting of pole-dancing classes, and therefore had not shared with her family that she had been taking the classes for the last two years:

Meghan: So coming from a fairly conservative background, how does your family feel about you taking pole-dancing ?

Lynn: They don’t know. No, it’s exercise class. Yeah. They don’t know.

Meghan: So, no siblings or cousins or anything?

Lynn: No.

Meghan: How would that be received if they knew?

Lynn: Not so well. Nope.

Lynn explained that her family would be judgmental and critical of pole-dancing classes, even as a form of fitness, which is why she chose not to tell them about her participation.

In summary, many of the participants’ friends and families were supportive of their

participation in pole-dancing classes; however, many of these women also experienced the negative effects of the stigma that is still attached to pole-dancing in western culture.

Affect on Sexual Identity

My research found that participants perceived pole-dancing fitness classes to have a strong influence on their sexuality in a number of different ways. This section outlines the themes of: sexual confidence, sexual expression, rediscovering sexuality, discomfort with sexuality, and finally, the non-sexual view of pole-dancing fitness. Once again, a number of these themes offer reasons why women enjoyed the classes and therefore chose to continue taking pole-dancing, although these were not explicitly stated as motivations when asked.

Sexual Confidence

According to participants, being involved in pole-dancing classes had a positive influence on their sexuality. Most did not feel as though their sexual behaviour had drastically changed due to the classes; however, almost all of the women explained that pole-dancing increased their confidence in their sexuality. For example, Jamie stated this idea very clearly when she said: "I think I'm more confident with my sexuality, but my behaviour hasn't changed". Similarly, when Debra was asked about how the classes affected her sexual identity she responded: "It's more, for me, a confidence thing, a confidence booster if anything". Overall, the most popular response from participants regarding the influence pole-dancing had on their sexuality was to describe the classes as increasing their sexual confidence.

The increase in women's sexual confidence through pole-dancing was closely related with a decline in their sexual inhibitions. This was usually expressed in relation to

their sexual encounters with their partners. For example, Melanie discussed a number of body insecurities she felt, including unhappiness with her weight, which she explained had increased her sexual inhibitions when with her husband. However, she found that taking pole-dancing eventually decreased these negative feelings: “Before, I would be very embarrassed to show my husband any moves that I would learn or anything, I would just feel self-conscious. But now I’m just getting over that, and I’ll show him some stuff that I’ve learned.” Similar examples were described by a number of women who felt less self-conscious around their partners after having participated in pole-dancing. For example, Leigh found the classes gave her confidence in her sexual ability: “I feel less inhibited, just more free to do different things and try new things [...]” What these examples showed was that women’s decline in sexual inhibitions was beneficial to their own sexuality and sexual pleasure. It clearly benefited the women’s partners as well, although to what extent was difficult to determine as few women talked about their partners’ reaction regarding this experience.

Similarly, teaching women to shed their inhibitions and become comfortable and confident with their bodies, specifically with their sexual bodies, was a goal the instructors strived to achieve. For example, Sarah, an instructor, explained the instructions she gave to her students about how to become comfortable with their sexual bodies: “I always remind them, don’t be afraid of your own body [...] I just remind them, ‘Let your hands wander, feel the curves of your body. It’s your body, they’re your hands.’ I just remind them that it’s you, don’t be afraid of yourself.” This comfort with their body was in fact what a number of the women learned in pole-dancing class over time, which helped them become less inhibited. Jill explained:

I'm more comfortable with myself. As for doing the walk around, when you first start 'Let your hands wander' you're really reserved, you don't want to do that in front of people. And then you just get comfortable with yourself and know how you move and you just really learn a lot about yourself as you do it.

Pat also discussed how the classes taught women to be more comfortable with their bodies and their sexuality:

I think I see it [pole-dancing] as more they're helping a female perhaps become more comfortable with their body as is, and with their sexuality. Perhaps, if anything, just to improve the woman herself and to make her more happy and more comfortable [...] Confidence, developing confidence and self-esteem.

Thus, for Sarah, Jill, and Pat a main benefit of pole-dancing classes was becoming comfortable with their sexual body. Ultimately, gaining confidence in their sexuality, decreasing inhibitions, and learning to be comfortable with their bodies were benefits many of the participants described, and therefore may have been reasons for their continued participation in pole-dancing.

Sexual Expression

Closely related to women's growing confidence in their sexuality, many participants found the classes provided an outlet through which they could express and explore sexual movements and feelings. For Kelly, the classes provided her with a place to express her existing sexual feelings. She explained this by stating: "I don't think it [pole-dancing] has changed me as much as its just supported my own sexuality [...]. I think part of the reason I sought the classes out too was to find an outlet to express how sexy I was feeling in the first place." She elaborated on these feelings and explained why she needed an outlet in order to express her sexuality:

Taking the classes has almost given me permission to be sexy. Because it's accepted and encouraged, so you kind of walk out of there thinking, it's not bad to be sexy. And that's what I was saying earlier, I think most women, especially for me as a mom, there's always this undercurrent of you don't want to be too sexy because people look at you in a negative way. Like if you dress too sexy or act too

sexy [...] and I think, it's just been really liberating for me to be in a venue where I'm encouraged to express that.

In this example, Kelly drew attention to the stigma attached to women, especially mothers, who choose to present themselves as sexual beings and express their sexuality. Kelly described herself in the interview as a very sexual person and she explained her struggle with managing this aspect of her personality within a culture that frowns upon those sexual feelings and desires in women. Pole-dancing classes, however, appeared to offer her an acceptable avenue through which she could express her sexuality, one which she was grateful for. Lynn, who described herself as much more sexually reserved than Kelly, made a similar criticism regarding our culture's treatment of women's sexuality:

Well, for me, I grew up in a very conservative household where, heaven forbid if two people kiss on television and my dad and I are sitting on the couch, the two of us want to just die. You're not free to talk about...anything. You're almost shy about talking about it. It's like, 'No. It's okay. It's okay to be a sexual being, it's okay to embrace that side of yourself. You may not know how, but it's okay to learn how. It may take time, but I mean we're all sexual creatures. But I think there's an awkwardness there that from maybe upbringings or the world around us where I think there's a really negative attitude towards women who embrace their sexuality. And I think, for most of us, we probably shied away from maybe doing that because only certain kind of girls do that. And it [pole-dancing] is about maybe breaking those stupid norms that were put into place. Okay, I have to forget everything that I had drilled into me for years.

Therefore, both Kelly and Lynn reveal that they feel pressure from the values western culture has placed on women to be "good" women. For them, pole-dancing classes offer a space in which they can escape these pressures and explore and express their sexual feelings. Thus, it is likely that the sexual expression that many of the women experienced from pole-dancing classes adds to women's enjoyment of the classes and is another motivating factor for their participation in pole-dancing.

Rediscover Sexuality

The loss of their sexual self was a theme many of the older women addressed. The maturing process and the variety of factors that come along with this process were the cause of a loss of sexuality or sexual desire that many of the older women I interviewed identified. Pole-dancing was a way many of these women were rediscovering their sexuality. For example, Leigh explained that reconnecting with her sexual side was a main reason she wanted to take the classes: “And I think as you get older you kind of lose touch with your sexuality, so that aspect of it [pole-dancing] was enticing to me, to just, I always say reconnect with the goddess within”. Similarly, Lynn found the classes created a space for her to tap into the sexual desires she had lost over the years:

I think that a lot of times in marriages your sex life is the first thing to go, it shouldn't be, but it is. And you have sex like rabbits when you're dating and all of a sudden you get engaged and you get married and you swore, “That'll never happen to us,” and then you'd rather have a nap [...]. And so, you know, I think the class makes it comfortable enough to be trying to tap into that sexy side.

What Leigh and Lynn revealed in these quotes was that pole-dancing allowed them to rediscover and reconnect with the sexual feelings that they had lost as they matured.

Leigh summarized: “You've reconnected with that part of you and you think, ‘Yep, I'm still sexy even at the age I am.’”

Motherhood also had a huge impact on the women's sexuality. The participants with children expressed feeling as though they had lost a significant part of their sexuality and sexual desire because of their experiences as mothers. Melanie stated that, “It's hard to feel sexy when you have children and you're married. You really, really lose it, you really lose that feeling.” As well, Kelly discussed losing and then rediscovering her sexuality after being pregnant:

I think the actual act of being pregnant and giving birth fundamentally changes your self-concept [...]; it's like you're giving up your body to a process. And then you have a young infant and you're breast feeding and you have stretch marks and your belly's sagging and you don't look like you did when you were 22, and most women definitely feel that they'll never get that same kind of sexuality back that they had before they had children [...]; but finally, to rediscover your sexuality after going through the whole experience of being pregnant and giving birth, that's so rewarding.

Leigh, who had older children than Kelly, discussed how the responsibilities of motherhood in general, and not just pregnancy, caused her to lose touch with her sexuality and how pole-dancing helped her reconnect with it. She explained:

We [mothers] go three years without buying a new bra because the kids need this and the kids need that, and you just don't have the finances to do it all. And I know that because I've experienced that, and so you get to an age where you go, "Hmm, hang on, what happened to me? Who am I and where did I go?" And you lose your body shape as you get older, not everybody but it's more of a challenge to maintain weight and all of that kind of stuff. So doing that [pole-dancing], for me it was like reconnecting with myself and with my feminine side.

Therefore, it is clear that many women felt the classes allowed them to reconnect or rediscover their sexuality which had been buried under the experiences and responsibilities of motherhood. This was also likely a motivation for women to continue taking pole-dancing.

Discomfort with Sexuality

Despite all the women's discussions regarding how pole-dancing allowed them to open up and express their sexuality, they also felt uncomfortable at times during the classes with some of the more sexualized movements. For example, Melanie explained that she felt uncomfortable being asked to touch her body during class: "My least favorite is having to move your hands up your body. It's one thing if you're doing it for your husband, but when you're doing it for a group of girls it's very hard for me to delve into sexuality." Therefore, Melanie had difficulty being involved in the highly sexual aspects

of the classes, as did a number of the participants. However, these negative feelings that the women had about performing the sexual movements in class appeared to decrease as time passed and the women grew accustomed to them. For example, Rachel explained her initial discomfort with the sexualized movements but then stated that eventually they became commonplace:

At least once or twice a class I'd be a little awkward here or there when they'd tell you to do something, like when we were first doing the bouncing on the thighs and she was like 'And slap yourself!', I was like, 'You mean spank, that is what you're doing.' You had those moments where you were like 'Whoa!', but then you get used to it.

This acculturation to the discomfort in class that Rachel described was part of my own experience as a participant as well. I noticed that we were strongly encouraged to "Let our hands wander" by the instructor, meaning in the warm-up we were often touching our bodies. I assumed the purpose of this was for students to get used to touching their bodies, although it felt fairly strange and embarrassing. However, by the end of the six weeks of classes, my comfort level had dramatically increased. By the final class I noted that I no longer felt awkward when we are asked to "Let our hands wander", and this was a feeling that appeared to be echoed in the behaviour of the other participants in my class.

The initial discomfort and awkwardness the women felt doing the sexualized movements in class could be for a number of reasons. An interesting suggestion was proposed in the focus group when a discussion of the awkwardness felt in class began:

Participant # 3: It's a weird thing right, to stand there in front of a mirror and touch yourself, I mean it's a new thing for *me*.

All: (Laughing)

Participant #1: It's a faux-pas right? Sure.

Participant #3: And it's different, I mean it's different to do something like that and it is, it's a little ah....

Participant #1: It's very foreign.

Participant #3: Yeah! I mean how do we do that?

Participant #2: You feel awkward, like its not a natural, you're not -

Participant #1: Instinctive.

Participant #2: No, no, because I think too, and it doesn't matter what age we are, I think we're brought up in a culture where we're not enough, our physical body isn't what it should be and so don't embrace it, you should be trying to change it and fix it, and minimize and shrink and enhance.

In this discussion, the reference that a woman touching her body is a "faux-pas" connects to the idea that women who are highly sexual are stigmatized in society, which was a concept discussed above. However, Participant #2 also identified the expectations placed on women to conform to the body ideals of slenderness and beauty, as a reason that women feel uncomfortable doing certain sexualized movements in class. She explains that the beauty ideal has taught women to hate and criticize their bodies, not to embrace and enjoy them. It was later suggested in the focus group that pole-dancing can help women escape these feelings and accept their bodies for what they are.

The Non-Sexual Side of Pole-Dancing

It should also be noted that there was a theme in which some women described the pole-dancing classes as non-sexual. The movements in class were often regarded as difficult and physically challenging, and therefore became removed from the sexual connotations they would normally hold. When Jill was asked in what ways she found the classes sexually arousing, she responded: "I wouldn't say arousing or anything like that. I'm in my sweat pants, I'm hot, I'm sweaty, I don't feel sexy at the time." Similarly, in the focus group, a participant explained that the difficulties many women encountered when learning spins on the pole made the classes less sexualized: "And you're hurting yourself because you don't have the strength to do the move correctly [...] you're doing it too quickly, you're not looking sexy, you don't feel sexy." As well, my experience as a participant in the classes reflected a similar sentiment regarding the difficulty of the pole-dance moves. I found the part of class that was spent on the pole to be the least sexual

because of the level of difficulty it posed; my focus was on my hand and foot coordination and holding myself up on the pole which left little room to experience any sexual feelings. Finally, Alli found the structure of the classes negated the sexual elements:

When people ask me about that, I'm always like, 'There's nothing really sexual about the class at all, because I feel very, very separated from anything to do with sex.' Even though their like, 'Yeah, rub your hands all over your body,' [...] for me it doesn't feel like it has anything to do with sex at all. There's almost something that's not sexy about it because it's so forced and so planned and there's a certain way of moving, like so scheduled almost.

Therefore, these examples contradict the stereotype of pole-dancing as a highly sexualized form of dance.

Oppression versus Empowerment

In addressing the final research question, the themes have been broken into two sections. The first section will be titled "Oppression" and describe all themes relating to the oppressive elements of pole-dancing fitness, and the second section will be titled "Empowerment" and describe the themes related to the empowering elements of the classes. As well, as is true for the above three sections, many of the themes, particularly those in the "Empowerment" section, offer possible motivations women had to continue taking pole-dancing classes. These themes were not directly identified by participants as motivations however, and are described as such by my own interpretations.

Oppression

Demonstrations for Partner

Some of the women who took pole-dancing used the skills they had learned in class, at home. The most obvious example of this was the women's display or performance of their skills for their partners' enjoyment. For example, Kate, a pole-dancing instructor, said: "I used to go home and I used to explain what we did in class and I'd show my husband a move like the side-leg peel up, or just some of names of some of the moves that are super cheesy. We'd always have a pretty good laugh over those." Melanie, a student who often demonstrated her pole-dancing skills for her husband, explained: "I'll show him some stuff that I've learned, and what he thinks of it, stuff like that. He likes it, he thinks it's good." Thus, some women used their pole-dancing skills to entertain their partners. However, this was done in a variety of ways, as Kate used her skills more for humour, while for Melanie it seemed to be for sexual desire.

As well, both of the single women who I interviewed expressed a desire to want to show a romantic partner the moves they learned in class. For example, Rachel explains:

I am single, but when the women would talk about, "Oh, my husband says that I should show him my routine" I was like, "Yes!" I was so proud of them or happy for them. I imagine if I did have a boyfriend it would be something that, maybe not right at first [...] I still think I'd feel awkward doing a whole routine for a boyfriend, but I would picture something like that. I could see myself working in little moves here and there, or being like, "Guess what I learned today?" I think it would just be sort of fun.

Likewise, when Kelly discussed having a pole in her house, she explained: "I haven't shown anybody else. I'm sure I will at some point, whether it be my girlfriends over for wine, or if I had a boyfriend then I'm sure I'd probably show him the moves on that too."

Kelly and Rachel were the only women who I interviewed who were not in a romantic

relationship, however both expressed interest in having a partner for whom they could demonstrate their skills. Rachel was also the only participant who stated that one of her initial reasons for taking pole-dancing was because she felt the classes would make her more appealing to men, as discussed in the motivation theme of “To Feel Attractive”. Therefore, once again it appears that pleasing a male romantic partner is one of the goals some of the women had when taking the classes. As well, this could be another motivating factor that women had for taking pole-dancing. It should be noted, however, that none of the women quoted above saw their demonstrations for their partner as oppressive, but instead as a healthy part of their relationship. I do not wish to ignore these women’s perceptions, however the reason this theme falls within the “Oppressive” section is because it more clearly connects with the arguments made by the “Oppressive Perspective” in Chapter Two.

Public Displays

The instructors that I interviewed, and one of the students who had been taking the classes for a few years, discussed their participation in public events that were meant to showcase pole-dancing fitness, such as an open house at the studio. This was the only element of performance related to the pole-dancing classes that was discussed, and these performances were optional. Julie explained some of the details regarding the studio’s first open house: “It was a Friday evening and we opened the doors for our students, as well as anybody interested, and their spouses, or neighbours, or sisters, brothers, whatever, to come in and see what we do.” Jamie, a long-term student of pole-dancing, discussed her experience of participating in this open house:

I did participate for level five. Julie was instructing, and she was just calling out the moves, and there was so many people in there I went to do a spin, I was so afraid of hitting somebody, lost my grip, fell on my butt, broke my heel, and kept

going throughout the whole thing. I did, I did, broken heel and all. And, it was interesting, but I knew from watching the other four levels ahead of me that the individuals were primarily focusing on the instructor, or if you had your partner there your partner was focusing on you, so I was nervous, but I didn't feel awkward.

Overall, Julie and Jamie were very enthusiastic about their performances in the open house and it was described as a positive experience, despite Jamie's mishap.

As well, Kate, an instructor at the studio, explained the various performances she had been involved in: "Yes, we do performances at The Bridal Show, we've done it at gyms before, the dance troop did one at Women's Fitness. It's all volunteer positions, like the instructors will do it or students will volunteer to do routines." Once again, Jamie participated in a fitness show performance and discussed her feelings surrounding this experience:

Jamie: I got cheered on and it was just great, I mean it was, you know everybody clapped and my daughter was proud of me and to me that's an achievement, to have your kids stand there and watch you. And again, it's appropriate, I mean she's going to be 18 this year, so I'm showing her you leave your clothes on but you can still be sexy too, right? And that's basically what I did.

Meghan: How do you think it would have been different if there were men in the crowd?

Jamie: There were men there, because women brought their spouses [...] the majority of it was a woman's show but there were a few men, and that didn't bother me. I mean they were with somebody and it wasn't like in a bar atmosphere...it wasn't like that at all, no it was very nice, it was very well done. I had a huge stage to walk onto, but it was a lot of fun.

Therefore, usually the public performances the women did outside of the classroom were not necessarily done for male attention, but were used as a marketing tool. Again, it should be noted that the women's participation in these events was voluntary and they appeared to find performing enjoyable, not oppressive. However, the fact that the women were performing a highly sexualized dance for a crowd of people is an issue that relates to gender oppression.

Similarly, some of the women chose to use the moves they learned in class in certain public settings. For example, Kelly explained that she sometimes used the movements she learned in pole-dancing class when she was out dancing with her friends: “Even going out dancing, there’s some ways of moving that I have danced when I’m at a club with my friends, which isn’t very often, but I have incorporated it. A lot of it is just a way of movement.” As well, Jamie found she sometimes used moves from class during everyday activities: “We can go to the grocery store and, funny enough I wasn’t the only one who talked about this, that when you bend down to pick up something, well you bend down sexy.” Therefore, some women found they integrated the dance and stretching skills they learned in pole-dancing class that did not require a pole within their daily activities. Once again, the women enjoyed these experiences; however, they could also be analyzed based on their connections with certain forms of gender oppression.

Exclusive Environment

However, some women also found the environment in pole-dancing classes to be exclusive. This was not as prevalent a theme as that of the supportive environment which is discussed below, but was still present. One way pole-dancing excluded women was based on class. For example, Rachel, who had to stop taking pole-dancing classes because they became too expensive for her, explained her observations of the typical women she saw in the classes: “They’re all upper-middle class and they did put themselves together. They were wearing Lulu’s⁶ and they were good-looking women.” Similarly, Gretchen explained her frustration with the expense of the classes: “I think they’re too expensive. I really do [...] I have to sacrifice a lot of stuff just to do this, and

⁶ “Lulu’s” is a reference to the yoga apparel store Lulu Lemon, in which the average price for a pair of yoga pants is CAD \$100.00.

I've taken away a lot of things that I want to do just to do this [...] I wish it was cheaper.” Therefore, from these statements it was clear that only women within a particularly high income bracket could afford to participate in pole-dancing. This point was also demonstrated through Rachel's forced withdrawal from pole-dancing because of her monetary constraints.

The above quote by Rachel also described the women in pole-dancing classes as attractive, which was seen through her description of the women as “good-looking”. This view was supported by observations made by Leigh who explained that most of the women in her classes were very attractive women: “They already look great. They're pretty amazing looking women.” Therefore, it can be assumed that many of the women in the pole-dancing classes fit, at least somewhat, within the western standards of ideal female beauty. Thus, pole-dancing classes could be said to exclude women who do not conform to the beauty ideal. This idea was supported by the images of women used in the marketing materials for the pole-dancing studio, which were always of slender and usually fairly young women. As well, some participants felt the instructors at the studio promoted this body ideal, not through their instruction during class, but through their own self-presentation. Rachel described the physical appearance of the instructors at the studio she attended:

They [the instructors] say, “It doesn't matter what you look like, and you're all wonderful”, which is really nice to say, but it's easier to say when you look like that. And Kate was tall, skinny, model body, and not all the teachers were like that, but none of them were really on the bigger side, and they were all pretty, and tall even. I felt like there was a particular sort of standard that they all met.

Rachel's observations of the instructors were similar to notes I made during my participant observation. All the instructors I met at the studio were attractive and thin, and all had well-toned bodies. I felt there was a strong possibility that these women were

hired because they embodied the image the studio wanted to project. In short, pole-dancing classes appeared to exclude women of lower classes and those that did not fit with western beauty ideals.

Focus on Appearance

Pole-dancing fitness also seemed to create an environment that placed emphasis on physical appearance. A number of women discussed the introduction of high-heeled boots or shoes into the classes around level three, which could be seen as a sign of an increased focus on appearance. Alli explained her experience of wearing heels in class:

I think it brings focus to your actual form because when you're wearing shoes you have to make sure that your feet are pointed in a certain way [...] it's more like, 'Oh, I want this to look a little prettier,' and that's the whole reason, I think, they do it too, so you focus on the little finer points to get it looking nice.

Alli clearly explained how wearing high-heeled shoes in class increases the focus on appearance. Alli did not consider this a problem, in fact she expressed enjoyment about wearing these shoes in class, as did many of the women. However, for some, this was not a pleasant aspect of the classes. For example, in the focus group one woman shared her negative opinion about wearing heels in class. During a discussion about the aspects of the classes that the women wished they could change, she stated: "They should also say that you don't have to wear shoes, because they kill your feet, like I'm in *pain*. Oh my goodness, I get shin splints, my feet are killing me." Therefore, not every participant enjoyed the fact that they were asked to wear heels during class. In short, wearing heels in class could be seen as oppressive because it not only increased women's focus on their physical appearance, but they also caused some women pain.

As well, Debra found certain instructors' focused on appearance more than others. When asked if she found that there was a strong focus on appearance in class, Debra explained that:

I think there's probably more [focus] on appearance with my current instructor, because she's like 'look at yourself in the mirror', that sort of thing, so I did notice a difference with her. I think there's quite a bit, but don't think in a negative way, I don't think in a way that ever made me feel uncomfortable [...]

Again, Debra, like Alli, did not find the focus on appearance during pole-dancing to be a negative experience, but explained it simply as part of her instructors' teaching technique.

As well, a few of the participants were concerned about their own appearance during class. For example, Jamie explained:

For me, appearance is very important because posture is probably one of the most important things in this class, because if you don't have your posture right then you're not doing it right. So it's good to have the mirrors there [...] so to me it's very important. I personally try to wear really nice workout gear so I feel better [...].

Thus, for certain women there was a noticeable focus on appearance during class, however for the most part this focus was welcomed and even enjoyed by the participants. It should also be noted that, for the most part, a focus on appearance within pole-dancing classes was not a strong theme found in my analysis.

Insecurity Regarding Ability

Many women had insecurities surrounding their inability to do a move in class. These negative feelings manifested themselves as discomfort with moves, fear of moves, and frustration. The discomfort many women felt with some of the moves in class was because of their sexualized nature, which was discussed in detail above and therefore will not be discussed again here. However, women also appeared to have a fear of certain moves, which was usually based on their high level of difficulty. Many of the women

found the moves they were asked to do on the pole very daunting, particularly when they first started the classes. Jill explained the anxieties she had in level one of pole-dancing: “I thought I was going to fall. As soon as I got on the pole I thought I was going to fall, I thought I was going to hurt myself.” As well, women who had completed the upper levels often expressed fear surrounding inverting on the pole. Therefore, women had discomfort with certain pole-dancing moves, not only because of their sexual nature, but also because they did not feel safe attempting to do certain, particularly challenging, moves.

Similarly, many of the women expressed frustration with the classes because they were unable to complete certain movements. For example, Jamie expressed her irritation regarding difficulties she was having achieving some of the moves in class, which had been preventing her from moving on to the next level:

I’ve been taking private lessons too, to try and overcome some of those obstacles where I get in a rut and I can’t function, and it’s very, very frustrating because you just want to achieve and you want to be encouraged to go on, because I find sometimes, and it’s only happened once, where I just got into a funk, and I was just like, “Urgh, I’m just so tired of trying and trying and not getting past that level.”

Similarly, Melanie found some of the floor exercises in class to be difficult, and that difficulty was upsetting for her: “It’s hard to do some of the leg stretches, it’s hard to keep my legs up and do what is asked without my legs shaking or anything like that, and you always feel a little bit bad when you feel inadequate.” Therefore, pole-dancing can be oppressive because of the insecurity it causes in women through their discomfort, fear and frustration with certain moves.

Furthermore, the insecurity that many of the women experienced in class often stemmed from comparisons the women made between themselves and other students and

instructors who they saw as superior to themselves. For example, Lynn explained how at certain times she felt inadequate compared to the other women in the classes:

And there was a period, probably a month or so ago that I hit that plateau, and I was really discouraged, and I was looking around saying, 'Ok, so these girls, they're all doing each level once, and they're kicking my ass, and I've done these levels two and three times, and I still can't do it as well as they can.' And you sort of have your little pity party [...].

Similarly, comparing themselves to the instructors' ability was a matter that was discussed in the focus group:

Participant #4: And they're so ripped too, it's like "awwww", am I going to have to live up to that?

All: (Murmurs of agreement)

Participant #1: Look at Julie. I don't want to outcast Julie, but my god is she –

Participant #2: She's a freak of nature though Jamie, come on now.

All: (Laughing)

Participant #1: She's fit!

Participant #3: Yeah I know.

Participant #3: And she's so flexible.

Participant #2: She's not human though.

Participant #1: Oh, those legs go on forever, and when I first started, when she started teaching me I was like, "I don't know if I can continue this class." She's so damn good, I was taken back at first and went, "I'm never going to be able to get my leg up that pole like that, it's just not happening."

Therefore, certain women found the level of difficulty in the classes was not only frustrating, but when they compared themselves to the other women in their classes that could do the moves that they had been struggling with, it was very upsetting for them. This increased many women's levels of insecurity surrounding their ability in the classes.

Body Insecurity

Many of the women also suffered from body insecurities in pole-dancing classes specifically related to their age, weight and flexibility. Most of the women's body insecurities existed before the women began pole-dancing classes, however the classes exacerbated their concerns. As well, similar to women's insecurity regarding their ability,

many of the women made comparisons between themselves and other students that they saw as superior to themselves in some way, further increasing their body insecurity. For example, one participant in the focus group explained that her insecurities regarding her weight were increased when she entered a pole-dancing class of all young women: “And then there was a bit of a funny feeling going into a class where you’ve got all these people who are younger, who haven’t lost shape yet, and then I’m the fat one in the class.” As well, Jamie, who was in the latter part of her forties, connected youth with superior flexibility and more physically attractive bodies. Therefore, she felt frustrated and insecure when most of the women in her classes were significantly younger than her:

Another little thing I find is I’m very easily uncomfortable when the majority of the girls in the class are more like 20 and 25 [...]. Their flexibility is *so* much better than mine and I find that discouraging for me [...]. I can honestly say that’s probably my biggest frustration out of the whole thing. I even said at the very beginning, I wish Tara would have age appropriate classes, like forties day or thirties day, twenties day, because when you’re looking at 20 and 40 year olds, there’s like 20 years difference in their flexibility. And of course, these women, they’re tight, they don’t have cellulite yet, you know (laughs), they’re perfect in my mind. And it’s kind of discouraging to see because you’re trying so hard to overcome all of that and accept that you’re at this age you can still be in really good condition. So, I find that’s probably one of the little things that I find a little bit uncomfortable.

Finally, another woman in the focus group explained that she had chosen to take a break from pole-dancing classes and join a gym. This was in part due to the high level of frustration she was feeling in pole-dancing class because she was not experiencing the same physical benefits as the other women in her class:

I think that I just need that change [...]. I can lose the few pounds I’ve put on and actually get some strength and then go back to class and say, “Now I’m ready.” Because what I found hard at class [...] they [students] are talking about their weight loss successes, but they’re doing so many other [fitness] things. If you can’t afford to be doing multiple things, and you know that their multiple things are what’s helping them achieve the success in the class that you’re in and you’re crapping out. And well, I’ve already paid for a membership I can’t afford to do all these things too [...].”

What this participant showed was that she felt inadequate to continue the classes because she had not lost as much weight as the other students in her class. She attributed the success of her fellow students to the fact that many of the women participated in multiple fitness exercises, not just pole-dancing, which she could not afford to do. Therefore, in order to continue with the classes she felt the need to lose weight. As well, Lynn's experience draws attention again to how the classes can exclude women based on appearance and class. Ultimately, the body insecurities of the participants were exacerbated when the women compared themselves to other students in the classes.

Furthermore, the instructors were another source that worsened the participants' body insecurities. None of the participants felt the instructors were discouraging through their words, however their appearances were intimidating to some women. Rachel explained that most of the instructors fit within a particular beauty ideal, as was discussed above. She then described how this affected her feelings about her own body: "I can see a lot of people comparing themselves to the teacher [...] the teachers were all very good looking, thin girls, and so [...] that's the only thing about the teachers in particular that would make me feel self-conscious about my body." As well, Melanie discussed the insecurity she felt regarding her body shape, especially compared to the instructors and students:

I'm short and I'm heavier than a lot of other people that, well like of the teachers and everything, and other students, and that makes you self-conscious, you know. And knowing that they have a wall of mirrors, it's very hard [emotionally] to really see yourself doing anything, and so I still find that hard. I'll never get over that, I find that very difficult.

In short, many of the women found that their body insecurities, which were arguably already present in their minds, were brought to the surface by pole-dancing classes.

However, the participant from the focus group was the only woman I interviewed who felt the need to take a break from the classes due to the pressure she felt to meet a certain body standard. Therefore, the level of insecurity or inadequacy that the women I interviewed were feeling was not to such an extreme that they dropped out of the classes.

Empowerment

Absence of Partner Involvement

There was a theme that came across in a number of the women's experiences in which they explained that they rarely, if ever, displayed their pole-dancing ability to their partner. For example, when Gretchen was asked if she ever did routines for her husband she replied: "No (laugh). God no. I didn't even take him to the open house." As well, one participant in the focus group explained that her husband was very supportive of her participation in pole-dancing, however she said, "He sees none of the evidence at home, but he's very proud." This participant later clarified that her husband was proud of her because taking pole-dancing classes represented both a physical and emotional challenge that she had overcome. Julie also shared a story about one of her students who did not tell her husband that she was taking pole-dancing classes:

I can think of one student right now that her husband has no idea. And it's not because she thinks he'd be disapproving, it's because he would take it in a different direction. She loves it for the comradery, the mental stimulation, the physical stimulation, just the whole being that I've been talking about. He would take it and put it in a sexual context and she's like, "He'd never get it," she's like, "He'd be trying to get me to show him something," and that's not why she taking it, so she said, "He doesn't need to know."

Therefore, there appeared to be a divergence in the experiences of women and their use of pole-dancing skills outside of the classroom. For some women, they enjoyed using these skills and demonstrating them for their partner, as was discussed above, however

for others this was not at all the case. For these women, pole-dancing was an activity that they kept very private and appeared to be for their sole enjoyment, as they did not enjoy demonstrating for their partner.

Supportive Environment

Pole-dancing classes provided a supportive and encouraging environment for the women, which was touched upon in a previous section regarding the participants' experiences of female bonding with students and instructors in the classes. For Lynn, the supportive and encouraging environment was a main reason she remained in the classes: "Yeah, everyone's encouraged, it's a *very*, very encouraging environment, I love it. It's the only thing I've ever stuck with." Kate, echoed these thoughts, with her explanation of why so many women enjoy pole-dancing:

I think it's a safe environment. I think that's really one thing that I found in it. I think it's very rare, when somebody's trying to do something, a move, and they can't get it, or they're trying their hardest and their just not being able to invert or they're just not being able to do whatever it is. No one's ever there to put them down or to laugh, everyone's very encouraging. And I think that the community that it attracts *is* that community, that everyone's there just to have a good time, to learn something new, and to encourage each other.

Finally, Pat also described the classes as a safe environment, but for different reasons.

She felt the classes created a comfortable environment by being sensitive to women's insecurities:

I think that a lot of women find it to be a safe place because when they do go to the gym, for the most part, a lot of the gyms are coed, and there's always guys there, there's always the girls who are fit and who may be intimidating to some other women. Whereas this particular place is, from what I understand women-only cause I've never seen a guy in there. So, I think for that part it's safe. And I know our location sort of has dim lights, which is more of a comfortable environment for maybe somebody who's not comfortable with their body and is a little shy. And so, I think for the most part it's a safer environment for someone to go.

Therefore, for Pat, Kate and Lynn and many other participants, the safe, comfortable and supportive atmosphere the classes provided was a huge benefit. Therefore, it was also likely a motivation many of the women had to remain in the classes.

Furthermore, many participants discussed the fact that women were supported in the classes regardless of their skill level and/or body shape. For example, Lynn felt that the classes' indifference towards a person's appearance and skill level made pole-dancing an ideal fitness activity. When she was asked about how strong a focus there was on appearance in the classes, she responded:

I don't think that there's an emphasis on that at all, I think it's an encouraging environment where people are welcomed no matter what package they come in, and to do what they can do on their level, which I found encouraging for me. I just go at the pace that I've been going at, it's slower than most people but it's about doing it and doing it well as opposed to just getting through it. And feeling strong, because I think strength and confidence are the two of the most beautiful things in a person, and that is probably emphasized more or encouraged more than physical attributes.

Lynn's description of the classes highlighted how the classes supported and encouraged a variety of women with a variety of skill levels. This is contradictory to the earlier theme which described pole-dancing as exclusive, and instead appears to argue that the classes are open and accepting of diversity in their students.

Accepting of Diversity

Another aspect of pole-dancing classes that the participants enjoyed was the acceptance of women from various demographics. In particular, they focused on the acceptance of women regardless of size, age and ability. To begin, an instructor, Julie, explained a main purpose of the classes was to help women learn to love their bodies for what they were:

Most importantly, it's that no matter what shape, size, ethnicity, age we are, we're women [...] and it doesn't matter what size you are. And the media and society

are putting too much pressure on women to be perfect and if in here they can feel like it doesn't matter [...] that's what I'm trying to create here. So I do mention things like that to them and say, "Be confident, love your butt that's great! [...] Embrace your curves, love them rather than shun them." We don't need to be Twiggy and we don't need to be size two.

However, Julie was an instructor and, as discussed above, the instructors all fit within the beauty ideal. Therefore, although she may have attempted to create an accepting atmosphere with her words, it may not have been conveyed through her appearance. That being said, Rachel felt that overall the classes did create an environment that did not focus on body image:

In terms of the actual atmosphere and the teachers, I don't think they emphasize it [body image]. I think that the only reason that it may be there, more so, is because of what people bring in and the connotations with pole-dancing and stuff like that. I think that the actual studio and the classes do a really good job of trying to make it not about physical image, and about an inner confidence.

Overall, the instructors I interviewed all explained their attempts to create an environment in class that did not focused on the body image ideals that are portrayed in the media, and a number of students acknowledged that this was in fact achieved in the classes, as Rachel demonstrated.

In addition, Jill explained that because of the studio's acceptance of such a wide variety of women, it was particularly beneficial for older generations of women:

Well, I think that a lot of the older women that generally don't feel sexy because they see all these young girls and think, "Oh, I'm not a stick figure anymore," they come into classes and feel so much better about themselves. Because you go and there's all sorts of different shapes and sizes, attitudes, looks, everything is so different [...]. So I think that really helps a lot of the older generation.

Lynn offered support to Jill's argument, asking: "Where else can you go where you don't already have to be in shape, where it doesn't matter what you look like, it doesn't matter if you're 21 or 61, and everybody gets something different out of it?" Thus, according to these women, the classes were not exclusive to a single age, body shape, or ability, but

were accepting of a diverse population of women. These findings could also be seen as motivations women had to continue taking pole-dancing classes. It should also be noted that these observations contradict some of the earlier themes discussed above, which will be addressed in Chapter Five.

Absence of a Focus on Appearance

Many of the participants did not perceive a strong emphasis on appearance during pole-dancing class. For example, when directly asked if she found there was a focus on appearance in the classes, Alli replied:

Not so much. As far as I can tell, the little bit of a sociologist in me that's left there, people just come in, just in their general gym clothes. I haven't seen too many people dress up for the part, like, "Yes, I'm going to a pole-dancing class so I have to wear my sports bra and do this and show off my body." There's not a whole lot of people that are taking the class that do that. Even the instructors are really good, most of the time they're wearing the Aradia tank [top], and it's not like they're wearing anything provocative, it's their regular capris yoga pants or that sort of thing.

Thus, in general, Alli did not find that the students or instructors felt the need to "dress-up" for class or look the traditional part of a women who pole-dances, which was an opinion that was shared by most of the participants. For example, Jill explained that she gave very little attention to what she wore in class; her only concern was that she was comfortable:

I don't put any focus on appearance, I really don't. I know instructor-wise you have to be able to hold yourself and look good. But as a student, no. I went in my baggiest sweatpants, my knee-pads, just a shirt I grabbed. It didn't matter about looking sexy, as long as you felt it.

Therefore, in Jill's comments we see that she felt the instructors needed to present a certain standard of appearance, however for herself as a student it was not a concern. Similarly, when Lynn was asked if she spent a lot of time on her appearance before she attended class, she replied:

Oh, hell no. Oh no, no, no [...] Listen: Yeah, there's some girls that go to class and they need their Lulu Lemons to show up. I'm not one of them [...] but you would find those people anywhere. I'm sorry I'm not too interested in doing my hair and putting on make-up just to sweat my ass off.

Thus, Lynn found the idea of being concerned about her appearance and wanting to look good in class laughable, although she acknowledged that some women in the classes were concerned with these things. As well, the women who did not feel there was a focus on appearance during class seemed to enjoy this fact. This suggests that for those women who enjoyed focusing on their appearance, which was discussed above, they could make it part of the classes for themselves based on how they dressed. However, those women who did not want to be concerned with their appearance during class felt they could freely choose this option as well.

Confidence

Many of the women used the word "confidence" when explaining the effect the classes had on them. Confidence was discussed above relating specifically to women's confidence in their sexuality and because of the fitness benefits of the classes. However, a number of women discussed how the classes created an overall confidence in themselves, not directly related to fitness or their sexuality. For example, an instructor, Julie, explained her initial experience in the classes and the feeling of self-confidence she gained: "I was really nervous, but by the second or third class [...] it just made me feel so good about myself. After a couple of years of children you just tend to lose that feeling of self-confidence, and it just brought it back." Julie also went on to explain that developing this self-confidence in other women was a reason she began instructing, and was one of her favorite aspects of teaching pole-dancing. As well, Kelly explained that the classes made her feel confident in many aspects of her life: "It has had a definite emotional and

mental effect on my life. It's definitely exponentially increased my confidence in many areas of my life." Kelly then provided an example of how the classes have increased her confidence:

I'm more confident, so I have less competitive feeling among my friends because I feel better about myself [...] when you have that resource of confidence in yourself, you don't worry so much about what other people are doing, because I feel like I'm doing something good for myself. So it's positively affected my intimate relationships just by making me feel more confident and open.

As these excerpts illustrate, for some women pole-dancing helped build their self-confidence, which was a significant benefit to their overall lives. In fact, "confidence" was a word used frequently by participants to describe the overall benefits of pole-dancing.

Further, certain women gained a sense of purpose in their lives from taking pole-dancing classes, which was closely connected with their feelings of self-confidence. For example, for Kelly, pole-dancing classes opened new doors in terms of the direction she wanted to go in her life:

They [pole-dancing classes] are my motivation for finding my own path in my life. Like in the last couple years I've gone through a divorce, and my kids are getting a little bit bigger, and so I'm in a different stage in my life right now, and this seems to have given me a confidence to realize that I can do whatever I want [...] I've tried to think, "Well, maybe one day I would like to open up my own pole-dancing studio, or maybe I could do personal training and incorporate those lessons." It's actually opened up a lot of new ideas for career.

Likewise, for the instructor Julie, teaching pole-dancing became her main career: "It made me feel good to do a job that makes me feel good, and I can make someone else feel like I do. It just seemed perfect [...] it would have been my third class ever when I finally said 'I need to teach this'." Therefore, for both Julie and Kelly and a number of other participants, the classes helped them develop self-confidence. As well, both Julie and Kelly discovered new options for directions in their lives that they had not considered

before taking pole-dancing. These benefits seemed to be a clear reason why certain participants continued taking pole-dancing classes.

Empowering

A few participants described the classes as empowering. Kelly, in fact, used the word “empowering” a number of times when explaining her experiences in the classes. For example, when asked in what ways pole-dancing fitness may be objectifying, she retorted:

I believe it empowers women, and that’s been my experience. I feel completely empowered that I can actually find classes that teach me how to move like that, which is going to enhance my sex life, enhance my self confidence, and [...] it’s accessible to everyday women, housewife, mom. That I think is empowering, as opposed to objectifying.

Kelly strongly focused on the sexual elements of the classes as a main reason why she participated in pole-dancing, as is discussed above. Therefore, it is logical that she found the sexual elements of the classes to be empowering. As well, for Jill, she felt pole-dancing was particularly empowering for older women: “But definitely for the older women it’s *very* empowering, *very*”. Jill explained that she felt this way because of the open and accepting environment in the classes that encouraged and supported older women’s participation. Overall, only a select few participants used the term “empowering” to describe pole-dancing, although if asked directly, I believe most of my participants would have agreed that this was an accurate assessment of the classes. In summary, feelings of empowerment were associated with pole-dancing fitness by a few participants and may be another reason for women’s continued participation in the classes.

Accomplishment

The pole-dancing classes were also seen as a source of accomplishment for many of the participants. The feeling of accomplishment that many of the women described usually stemmed from their achieved goals in the classes. These achievements were often described in the women's narratives and based around their initial feelings of doubt in themselves which they eventually overcame. For example, Pat explained that learning to invert on the pole was an important accomplishment:

Last night was our first time that we flipped upside down, so that was a pretty cool accomplishment. Because I remember the first night that my friend and I walked in for the first class of level one and it was a level three class ending in front of us and that's what they were doing. They flipped upside-down and we were like "Oh my god", because it looked very scary, "How can you flip yourself upside down like that?"

Likewise Jamie, who identified herself as being in the latter half of her forties, explained that she felt accomplished when she learned to properly execute a move. She made reference to the fact that this was particularly important to her because of her age: "[...] even at this stage in my life learning that, 'Wow, I can flip upside-down on a pole, that's pretty incredible.' And so every time you come in, or you learn something new, or you perfect something that you've been trying for so long, is such a reward." Finally, Leigh had similar feelings of accomplishment and pride for completing a difficult move in class. She described her personal thoughts regarding the successful completion of a new move: "'Oh my goodness, I can't believe that I did it, I couldn't do it up until now.' I think you walk away with a sense of accomplishment and a sense of pride and just a little more kick in your step." Therefore, the participants' sense of accomplishment clearly had a heavy impact on their enjoyment in the classes and would likely be another motivation women had to continue taking pole-dancing classes.

Conclusion

To summarize these findings, the main motivations participants identified as reasons they joined pole-dancing classes and continued to participate in them were: the physical benefits, enjoyment, self-improvement, to feel attractive, and to feel independent. Other individuals, such as the instructors and students, had an overall positive influence on the women's experiences of the classes and helped create bonds between the women. Meanwhile, the women's partners, friends and family mostly offered support, but some were disapproving. The positive effects that pole-dancing appeared to have on women's sexual identity included increasing women's confidence in their sexuality while decreasing their inhibitions, and allowing for sexual expression and rediscovery of their sexuality. However, some women also felt discomfort with their sexuality during class and some argued that the classes did not make them feel sexual at all. The potentially oppressive elements of pole-dancing included women who displayed their pole-dancing skills publicly or demonstrated the sexualized dance moves for their partners. As well, the class environment was sometimes exclusive and there was a focus on appearance in the classes. Finally, many women experienced feelings of insecurity in pole-dancing class because of their lack of ability and anxiety over their body image. However, empowering elements of the classes included the overall environment, which was described as supportive and accepting by the participants, and many found that there was little emphasis on appearance. As well, for some women their partners had little to do with their participation in pole-dancing and were not given demonstrations, suggesting the women took the classes for their own enjoyment. Finally, many women felt pole-dancing classes helped build their self-esteem, identifying the classes as helping instill them with a sense of confidence, empowerment, and accomplishment. Many of these

themes have various points of overlap and contention, which will help draw out the most important and interesting elements of pole-dancing fitness classes. The following chapter synthesizes these themes and discusses their meanings in terms of women's oppression or empowerment.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I will relate the themes I have found within my analysis of pole-dancing classes to my theoretical framework regarding the Empowerment Perspective versus the Oppressive Perspective. The themes found for each of the four research questions often overlapped and intersected as many held similar meanings but related to different research questions. Therefore, this section collapses the themes together to discuss the overall empowering and oppressive elements of pole-dancing fitness. The discussion of the oppressive and empowering elements of the classes will be broken into three sections. The first looks at the diversity of women (or lack thereof) found in the classes, stemming from the survey data. The second discusses women's identity in general, and the third specifically addresses women's sexual identity. I then make a case for why it is important to allow women to define their own realities, followed by a discussion of the difficulties I encountered when comparing the arguments of the Oppressive Perspective with the Empowerment Perspective. I then work towards summarizing my discussion by finding a balance between the oppressive and empowering elements of pole-dancing. To conclude, I discuss the limitations of this research, suggest future research projects on pole-dancing fitness, and explain the implications this research has for sexuality research on women.

Empowering or Oppressive?

Diversity in Pole-Dancing Classes

As was seen in a variety of themes and within the results of the survey, pole-dancing classes have more diversity among their participants than was originally

suggested by the Oppressive Perspective. It was hypothesized that older women would not feel comfortable taking part in pole-dancing because of how older women's sexuality has been viewed in western culture (see Anderson and Cyranowski 1994; Gill 2008; Kilbourne 1998; Schaie and Willis 1991; Shrage 2005; Strong and DeVault 1997). However, according to the survey results and findings from other methods, it was not uncommon for women in their forties and fifties to be participating in pole-dancing. In fact, during the interviews one instructor explained that she even had a 60-year-old woman in one of her classes. Therefore, the fact that women of a variety of ages participated in pole-dancing contradicts the hypothesis made in the Oppressive Perspective, and therefore, could be said to offer support for the Empowerment Perspective and its focus on diversity.

Within the themes that described the environment in pole-dancing classes, participants explained that women of a variety of body shapes and physical abilities were welcomed into the classes. Therefore, the oppressive hypothesis which stated that women with body shapes that did not fit with normative media ideals (see Bartky 1993; Bordo 1995; Chernin 1998; Gill 2008, 2007a; Kilbourne 1998; Wolf 1990) would not be comfortable in pole-dancing, does not appear to be supported by this research. Many participants described women of a variety of body shapes and abilities in their pole-dancing classes, and the instructors were adamant that these qualities did not matter nor should they affect women's choice to participate in the classes. In fact, each instructor expressed a desire for women with bodies and abilities that did not fit with beauty ideals to partake in pole-dancing. It must be noted that a few participants felt that beauty ideals were indirectly emphasized in the classes through the instructors' appearances; however, overall the participants seemed to agree that pole-dancing classes allowed for the

inclusion of women of a variety of ages, sizes, and abilities. This finding contradicts hypotheses which argued that pole-dancing is an exclusive environment reserved for thin, young, athletic women. Ultimately, diversity regarding women's sexuality and sexual choices was an important element that was discussed within the Empowerment Perspective (see Attwood 2006, Bauman 1998; Buszek 2006; McCormick 1994; Weeks 1998). Thus, the acceptance of women of different ages, body types and abilities in pole-dancing classes offers support to this perspective.

However, although pole-dancing classes appeared to be at least somewhat diverse in terms of age, body shape, and ability, there was also evidence of processes of exclusion that existed in the classes, which supports the Oppressive Perspective. The findings of the survey in particular made it clear that women of racial minorities and women with sexual orientations outside the heterosexual norm were non-existent within this pole-dancing sample. As well, my own observations of the classes revealed little evidence to contradict these findings, as the women I encountered discussed being in heterosexual relationships and I saw only two women of racial minorities during my time spent at the studios. These findings support the Oppressive Perspective, which speculated that women of racial minorities and of non-heterosexual identities would not feel comfortable participating in pole-dancing classes because of stigma that has been placed on their sexuality (see Adams 1997; Attwood 2006; Gill 2008; hooks 1996; Tolman 1994; Weeks 2002).

Similarly, women were excluded from the classes based on income level. This was exemplified best through Rachel, a participant who could not afford to continue taking the classes, although the high price of pole-dancing was an issue a number of participants discussed. A quick search for prices of pole-dancing classes online revealed that the classes appear to range from CAD \$120.00 to \$169.00 per level (Aradia Fitness

Canada Inc 2009b; Flirty Girl Fitness 2007; Pole dance Studio 2009). Therefore, taking pole-dance classes is clearly not affordable for all women. This supports the Oppressive Perspective because the high monetary expense of the classes coincides with Attwood's (2006) claim that only women who can afford affluent lifestyles are granted the privilege of engaging in highly sexualized activities without being stigmatized. Thus, pole-dancing is an activity reserved for affluent, upper-middle class women and fits into Attwood's (2006) idea of "classy sex". The results from the survey somewhat support this finding. Participants and, if applicable, their spouses, held a variety of occupations, therefore the average class level was difficult to determine. There were no women or spouses that held jobs of exceeding high class, such as executives, however there were also a minimal number of women who appeared to be working class and the large majority had a university or college education.

In short, the diversity of women in terms of age, ability and body shape offers support for the Empowerment Perspective; however, the lack of women of racial minorities, non-heterosexual women, and working class women provides support for the Oppressive Perspective.

Women's Identity

The motivations that the women in pole-dancing identified drew attention to both the Empowerment and Oppressive Perspectives and often a certain motive could be both oppressive and empowering to women, depending on how it manifested itself in each individual. I will begin by highlighting the oppressive elements of pole-dancing regarding the participants' identities. First, many women suffered from body insecurities that existed previous to their participation in pole-dancing, which many women freely admitted. However, pole-dancing classes seemed to exacerbate the women's concerns

which was exemplified in the participants' envy of the other women in their class. Participants often compared themselves to the students and instructors in the classes, which led to increased body insecurity. Therefore, although women of a variety of body shapes felt accepted and encouraged to take pole-dancing, this accepting atmosphere appeared to be overshadowed at times by students' and instructors' body shapes that were slim and toned. As well, many women expressed difficulty and frustration with the moves they were asked to do in class because they found them too challenging. These challenges could then generate feelings of physical inadequacy in the women, which is oppressive to women. Feelings of body insecurity and inadequacy are not foreign to women in western culture, as media portrayals of slender, "beautiful" female bodies have placed body shame on women for decades (Bartky 1993; Bordo 1995; Chernin 1998). Often these body ideals have created deep-seated anxieties in women, which in extreme cases have led to illnesses such as anorexia and bulimia (see Bordo 1995; Orbach 1988). Thus, the exacerbation of body insecurity that occurs as a result of pole-dancing can be said to oppress women.

Similarly, according to Bordo (1995), women's obsession with exercise and fitness is because of pressure they feel to achieve the slender body ideal that is found in the media (see Bartky 1993; Bordo 1995; Chernin 1998; Kilbourne 1998). Pole-dancing has been constructed as an exercise class and the physical fitness benefits of the classes were a central motivation for many of the women to join. As well, as Rachel and Debra pointed out, most of the instructors at the studio embodied the ideal feminine beauty displayed in the media. Therefore, some of the women in pole-dancing classes may have joined in the hopes that pole-dancing would help them achieve the media ideal of the slender, young, attractive female body. Based on these arguments, pole-dancing can be seen as contributing to gender oppression because it encourages expectations of

impossible body ideals that have been normalized in western media to keep women under the control of capitalism and patriarchy (see Bartky 1993; Wolf 1990).

It should also be noted that the typical images of beauty found in the media are status symbols. Bordo (1995) explains that thinness first began as a symbol of status in the mid-nineteenth century when aristocrats wanted to separate themselves from the bourgeois businessmen and politicians who symbolized their wealth and power through bulging stomachs. Instead, aristocrats created social space through the control of their eating, which was symbolized through their thin bodies (Bordo 1995). This ideal was eventually adopted by the middle-class, and social power became less about a mere accumulation of material goods, but about an individual's ability to control and manage their impulses and resources (Bordo 1995). Thus, excess body weight came to be seen as personal and moral inadequacy (Bordo 1995). Today, for women, a slender but also toned and muscular body, although not too muscular, is the body ideal because it signifies a woman with the "correct attitude" who knows how to take care of herself (Bordo 1995: 195). In addition, to remain thin and muscular is a costly endeavor, as buying healthy food, diet products, and owning gym memberships or exercise equipment is expensive. As Wolf (1990) points out, the purpose of the beauty images of women in the media is to create revenue by encouraging women to buy countless products which are said to help them achieve the ideal beauty standards. Thus, the beauty ideal is more accessible to upper class women who have the means to buy "attractiveness". Therefore, what these arguments suggest is that pole-dancing can be seen as an avenue for women to achieve body ideals and gain status over other women. These goals are connected with issues of gender oppression, discrimination and exclusion, and therefore offer further support to the Oppressive Perspective.

Similarly, for some women, their motivations for taking pole-dancing included making themselves more attractive, particularly for men. As well, a number of the women felt there was a clear focus on appearance and looking “sexy” in the classes, particularly in the upper levels when women were asked to wear high-heeled shoes. Therefore, it is important to ask how women define the term “sexy” and what bodies they consider “attractive”. From the descriptions given by participants, it appeared as though some of them defined attractiveness based on the typical sexualized images that are prevalent in western media today. A reason for this may be because these are the only images of “sexy” women that are made available to women, which then explains why pole-dancing, and not other fitness exercises such as yoga or kick-boxing, is seen as sexy for women. Thus, pole-dancing offers a limited definition of women’s sexuality because it draws upon many traditional stereotypes of what it means to be sexy for women, such as wearing high heels. Therefore, pole-dancing can be seen to contribute to gender oppression.

On the other hand, some participants felt pole-dancing supported women and their bodies for what they were, and created a space for women to feel accepted and comfortable with their bodies regardless of shape and size. In fact, a few participants felt that pole-dancing was able to separate women from the pressures media placed on women to look a certain way and created an environment that was free of bodily judgment and critique. In short, there were aspects of the classes that were empowering for women.

To begin, when discussing the environment in the classes, the themes of confidence and acceptance of diversity were strongly supported by many of the women, and were reasons that they felt pole-dancing did not encourage the body stereotypes of women which saturate western media. These themes showed that for some women, taking

pole-dancing could help calm their body insecurities. As well, as Pat pointed out in a quote used to illustrate the comfortable and safe environment pole-dancing offers, there were no men in the classes, the studio was owned by a woman, and the classes were all taught and taken by women. This means pole-dancing offered safe space free from the objectifying male gaze. In fact, for a number of women the involvement of their romantic partners in the classes was very minimal, and for a few, non-existent. Therefore, the classes appeared to be much more about the women's own personal enjoyment, which connects to the themes of independence and self-improvement found within women's motivation to participate in pole-dancing. These findings clearly reveal the empowering elements of the classes regarding women's outward appearance. They seem to contradict, at least to some extent, the oppressive hypothesis which states that pole-dancing is used as a means for women to achieve body ideals. Instead, pole-dancing appears to be creating space for a more diverse group of women to explore their sexuality for themselves, which was part of the argument made within the Empowerment Perspective (see Attwood 2006; Bauman 1998; Buszek 2005; McCormick 1994; Hollibaugh 1996; Weeks 1998).

In addition, the fact that some women felt there was little to no focus on appearance during the classes, offers further weight to the idea of pole-dancing as empowering. Some women felt very comfortable attending class in sweatpants, giving little attention to their outward appearance. This means the normalized images of beautiful women found in western media that cause body insecurity and anxiety are avoided and possibly somewhat subverted in pole-dancing classes. One problem with this argument, however, is the fact that in the upper level classes women were expected to wear high heels. In fact, a discussion in the focus group revealed the women's amusement

at the unusual attire many women wore to class, which consisted of exercise clothing, knees pads and heels. I would argue that this odd arrangement of clothing symbolizes the overall effect of pole-dancing fitness; that is, both the empowering and oppressive aspects of the classes are influencing women at the same time.

The support many participants felt from their fellow students and the instructors in the classes adds further weight to the Empowerment Perspective. Many of the women discussed feeling comfortable with and supported by the instructors and students in the classes, which helped them accept their appearance and ability for what it was rather than feeling inferior. Women who normally had trouble with coordination, strength or athletic activities in general felt comfortable and supported in pole-dancing classes, which some participants said was difficult to find in other fitness activities. A similar effect was found in the experience of female bonding, which was a huge draw to the classes for many of the women. Friendships and support networks were created between many of the women in the classes, which is arguably an empowering experience for women. In my focus group, it was touched upon that the reason women created such strong bonds in pole-dancing in particular, was because of the slight nervousness or embarrassment women often felt in classes. As well, I would argue that being part of a group that is stigmatized to some extent in our society, as is the case for women who take pole-dancing fitness classes which was revealed in my findings and discussed below, helps to increase bonding between individuals within the stigmatized group. These themes of support and bonding do not clearly connect with the hypotheses regarding women's sexuality found in the Empowerment Perspective. However, due to the amount of insecurity and anxiety that women in western culture deal with, which has been addressed above in terms of body

image, environments which foster close female bonds and support women are arguably key to women's empowerment.

There was also significant support for the psychological and emotional benefits that the classes held for women, by helping participants build their self-esteem. This was demonstrated through the themes of accomplishment, confidence, and empowerment. The need to work towards a goal and feel successful is arguably a huge benefit to a women's psychological health. As well, two motivating themes that were identified were that of independence and self-improvement. Some women felt a sense of independence by taking pole-dancing, particularly because it provided them with time for themselves and an outlet from their daily duties as wives, mothers, employees and so on. This idea is supported by the work of Simon and Gagnon (1986), regarding the sexual scripts of women, in which they argue that the erotic is sometimes used as an escape from one's identity, which appears to be how some women used pole-dancing classes. As well, some women found that taking the classes was a personal challenge because they were asked to step outside their comfort zone, making the classes a means of personal growth. Overall, a number of aspects of pole-dancing classes had a positive influence on the mental and emotional health of many of the women involved, and thus, pole-dancing can be seen as empowering for women.

In fact, given that pole-dancing was originally used as a form of sexual entertainment for men in which women were exploited and objectified, this drastic change in the use of pole-dancing could be argued to be a reclaiming of the activity by women, by making it for women's benefit more so than men's. It is true that some men do still benefit from this version of pole-dancing and there are elements of pole-dancing that can be oppressive, such as those discussed above. However, the majority of my

participants appeared to be the main beneficiary of their experience in pole-dancing classes, and the benefit to men was secondary and of minimal importance for many of the women. Pole-dancing is not just about women behaving sexually anymore, in fact, it could be argued that a woman whose only motivation to take pole-dancing is to make herself appear sexier would not remain in pole-dancing classes very long. The classes are physically demanding and expensive, and a woman who is merely looking to boost her “sexiness” quotient, could achieve this through far less onerous and less costly means. As well, pole-dancing fitness classes appear to be much more, if not completely, within the control of women, as it is women who own the studios and both teach and take the classes. Therefore, it is within women’s power to change certain elements of pole-dancing to suit their own needs instead of men’s, which is not usually true in traditional forms of pole-dancing.

The idea that pole-dancing fitness classes could be seen as reclaiming pole-dancing from its traditional position as oppressive for women and making it empowering, is one that is supported by arguments made by Buszek (2005), who outlined the empowering elements of the pin-up. According to Buszek (2005), the challenge of the pin-up has been to maintain the familiar conventions of female beauty and desirability because these are accessible to most women, but at the same time disrupt the patriarchal suppression of women. This same idea is echoed in pole-dancing fitness, in which women have taken a form of dance that was a familiar example of female sexuality and desirability, and have changed the purpose of that dance from a pleasure for men to a pleasure for women. Thus, Buszek (2005) explains that as certain pin-ups, “mime, rework, and resignify the signs and stability of specifically female sexual ideals,” women adapted the meaning of the pin-up to include subversive meanings and messages, which I

argue is also a similar situation for pole-dancing classes. Finally, in her book, Buszek (2005) explains that both women and men see pin-ups as sexually interesting; however, these interests are for very different reasons. This is also true for pole-dancing classes, because for heterosexual men pole-dancing is interesting as a form of sexualized entertainment. For women, however, pole-dancing is often about personal fulfillment in a variety of forms. What this reveals is that the fact that an activity is appealing to men does not negate its potential to also be empowering for women.

Women's Sexual Identity

Most of the women claimed the sexual aspects of the classes had a positive influence on their sexuality, such as increasing their sexual confidence, sexual expression, helping them rediscover their sexuality and decreasing their inhibitions. However, depending on how these effects manifested themselves in the women's lives, they could be empowering or oppressive. For example, when a woman rediscovers her sexuality it could be as large a benefit to her romantic partner as it is for herself personally. In fact, a few women referred to the need they felt to "bring back the spark" in their relationship, perhaps because of their partner's desire for them to do so, although this was not clarified by the women. A similar argument could be made for the women who experienced a decrease in their inhibitions regarding sex and their bodies. The women framed this experience as beneficial to their own sexuality; however, it likely benefitted their partners as well. For some women, it was difficult to determine if they were happy taking pole-dancing because the classes allowed them to enjoy their sexual experiences for themselves, or if this happiness was due to the fact that their partners had been sexually satisfied. Finally, one reason the women felt more sexually confident when taking pole-dancing classes could be because they knew taking pole-dancing makes their partners

happy. Proof of this idea was seen most clearly in Melanie's narrative, in which she was very open about the fact that she demonstrated the classes frequently for her husband and was concerned about his opinions of the classes. Melanie's focus on her husband's thoughts about pole-dancing, referring to what "he" thinks and what "he" likes, suggests she was more concerned with pleasing her husband by taking pole-dancing than her own sexual enjoyment. Therefore, Melanie's motivation to take pole-dancing appeared to be closely linked with the oppressive arguments of Gill (2007a, 2007b, 2008) and Levy (2005) who claim women are becoming more sexual to please men.

As well, support for the oppressive elements of the sexual aspects of the classes were found in themes related to the effect pole-dancing had on women's behaviour outside of class. For example, a number of women demonstrated their pole-dancing moves for their partners, and some used their pole-dancing skills in public settings. A number of women engaged in public performances of pole-dancing, such as performing at gyms, while other women found a way to work these moves into their everyday activities, such as grocery shopping or when out dancing at a bar. Although the women who exhibited these behaviours described them as enjoyable, they also connect with the arguments of gender oppression. Sexualized displays of women's bodies for men and in public are a traditional form of women's objectification and oppression. For example, advertisements have sexually objectified women's bodies for decades (see Bordo 2005; Kilbourne 1998). Thus, authors found in the Oppressive Perspective, such as Bartky (1990, 1993), Blood (2005), Levy (2005), Gill (2007a, 200b, 2008) and MacKinnon (1987) would see this use of pole-dancing as oppressive for women. As well, these findings connect with the idea that contemporary society is creating more attractive and sexually skilled women for men's pleasure, which was a hypothesis that was generated

within the Oppressive Perspective relating to the work of Bartky (1990), Blood (2005), Gill (2007a, 2007b, 2008), and Levy (2005). Therefore, women who participated in pole-dancing classes mainly for the pleasure or entertainment of others were arguably objectifying and even exploiting themselves, which offers support for the hypothesis that pole-dancing classes can be a form of oppression to women.

In contrast, Attwood (2006), Bauman (1998) Weeks (1998), McCormick (1994) and a variety of postmodern sexuality theorists and liberal feminists, would argue that developing sexual confidence, sexual expression, rediscovering their sexuality and decreasing their sexual inhibitions can be empowering aspects of pole-dancing classes for women. In terms of increasing sexual confidence, for most women this confidence seemed to be focused on themselves and was not related to their partners or other men. In fact, there was a theme which explained that some women did not demonstrate their abilities for anyone outside of the classes, even for their partners. Instead, the classes made them confident in themselves, meaning the women were less afraid to go after their own sexual desires instead of simply doing what they thought men wanted. Similarly, pole-dancing classes decreased women's sexual inhibitions, which meant they felt freer to explore their own sexual feelings and desires. This sometimes manifested itself in the women's lives by improving their sexual relationships with men, however this improvement appeared to be equally or even more beneficial for the women than the men. These arguments were best exemplified by Leigh, whose descriptions of how pole-dancing influenced her sexual identity focused on herself and her actions. Her husband's reaction and opinions were, for the most part, absent in her descriptions. Thus, the sexual confidence and loss of inhibitions that a number of the women experienced from taking the pole-dancing classes, were of central benefit to the women's own enjoyment. Their

partners may have still benefitted, however it was peripheral to the women's own needs and desires, which is arguably an empowering experience for the women.

Likewise, pole-dancing created a space for women to express their sexuality, which was clearly seen within Kelly's narrative of the classes. Interestingly, Kelly was one of the few participants who did not have a romantic partner and explained that she had never shown anyone her pole-dancing skills, even though she owned her own pole. She also did not indicate that she used the topic of her pole-dancing to attract men, and in fact discussed men's attitudes toward the classes with some contempt. Thus, what Kelly's experience demonstrates is that for many of the women, pole-dancing was most significant to their own sexual development and expression. This argument is supported by McCormick (1994) and Hollibaugh (1996) who both advocate for women's sexual exploration in a variety of sexual experiences, which McCormick (1994) argues allows for healthy sexual development and Hollibaugh (1996) believes is essential to women's sexual freedom.

In addition, for a number of the women, a motivation and benefit they found in taking pole-dancing classes was to rediscover their sexuality. In particular, this was important for the more mature women, who were often wives and mothers. This theme was demonstrated through Leigh most distinctly, as she was the oldest participant I interviewed and had three children. Leigh found pole-dancing helped her rediscover and reconnect with her sexual desires, which had been buried under responsibilities such as marriage, jobs, and motherhood. This could be said to be empowering to her sexuality, by once again connecting with postmodern ideas of exploring one's sexuality (see Attwood 2006; Bauman 1998; Hollibaugh 1996; McCormick 1994).

In connection with these arguments, because older women's sexuality has been largely ignored in the media (Gill 2008; Kilbourne 1998) and repressed by western social norms (Koch et al 2005), older women have come to be seen by western society as non-sexual beings. Therefore, older women who choose to engage in sexualized activities, such as pole-dancing classes, could be seen as resisting the stereotype of the non-sexual older woman. For example, Sharage (2005) has made reference to the desexualization of older women in western culture, and Gill (2007a, 2007b, 2008) and Amy-Chinn (2006) highlight the fact that it is only young women that are displayed as attractive and sexy in the media. However, as older women continue to participate in pole-dancing, the classes become an avenue through which women can challenge and subvert these ageist notions. This contradicts the hypothesis found within the Oppressive Perspective, which predicted that older women would not feel comfortable taking pole-dancing classes because of the characterization of older women in western culture as non-sexual beings.

As well, if we accept that pole-dancing fitness classes can be a form of resistance against cultural norms, and if we accept that many of western culture's norms have been created within a patriarchal society (see Bartky 1990; Foucault 1990; MacKinnon 1987), then it can once again be argued that women are reclaiming pole-dancing. Women have altered the original intentions of the activity, and are reconstructing pole-dancing in a way that benefits women, which was also argued above in relation to the psychological and emotional benefits pole-dancing holds for women. Thus, women who use pole-dancing to rediscover their sexuality, effectively reclaim it from its original form of pleasure and entertainment for men. This argument offers further support for the Empowerment Perspective.

In addition, many women expressed significant apprehension about discussing their pole dancing classes with certain individuals, especially men, because of the stigma that is attached to pole-dancing classes based on its association with strippers. Many of the women in my research explained that they only told select individuals that they participated in pole-dancing, and they felt defensive when other individuals discovered that they took the classes. This was seen most clearly in Lynn, who did not tell any member of her family that she was taking pole-dancing, and Kelly, who was frustrated by men's assumption that because she took pole-dancing classes she wanted to start working as an exotic dancer. The concern and apprehension many of the women expressed about being open about their participation in pole-dancing was likely connected with the women's fear of being labeled a "slut" (see Kimmel 2000; Tolman 1994; Walker and Devlin 2002) or "bad" women (see Bryant and Scholfield 2007). Choosing to openly present themselves as sexual beings has not traditionally been considered acceptable behaviour for women in western culture and is not conducive with accepted practices of "good" sexual behaviour for women.

This then suggests two things. First, my findings contradict the hypothesis that women are participating in the classes because of a desire to mimic women in advertising and be seen as more sexual, as Gill (2008) postulates in the Oppressive Perspective. Instead, most of my participants appeared to take pole-dancing in spite of the fact that it caused them to be viewed as highly sexual, which was usually regarded as a drawback of the classes. This idea was also supported by the theme found in some women's narratives which claimed that participating in pole-dancing classes did not have a strong connection with their sexuality nor did they feel the moves in the classes were sexual. At certain points during my participant observation, I experienced this myself. However, claiming

that pole-dancing is completely non-sexual may also have been a way for women to avoid the negative stereotypes and separate themselves from the stripper image that is attached to pole-dancing fitness classes. In fact, in research on women who work as exotic dancers, it is clear that their profession is viewed as deviant where women have to fight to be respected (Bott 2006). Therefore, women devise ways to distance themselves from the negative images of exotic dancers (see Spivey 2005). A similar phenomenon may be occurring with women who take pole-dancing classes, which contradicts the Oppressive Perspective that suggested women are taking pole-dancing as a way to make themselves more sexually appealing

Second, if we accept that some women do actually take pole-dancing classes for their own personal enjoyment and not for the benefit of others, these women can be said to be subverting traditionally stereotypes of female sexuality. This perspective is connected with the arguments of the Attwood (2006), Bauman (1998) and Weeks (1998) in the Empowerment Perspective, who suggest that women in contemporary society are beginning to explore their sexuality for themselves by moving beyond the limited definitions of female sexuality that have existed for so long in western culture. In fact, according to Dr. Ross, a professor of sociology and women's studies interviewed for a student newspaper article:

[Pole-dancing classes] have the potential to expand understandings of female sexuality beyond the "good girl/bad girl" images that often saturate the media. When a woman who is assumed to be a "good girl" goes to a pole dancing class or sets up a brass pole up in her living room, she is suggesting that her sexuality need not be limited to a simple "good girl/bad girl" understanding. She is challenging norms and subverting mainstream notions of how a woman should act (Keller 2006).

Thus, the experience of subverting the “good girl/bad girl” dichotomy which limits women’s sexuality may be an empowering element of the classes that women who have traditionally be labeled as “good girls” enjoy.

Finally, many participants discussed their discomfort in class with touching their bodies when the instructors asked them to “Let their hands travel”. This could be for two reasons. The first is that women have been made to feel shame in their bodies and that they are inadequate because they do not meet the slenderness ideal (see Bartky 1993). This was a suggestion offered by a participant in the focus group. Thus, when instructors asked students to “Let their hands travel” over their bodies in class, it may have been meant to help the women create an appreciation and comfort with their bodies, regardless of their outward appearance. This idea was supported by the data collected from the instructors. The second reason women may have felt discomfort touching their bodies, could be because women have been taught to fear and avoid their own sexual pleasure. Kimmel (2000) addresses this issue in his discussion of the sexual double standard between men and women. The sexual double standard refers to the fact that society allows and even expects men to be highly sexual, but condemns this behaviour in women. He states that the sexual double standard is a result of gender inequality which assumes males are far more sexual than women, and that most women do not enjoy sex and those that do should hide it or they will be labeled a “slut” (Kimmel 2000). This idea was reinforced by Donelson (1999) who explained that from a young age girls are taught sex is a bad thing, that they should not have sexual needs or desires, and that if they enjoy sex too much they are sluts. Strong and Devault (1997) add that girls are taught not to engage in self-pleasure. These messages are reinforced through many avenues in western society. For example, Kimmel (2000) gives a short analysis of medical textbook content between

1943 and 1972, which he says often describes women as caring very little about sexual pleasure and one textbook even explained women's "universal frigidity" (Kimmel 2000: 222). With the prevalence of such stereotypes, many women have come to fear or feel detached from their own sexual pleasure (Kimmel 2000). Thus, it is not surprising that so many participants had difficulty when asked to "Let their hands wander" during class. The fact that pole-dancing classes aim to help women overcome these oppressive sexual barriers and teach them that their own bodies and physical pleasure are acceptable, provides further support for the Empowerment Perspective.

Accepting Women's Arguments

As was stated at the beginning of this chapter, all of the women interviewed demonstrated an enthusiastic enjoyment of pole-dancing classes. All planned, or at least wished, to continue with the classes, and those that were asked to classify the classes as empowering or oppressive, such as the women in the focus group, all described them as empowering. Acknowledging these perspectives of the women regarding their own participation in pole-dancing and considering them legitimate is important to my analysis, even considering the potential for the perspectives to contribute to gender oppression. Hollibaugh (2006) argued that women should have a right to choose their own sexual experiences, even if some individuals may find these offensive. For example, Hollibaugh (1996) and Vance (in Cossman and Bell 1997) advocate for women's right to choose to read pornography even though radical feminists such as MacKinnon (1987) are strongly opposed to the industry. Hollibaugh's (1996) perspective is paralleled by an example used by McNair (2005), who analyzes the movie *Striptease* through a liberal feminist perspective. McNair (2005) views the main character as choosing her life as a stripper,

and although her working conditions are not ideal, in general, they are similar to those of average workers: “The stripper in *Striptease* is a feminist, in short, who chooses her life she leads and makes no apology for it” (2002: 90).

Duits and van Zoon (2006) make a similar argument surrounding women’s choices, stating that not listening to women or taking into account their opinions and descriptions of their choices is an act of gender oppression. This idea was addressed by Duits and van Zoonen (2006) by examining young women’s choice of clothing. Specifically, they examined sexually explicit clothing such as belly-tops and visible g-strings and sexually modest clothing such as headscarves, and discussed how authority figures feel these articles of clothing are points of concern regarding girls’ sexuality. Mainly, they are considered a concern because these garments appear anti-feminist, and therefore society attempts to change how these girls dress through social acceptability norms (Duits and van Zoonen 2006). A major point the authors convey is that when authority figures attempt to change the way girls choose to dress and do not listen to their reasoning behind these choices they deny the girls’ agency and autonomy, creating “docile bodies” who are not politically relevant actors (Duits and van Zoonen 2006; 2007). This is classic patriarchal ideology at work. Duits and van Zoonen (2006) also point out that in North American society, women’s controversial choice of dress is seen as a cultural issue and subject to regulation, whereas men’s controversial choice of dress is seen as a political issue and a matter of freedom of speech, thus exempt from regulation. Duits and van Zoonen (2006: 114) conclude: “The state, school, public opinion, parents and other social institutions ‘resignify’ the everyday practices of girls, relieve them from the power to define their own actions, submitting them to the meta-narratives of dominant discourses instead.” Thus, ironically, by attempting to force these

girls to dress “appropriately” according to feminist ideals, they are subjecting the girls to oppression.

Overall, Duits and van Zoonen (2007) argue that when it comes to debates over girls’ controversial clothing choices, their voices need to be heard and opinions considered as serious arguments within the debate. I find this controversy over girls’ clothing to be very similar to the controversy over women who take pole-dancing classes. The critics of pole-dance classes who refuse to acknowledge or believe the women who claim the classes are empowering are, in effect, exhibiting the same behaviour as the figures who criticize young women for wearing belly tops and visible g-strings. And through these criticisms, they are in fact disempowering these women and causing further oppression by taking away their agency and autonomy. This is not to say that women’s opinions of the classes are always well-thought through, and there is the possibility, upon closer inspection and self-reflection, that women may find oppressive elements within pole-dancing classes. However, this should not be assumed to always be the case and I believe Duits and van Zoonen’s (2007) argument shows the critical importance of listening to the experiences of women and taking their opinions into account when examining an issue such as pole-dancing.

However, my argument here is not meant to ignore the significance of gender oppression and its existence within pole-dancing fitness. It has been highlighted a number of times throughout this thesis that women are not always aware of the influences patriarchal culture has on their actions. In a criticism of Duits and van Zoonen’s (2006) argument, Gill (2007a) responds explaining that culture has a huge influence on our likes and dislikes. She argues that it should not be assumed that the “choices” women make about the clothing they wear are made autonomously, because cultural values guide those

“choices” (Gill 2007a). She further explains that men dictate our cultural values (Gill 2007a). Therefore, gender oppression is operating against these young women through cultural values which have been internalized and influence their choice of clothing to ultimately benefit (heterosexual) men (Gill 2007a). A similar phenomenon was addressed by Friedan’s (1974) discussion of the feminine mystique. The feminine mystique was the idealized image of women as happy housewives and mothers, which was promoted through cultural influences such as women’s magazines (Friedan 1974). Therefore, many women “chose” to become housewives and mothers. These choices did not feel coerced and many women were happy to make them (at first); however, they were, in essence, dictated by a set of cultural values that benefitted patriarchy and capitalism (Friedan 1974).

These arguments by Gill (2007a) and Friedan (1974) which highlight the influence of internalized cultural values on women’s decisions, are important within the discussion of women’s views of pole-dancing fitness. However, I feel that it is important to be cautious when attempting to draw out the oppressive elements of pole-dancing classes, that we do not, in turn, restrict and limit women’s sexuality in other ways, which was the caution of Duits and van Zoonen (2007). There is the potential to completely rob women of any possibility of autonomy when discussing patriarchal influence, which is not the aim of this thesis and is believed to only further contribute to women’s oppression. Remaining true to phenomenological analysis, the perspectives of the participants will be considered key in understanding the true meaning of pole-dancing fitness.

Problems with the Empowerment versus Oppression Model

Determining whether pole-dancing is empowering or oppressive is difficult because of three main challenges that I encountered within the literature and from the participants themselves. First, I found there were contradictions between theorists within a given perspective, as well there were similarities between theorists in opposing perspectives. For example, Levy (2005), whose arguments were used in the Oppressive Perspective, concludes her book by suggesting that to achieve true sexual liberation, women need a much wider range of sexual options to satisfy a variety of desires. This is very similar to the arguments made by the postmodern sexuality theorists in the Empowerment Perspective, in which pole-dancing is seen as an example of expanding sexual options for women. As well, Levy (2005) advocates for women to have the freedom to decide what they personally want from sex instead of merely mimicking mass media images of sexualized women. This is contradictory to Gill's (2007a) argument that our choices can never be separated from the influence of media culture. Therefore, at certain points, the lines between the empowerment and the oppressive positions get blurred. It becomes difficult to clearly distinguish the two sides, as there are inconsistencies in their arguments relating to pole-dancing.

Second, determining if women's behaviour is a result of internalized patriarchal values is difficult to determine. Living in a patriarchal culture can influence women's thoughts and behaviour, and men's for that matter, to an extent that they are unaware of it. This means it can become difficult to discern if a woman is acting on her own free will or because of the hegemonic power of men that often controls women's behaviour without their conscious awareness. However, this argument can also be taken to the extreme and it could be argued that all women's behaviour is controlled by patriarchy,

meaning women have no free choice whatsoever unless their behaviour is completely detached from men or thwarts men in some way. As discussed above, this is not the perspective taken in this thesis. However, even if we assume women do hold the ability to be somewhat free thinking, the Oppressive Perspective argues that there still are many internalized values which women are said to often be unaware of, and therefore it is impossible to ever completely refute these arguments.

Third, each individuals' behaviour and perspective affects whether pole-dancing classes are viewed as oppressive or empowering. For example, my research found that each woman's experience of pole-dancing was different and unique. Thus, the classes themselves were more or less empowering or oppressive depending on each woman's individual experience, even though common patterns can be identified. As well, within the conceptualization of women's sexual behaviour, it seems there is a lot of controversy between various theorists and depending on where one sits theoretically certain behaviours will be analyzed differently. For example, the debates between anti-pornography versus anti-censorship feminists (see McNair 2005) have very different opinions regarding the legitimacy of pornography. Therefore, a certain behaviour can be defended as oppressive or empowering depending on one's theoretical standpoint.

Finding A Balance

It seems impossible within North American society to completely escape patriarchal influences as the structure of our society has been built on patriarchal practices and beliefs. As well, given the roots from which pole-dancing fitness stems, it is easy to accept pole-dancing fitness as an oppressive practice that restricts women's sexual freedom. However, at the same time, to discount the voices of the women who engage in

mainstream pole-dancing who claim it is a liberating and empowering experience is equally oppressive.

There are no published academic articles that have studied mainstream pole-dancing; however, an article by Collins (2002) on aerobics and feminism offers an analysis that could be very similar to that of pole-dancing. Aerobics is an area that has been criticized for maintaining dominant ideologies that place women in positions of powerlessness and sexually commodify their bodies (Collins 2002). However, many women who participate in aerobics identify themselves as feminists and argue that aerobics is an empowering activity (Collins 2002). This is parallel to criticisms of pole-dancing which argue that the classes are sexually exploitive of women, however the women involved believe the classes are sexually empowering and liberating. Collins (2002) concludes that through various strategies, such as distancing, asserting agency, rejecting the critique and making do, the women renegotiated the discrepancy between their feminist views and their participation in aerobics. According to Collins (2002: 106): “...no cultural phenomenon can be divorced from the dominant ideology”; however, the women who participate in the phenomenon can fight to renegotiate these dominant ideologies to allow themselves to feel empowered within a male dominated society. Thus, whether women are becoming more empowered or more oppressed by pole-dancing fitness classes is largely related to the reasons why the women are choosing to participate. A woman who participates because she wishes to attract men or please her male partner is very different from a woman who is fighting to renegotiate the meaning of pole-dancing and reclaim it as practice that is enjoyable and empowering for women. Thus, I argue that it is possible for women to achieve a degree of sexual freedom through pole-dancing. If a woman chooses to participate in mainstream pole-dancing free from at least direct or

obvious pressures to do so, and she does so in an attempt to transform pole-dancing from a practice that was used to objectify women to one that is for her own pleasure and enjoyment, then a level of sexual freedom and empowerment can be said to have been achieved.

However, this reclaiming may only be the privilege for certain groups of women, as my results showed that women of racial minorities, lower income, and non-heterosexual identities were almost non-existent within pole-dancing. As well, pole-dancing classes are, on some occasions, used as a form of entertainment for men and they support and exacerbate body insecurities that many women already suffer from in our appearance-obsessed culture, which contributes to gender oppression. Therefore, I would further argue that until all women are given equal privilege in terms of what is considered acceptable sexual behaviour and women are not made to feel inferior in anyway within pole-dancing classes, we cannot claim pole-dancing to be a completely sexually empowering activity for women.

Ultimately, pole-dancing classes are not necessarily an ideal example of women expressing their sexual freedom; however, they are a step in the right direction. For one, they have brought female desire and sexual expression into the mainstream and have made it acceptable, at least for some women, to talk about their sexuality and express it more openly instead of being embarrassed or even fearing to do so. Pole-dancing is also significant to the psychological and emotional well-being of women. The classes provide a women-only space, free from the direct control of men, and spaces such as these often help foster bonds between women, strengthening them as a group. In fact, many women within the classes feel a strong sense of support and encouragement from the atmosphere that is created in the classes. As well, the main goal that pole-dancing instructors'

diligently work towards is women's sexual empowerment and liberation, and as long as women continue to work towards these goals the closer we come to gender equality. Finally, although certain groups of women may be less privileged than others, attempts have been made by some studios to include a variety of women from various backgrounds. For example, pole-dancing somewhat challenges the idea that women have to be young and thin to be sexually attractive, which subverts the normalized ideals placed on women's bodies in current western culture. Thus, the classes can be seen as an attempt to reclaim and recreate a traditionally oppressive, exploitive and degrading practice. And although factors such as the influence of patriarchy and inequality among women continue to be an issue, pole-dancing can be seen as a step forward in women's struggle to gain sexual freedom and empowerment.

Limitations of the Research

One limitation of this research project is the fact that it was a small study, meaning that the findings are not generalizable. All the information is drawn from a small select group of participants who were from two studios found in adjacent Canadian cities. This small sample size was necessary to complete the qualitative research project effectively, however the small number of women interviewed and a lack of diversity in terms of the studios they attended, given the wide variety found across North America, means very different results could be accrued if research was conducted elsewhere.

Additionally, all but one of my participants were women who were currently enrolled in pole-dancing classes. What this means is that all of the women had a present interest in the classes and had positive experiences in the classes. If I had also interviewed women who stopped taking pole-dancing because of their dislike of the classes for one

reason or another, I might have found different results. One of my goals with this research project was to determine why women take pole-dancing classes, including their motivations for remaining in the classes. To do this, it was necessary to interview women who had participated in the classes for extended periods of time, which means they likely enjoyed pole-dancing overall and conveyed a positive opinion of the activity in their interviews. Understanding the opinions of women who did not enjoy pole-dancing, for example women who participated in level one and then dropped out, would likely offer more support for the Oppressive Perspective, creating contradictions to my conclusions regarding pole-dancing as empowering.

Suggestions for Future Research

During my preliminary online research about pole-dancing, I discovered that many women who work as exotic dancers have experienced a judgmental attitude from many of the instructors at mainstream pole-dancing studios when they have participated in the classes. This was likely because the studios had a desire to distance pole-dance fitness from its connection with pole-dancing in nightclubs, renouncing the stripper association. Therefore, through some studios' attempts to make the classes less degrading to women, they may be subsequently alienating certain groups of women. Exploring the contradiction between women who pole-dance as exercise and those who pole-dance as an occupation offers another angle through which to explore pole-dancing and draw out the empowering and oppressive elements.

Furthermore, research which addresses men's opinions of pole-dancing classes, in particular the partners of the women involved, could help determine the oppressive and empowering elements of pole-dancing. The opinions of men compared to women

regarding mainstream pole-dancing classes could potentially produce contradictory results to this study. In particular, looking at the experiences and opinions of men whose partners participate in pole-dancing could reveal another side to the women's descriptions of how the classes influence their relationship. Similarly, comparing the opinions of women who have taken the classes and did not enjoy them with women who do enjoy pole-dancing could be effective in drawing out more of the nuances in terms of the oppressive and empowering elements of pole-dancing.

Implications for Sexuality Research on Women

Within my research on pole-dancing, a number of issues relating to women's bodies and their sexuality were brought to the surface. These included women's self-critical attitudes towards their own bodies, the effect of motherhood on women's sexuality, and sexualized activities as increasing female bonding. Pole-dancing classes offer an ideal case study to explore these issues further.

To begin, there was significant evidence found in my research relating to women's critical attitudes of their own bodies, which existed previous to women's participation in pole-dancing classes. Insecurities surrounding their bodies are often based around women's obsession with weight (see Bartky 1993; Bordo 1995; Orbach 1988), which has been addressed by many researchers and is acknowledged as a serious problem within western culture. Pole-dancing, as a fitness exercise with a particularly heavy focus on the body because of its sexualized elements, offers an ideal ground to explore how these issues manifest in women's lives in particular reference to how they effect women's sexuality. As was discussed above, pole-dancing aggravates some women's body insecurities, however for others the classes may help decrease these concerns. Therefore,

exploring pole-dancing in terms of its effect solely on women's feelings about their bodies and how it may change their perceptions of their body image could offer interesting and helpful results in terms of the struggle towards decreasing women's body concerns that often lead to serious eating disorders.

Furthermore, many of the mothers who participated in pole-dancing classes discussed the effect motherhood had on their identity, especially their sexual identity. This is an issue that pole-dancing appears to be strongly connected with, as I did not ask any questions regarding motherhood yet every woman who had children discussed the significance of the classes in relation to her role as a mother. Thus, pole-dancing appears to offer an important space that draws out the influence of motherhood on women's sexual identity and further research in this area could be beneficial to understanding changes in women's sexual identities over the life course.

Finally, the female bonding that occurred between the women in pole-dancing classes was an important finding, and I believe it is one that can have new implications regarding the benefits of our sexualized culture. As the sexual nature of pole-dancing appears to increase bonds between women, I would suggest that there is a need for research to explore how a variety of sexually explicit activities and materials can bring women closer together and create spaces for them to discuss their attitudes and opinions relating to the topic of sex. For example, many women have bonded over a shared appreciation for the show *Sex and the City*, which is sexually explicit and has created a space for women to discuss new and various topics relating to sex from a woman's perspective (see Kim 2001). Pole-dancing could be another outlet for women to engage in this activity and therefore research exploring the possible benefits of pole-dancing classes

in this way could produce findings that are valuable to women's healthy sexual development.

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APPENDIX A

Survey of Women in Pole-Dance Classes

You are being asked to complete this short survey to help the researcher gain an understanding of the social demographics of participants in pole-dancing classes. The survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. You do not have to answer any questions you are uncomfortable with. You may choose to stop filling out the survey at any time. You may also choose not to submit your survey. You are not required to provide your name on the survey which means it will remain anonymous. Your participation in this survey is greatly appreciated.

1. Please circle your age group.

15-20	46-50
21-25	51-55
26-30	56-60
31-35	61-65
36-40	66-70
41-45	71 and up

2. What is your relationship status? (Please circle the one that applies to you currently)

Single

Married

Common Law

Divorced

Widowed

Other _____

3. What is your highest level of education?

4. What do you do for a living?

5. If you have a spouse or common law partner, what do they do for a living?

6. Do you have children? Yes No

If yes, how many? _____

What are their ages? _____

7. Are you a member of a visible minority?

Yes No

8. What is your sexual orientation? (Please circle the one that best applies to you)

Homosexual

Heterosexual

Bisexual

Transsexual

Other _____

** Please detach this page from the rest of the survey and hand it in separately, even if you circle no for the first question.*

Would you be interested in being contacted to participate in further research on the subject of pole-dancing classes? This would take the form of an interview and/or a focus group. (The information you provided on the survey will not be discussed. Your participation in the survey is completely anonymous.)

Yes / No

If yes, please provide the appropriate contact information.

Name: _____

Home Phone: _____

Business Phone: _____

Cell Phone: _____

Email: _____

Other: _____

Thank you for participating!

APPENDIX B

Key Informant Interview Guide

Introduction (ice-breakers)

1. I would like to start with you describing your background as a teacher and how long you have been teaching for.
 - What qualifications did you need to teach these classes?
 - How important was experience in other forms of dance?
 - Have you always taught at the same studio?
 - How often are the classes you teach (eg. one a week) and how long is one class?
2. Describe for me a typical class. What is the routine you go through? Do all instructors follow the same routine?

Observations of the Classes

3. Can you describe for me the type of clothing that is usually worn in the classes and how it changes between different levels?
4. Describe for me the type of women you usually have in your classes. (In terms of personality, age, body type, occupation etc.)
5. How do you perceive your students' attitudes towards the classes?
 - Do they seem shy? Eager to learn?
 - What sorts of questions do they ask?
6. Why do you think women like taking pole-dancing classes over other forms of exercise?

Teaching the Classes

7. Why did you want to teach pole-dancing?
8. What do you see as the main goals of the classes?
 - How important is it that the students learn the moves perfectly?
9. How does teaching the classes make you feel about yourself? (How has it changed your self-concept?)
10. What kind of music do you play during the classes and why do you play this kind of music? How does it differ between levels (if at all)?
11. What kind of instructions do you give your students on how to feel sexy during class?
 - Could you give me some examples?
 - Why do you tell them to feel this way?

12. Do you ever have performances within the class or outside of the classes?
- How do these go?
13. How do you encourage the women to use the skills they learn in class, outside of the classes?
14. What do you hope the women take out of the classes in relation to their sexuality?
- What are you hoping you are teaching the women about sex and their sexuality?
15. Some people think these classes further objectify women. What would you say to this?
16. Is there anything else that you want to tell me about the classes that could inform my research?

Thank you very much for participating!

APPENDIX C

In-Depth Interview Guide

Introduction (ice-breakers)

1. How long have you been attending pole-dancing classes?
2. Do you plan to continue with the classes?
3. Have you always attended the same studio? (If not, why did you switch?)

Why take pole-dancing?

4. I'd like to begin with you describing how you first became interested in pole-dancing and how you decided to enroll.
 - How come you chose pole-dancing over other forms of exercise.
 - How did you find out about the classes?
 - Did anyone encourage you to take the class or was it your own initiative?
 - Are you doing this for yourself or your partner?
 - Are you taking the class alone or with someone you know?
5. Describe to me what reservations you had about enrolling in the classes, or if you had none, what were your initial thoughts about enrolling in the classes? How do you feel about them now?
6. Describe for me first what you like about the classes, and then what you dislike.

Sexuality Identity

7. How do you feel about yourself during the classes?
 - Could you describe for me how the classes have changed how you feel about yourself as a person in general?
 - How do you feel after a class? How does a class leave you feeling?
8. If you have ever felt you are not doing well enough in the classes could you explain to me why you felt this way and what this experience was like for you?
9. Describe for me how the classes have changed how you feel about your body, or if you perceive that they have had no impact on how you think about your body, why do you think this is?
10. How much focus is there on your appearance during class?
11. Describe for me how much attention do you give to what you wear and how you look during class?
 - How often do you worry about how much skin you are exposing and how you look?

12. Please describe how much attention you pay to what the other women in the class wear, what they look like and how well they are doing?
13. Do you often feel as though the other women in the class are watching you, and if so how does this make you feel?
 - How do you feel objectified by the other women in the class (if at all)?
14. How has taking these classes impacted how you view your own sexuality?
 - Or, if you do not find the classes influence your sexuality at all, why is this?
15. How have the classes affected your sexual behaviour, or why is it that they have no effect?
 - What about your sexual feelings?
 - What about your sexual attitudes?
 - What about your sexual beliefs and morals?
16. Please describe how, if at all, the classes affected your intimate relationship(s)?
17. Please describe, how, if at all, the classes sexually arousing/exciting?
18. What impact does the instructor have on your feelings about yourself or your body?
 - How is she encouraging or discouraging?
19. How open would you be to trying other sexual dance classes (such as striptease, seductive dance etc.)?

Outside the Class

20. (If applicable) How do you think your partner perceives the classes?
 - How does s/he feel about you taking pole-dancing lessons?
 - Would you say s/he is encouraging or discouraging?
 - Can you tell me how often you do a routine for your partner?
 - What is your motivation for performing the routines for him/her?
21. Do you ever talk about your pole-dancing classes with other people outside of the class? If so, who do you talk with and what do you talk about?
22. How (if ever) do you use the skills you learn in class, outside of class?
 - What is going through your mind as you exercise these skills?
23. What kind of emphasis do you think society places on women to be sexy?
 - How is pole-dancing related to this, or if you see it as unrelated, how so?

Conclusion

24. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the classes?
 - Is there any other important information I should know?

APPENDIX D

Focus Group Guide

The Goal of this Focus group is to:

- Understand why women choose these classes over other forms of exercise
- Understand women's perceptions of the classes
- Understand how the classes affect women's sexual identity

1. I would like to begin by going around the circle and have everyone introduce themselves, and tell us how you became interested in pole-dancing classes?
2. What do you think people find to be the best part of the pole-dancing classes? (or what are your favourite parts?)
3. Why do you think people choose to take pole-dancing classes over other forms of exercise, for example, a regular dance classes?
4. How do you think women who have never taken the classes perceive pole-dancing? How accurate are their perceptions?
5. How do you think men perceive pole-dancing classes? How accurate are their perceptions?
6. How would you feel if there were men in the classes?
7. How sexually liberated do you think Canadian women are in general? (Please explain). On the other hand, how sexually oppressed do you feel Canadian women are today? (Please explain)
8. Online, some people have argued that pole-dancing classes are liberating and sexually empowering while others say it is degrading and an exploitation of women's bodies. How accurate are these arguments? Which is more true and why?
9. How do women use the skills they learn in pole-dancing classes outside of the classroom?
10. How much of a focus is there on looking and acting sexy during the dance classes?
 - Does it seem very important?
 - Is it something the teacher brings up a lot?
11. What kind of atmosphere does the dance teacher try to create during class?
12. How would you describe the role of the instructor?
 - How does she interact with the class?
 - How does she encourage you?

13. In what ways, if any, does the instructor bring out the sexual aspects of pole dancing?
- How does her clothing and language make the classes more or less sexual?
14. Would you ever consider teaching a pole-dancing class (assuming you have the qualifications)? Why or why not?
15. Is there anything else anyone would like to share or discuss regarding pole-dancing classes?

Thank you very much for participating!