

If the Stiletto Fits: A Discursive Analysis of the Adoption and Normalization of Recreational Pole Dancing

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Keeping Our Daughters Off the Pole

My father and I used to joke about me growing up and pursuing a career as a pole dancer. Well, not exactly. You see, there was an inconspicuous white building down the road from the home in which I grew up which was labeled with the words, “Zebra Club.” As a kindergartener, I was filled with questions about the mini zoo which my mother refused to acknowledge the existence of. I took these questions to my father, who admitted to me that the Zebra Club was not home to zebras at all. Unsurprisingly, this intel only piqued my curiosity and resulted in me begging my dad to bring me to the human zoo every day after school. Following an incident involving our dining room table, wild dance moves, and a naked five-year-old Taylor, my dad explained that we could never venture inside the club, but we *could* pretend we were there every time we drove past. This resulted in us singing “zebra club zebra club” and performing iconic go-go dancer moves, such as the monkey, every morning and afternoon for the remaining years we lived in that house.

Fathers do not want to envision their little girls as they gaze upon the erotic dancer executing the superman during their weekly “business meeting,” but what is everyone else’s excuse? As an informed, global citizen, I am well aware of the commonly held beliefs surrounding the performance of pole dancing in strip clubs: that occupational pole dancers are coerced into accepting their position or that the sole reason women continue to work in strip clubs is the paycheck. Many opponents of traditional pole dancing argue that coerced commodification leads to the objectification of the dancers, which is demeaning.

In addition to the act of pole dancing itself, poling opponents view the setting in which it occurs, strip clubs, as being extremely problematic. Strip clubs are thought of as a breeding ground for human trafficking, partly because most people cannot begin to imagine why a woman would ever *willingly* engage in this occupation, but also because of the clandestine nature of strip clubs, which promotes the allegation that strip clubs are a hotbed for criminal activity. Overall, it is thought that the activities which occur within the club promote values which do not adhere to the status quo. When these clubs are an accepted aspect of a community, these bad values are, in turn, imparted to young people.

But what if pole dancing’s primary purpose was no longer to sexually arouse men? Would pole dancing suddenly become acceptable? What if men were excluded from this practice entirely? What would pole dancing become if it ended the commodification of women, occurred in a non-strip club setting, and participation were never coerced? Take traditional pole dancing, eliminate

all of the men, replace the strip clubs with yoga studios, swap the dress code of leather tops and lace thongs for sports bras and breathable spandex, and create a sweat-inducing routine, in lieu of a boner-inducing one. The resulting activity is recreational pole dancing.

A House Divided

Perhaps it was my previous fascination with the Zebra Club which incited me to enroll in a recreational pole dancing class this past October, or maybe it was simply the allure of being able to partake in such a controversial activity as a means of academic research. Enrolling in the class was also an excuse to learn a skill which I had only heard about.

When I revealed to my classmates, coworkers, friends, and family that I had chosen to write a research essay on pole dancing, most were initially taken aback, yet amused, while others were horrified at my audacity to choose such a vulgar topic for an academic essay. My mother even told me that it “would not be possible” to write such a paper through a scholarly lens. Upon immediately clarifying that I was, in fact, researching pole dancing *fitness* classes, also known as recreational pole dancing, or poling, as opposed to *traditional* pole dancing, also referred to as occupational pole dancing, people’s reactions tended to drastically change. Common responses to my clarification included, “I thought you meant the *other* kind of pole dancing,” “that’s a totally different story,” and “I always wanted to learn how to do that, it looks so sexy! Apparently it’s a really good workout, too.” But when I asked my friends and family to *identify* the primary difference(s), their responses were unanimous; everyone resolutely labeled traditional pole dancing as demeaning and objectifying. Though they all agreed that recreational poling is a socially acceptable practice for women to participate in, no one could confidently pinpoint which aspects make it so.

After participating in a poling class, I immediately agreed with the belief that traditional pole dancing and recreational pole dancing are “totally different stories.” That said, the Internet is home to angry blogs and ranting articles of numerous poling adversaries, the majority of whom argue that poling is no different from traditional pole dancing, or at least not different enough to deem one a social menace and the other socially acceptable (Deuce).

One thing both sides of the house agree upon is the fact that occupational pole dancing demeans and objectifies women. If gender equality¹ is promoted by a majority in the status quo, which is arguably the case in places such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, the four societies which are examined by the vast majority of recreational pole dancing researchers, then occupational pole dancing is a hindrance to the gender equality movement. So if recreational pole dancing’s adversaries are arguing that poling is not a large enough deviation from occupational pole dancing to deem it socially acceptable within the status quo, then poling’s supporters must be able to distinguish between the two forms of pole dancing by citing poling’s specific deviations from traditional pole dancing.

The Apple Never Falls Far From the Tree...Unless it’s Windy

Though the location of the first recreational pole dancing studio is uncertain, societies around the world began to embrace recreational pole dancing in the early 2000s, despite the fact that it

originated from an occupation which is widely regarded as degrading and reprehensible (Owen 84). The mass espousal of poling occurred with little regard to the societal implications of normalizing this activity while *simultaneously* continuing to reject its raunch culture origins, which leaves poling vulnerable to criticism from opponents of traditional pole dancing. While some people believe that recreational pole dancing helps to liberate women from the patriarchal societies in which they live, others assert that poling directly harms the gender equality movement.

In order to justify the *rejection* of one and concurrent *exaltation* of the other, societies which have normalized poling in the status quo necessitate the ability to identify ample distinctions between *occupation* and *recreational* pole dancing. If substantial differences cannot be identified, then the emergence of the poling industry will be stymied by its opponents on the grounds of gaping logical discrepancies. Operating under the assumption that occupational pole dancing will continue to be abhorred in the status quo, adversaries of recreational pole dancing commonly build their cases around these inconsistencies. This is why societies which have welcomed poling in the status quo must decide, and be able to defend, which it does for the movement – help or hinder. The inability to avoid inconsistencies will ultimately result in either the cessation of the poling industry or the regression of the gender equality movement.

After conducting a thorough investigation of the arguments for and against the practice of recreational pole dancing, from both the global academic community and general population, I am convinced that poling helps to *further* the objectives of the gender equality movement. Recreational pole dancing achieves this by taking occupational pole dancing, which has historically been used as a means of objectifying and commodifying women, and altering this activity in ways which foster female liberation and self-empowerment. This is primarily achieved through shifting the objectives of pole dancing (Donaghue et al. 446), de-commodifying female participants (Whitehead and Kurz 235), and drastically altering traditional pole dancing's setting and spectators (Whitehead and Kurz 233).

The Best Way for a Flirty Girl to Get Fit

The poling industry has worked hard to establish a distinction between their fitness routines and the performances of women who participate in pole dancing professionally. Analyzing the content of the promotional websites of poling studios and the instructional videos of poling trainers is the most obvious way to analyze the poling industry's intended image projection. Whether these websites and videos choose to focus on the self-confidence boosting nature of poling, the entertaining and enjoyable nature of the activity, or the rigor of the workout, the majority do not acknowledge the occupation from which poling originated, and only a handful choose to highlight the *sensual* side of poling.

Tracy Gray, co-founder/owner of Arcadia Fitness, Canada's first recreational pole dancing studio, quit her job as a branch manager at the Bank of Montreal in order to dedicate all of her time to strengthening and expanding her studio because she believed in the power of poling to restore a woman's self-confidence (Halloway 1). In the first paragraph of Arcadia's website's FAQ page, Gray states that "women today are striving for authenticity... [at Arcadia Fitness] we understand

that a woman's sensuality is a beautiful part of who she is and what she brings to this world." Gray acknowledges that poling includes aspects of a woman's sensuality, though she strays from harping on this poling element, and instead goes on to say that Arcadia Fitness helps to "teach women to unapologetically love their bodies and themselves." Also on the FAQ page, Gray addresses the frequent concern of prospective students that the class will be too difficult or overly sensual. Arcadia's reaction to such concerns is an explanation and reassurance that in beginner classes, "you will learn to shift & sway your hips as you walk [and] how to take the time to transition between stretches by running your hand over your hips & embracing the curves of your body." As is made clear through these official responses to FAQs, as well as the rest of their promotional website, Arcadia Fitness has chosen to focus on the aspects of poling that can improve a woman's self-esteem, in addition to attaining a toned body.

As Donaghue, Kurz and Whitehead describe in their analysis of the promotional websites of various Australian poling studios, most poling studios avoid direct acknowledgment of poling's origins, and instead choose to focus on the fitness aspect of the activity (Donaghue et al. 445). In their groundbreaking empirical research paper, "'Empowerment' and the Pole: A Discursive Investigation of the Reinvention of Pole Dancing as a Recreation Activity," Whitehead and Kurtz interviewed twenty randomly selected women throughout Australia, all of whom had taken, or were presently taking, pole dancing fitness courses. Most of the women used the fact that recreational pole dancing is a *fun* way to get fit as a means of "negating, shutting-down, or side-stepping potential accusations that [poling is a degrading activity]" (Whitehead and Kurtz 233).

Flirty Girl Fitness, an instructional pole dancing fitness video series, released a YouTube commercial in 2009 which opens with the words "long, lean, tight [and] beautiful" flashing across the screen. The commercial then describes "the world's sexiest dance moves" and the "fun, fat-burning, guaranteed results" of the featured routine. The announcer states the "secret is the flirtatiously fun dance progressions, designed to flatten your abs, thin hips and thighs, plus lift and firm your booty, all while you are just having fun moving and dancing to the music!" Though the product being advertised is an instructional video and accompanying pole, an actual pole has yet to be shown. This is also the first time that the word "flirtatious" is used in the advertisement, thus establishing an association between flirtation and pole dancing. The commercial does not further the association between the fitness routine and pole dancing – or pole dancing and flirtation – until the pitch. The announcer enthusiastically exclaims that this DVD features "super sexy fat burning routines from your favorite music videos" and if you buy immediately, Flirty Girl Fitness will send you a bonus DVD, which includes a "flirtatiously fun chair dance!" The commercial offers a bonus DVD which features a lap dance routine, but purposefully markets it as a "fun chair dance," just as the pole dancing routine is never referred to as a pole dancing routine. The focus of this commercial is the testimonies of women who experienced weight loss following their participation in the Flirty Girl Fitness program. By separating the subject of the instruction video from the traditional purpose of pole dancing and spending the majority of the airtime discussing weight loss, the advertisement shifts the focus from pole dancing. This shift in attention, combined with the fact that the weight loss testimonies came from "average," "normal" looking women, as opposed to hyper-sexualized erotic dancers or porn stars, works to normalize the video's content and make it socially acceptable for average women to purchase the product without feeling trashy or whorish.

Sex Sells

The second central distinction between occupational and recreational pole dancing is the commodification of women. The lack of monetary exchange from consumer to audience is critical in distinguishing between the two forms of pole dancing. In poling, there *is* a monetary exchange, but it occurs between the poling students and their teachers, who are almost always female. After examining the promotional websites of dozens of poling studios and scouring the papers of numerous scholars, I did not come across a single example of a poling studio which allows males to participate or teach in the same classroom as female polers. This is not to say that female students cannot be objectified by female instructors, but rather that the receivers of the monetary compensation are teaching skills, not performing with the intention of sexually arousing, or being aroused by, their students. By eliminating the presence of males and shifting the receiver of payment to female instructors, the poling industry has further distanced itself from its raunchy origins.

According to Whitehead and Kurtz's focus groups, many women believe that the degrading aspect of traditional pole dancing stems from the fact that women are getting *paid* to perform, as if to imply that the monetary incentive eliminated the possibility that professional pole dancers engage in this activity of their own free will (Whitehead and Kurtz 235). Poling combats this argument by eliminating payment to the woman on the pole.

What Happens in the Studio, Stays in the Studio

Those opposed to the practice of occupational pole dancing would likely point to the aroused male consumer as the industry's foremost problematic element. Alternatively, recreational pole dancing takes place in studios which resemble those of childhood ballet classes. According to Whitehead and Katz's focus group research, this change in venue makes all the difference for many women (Whitehead and Kurtz 233). The interviewed women essentially believe that pole dancing is "an inherently neutral activity that can be seen as empowering or disempowering, as a function of the specific context of its enactment" (233). If it is not the act of pole dancing, but rather the setting of the activity which can be constructed as either empowering or disempowering, then how can recreational pole dancing, which takes place in a yoga studio, possibly be construed as inherently degrading? And if pole dancing only gains meaning through context, then what is the meaning of recreational pole dancing? Fitness.

The second part of this distinction concerns the audience. I initially did not want to participate in a poling class, but was denied entrance to a class if my sole purpose was to observe. Moreover, men can neither observe nor participate in poling classes. By eliminating the audience that is viewed as the perpetrators of the objectification of female pole dancers, poling has eliminated one of the largest problems of this industry. A woman can *choose* whether or not she wishes to enroll in a class, just as she can *choose* whether or not she wishes to exhibit her skills for an audience. But this exhibition is beyond the scope of the class itself and is not facilitated by studios.

Poling's adversaries assert that even though polers are not being paid, they are still engaging in an activity which has historically been used to oppress women; therefore poling participants are hindering the fight for gender equality by transitive property. The opposition believes that the two activities aren't different enough to establish one as "wrong" and degrading and the other as acceptable, even normal, for the average woman to participate in. After reviewing testimonies of pole dancers, analyzing the work of various scholars in a variety of related fields and attending poling classes myself, I believe that the opposition is correct; the differences between pole dancing as an occupation and recreational activity are not substantial enough to normalize one and not the other. But I also contend that poling is not a hindrance to the gender equality movement. After reexamining the reasons why the status quo rejects occupational pole dancing, I have begun to think that perhaps societies ought to normalize recreational *and* occupational pole dancing for the same reasons that they should continue to promote poling.

Power of the Pussy

Most poling supporters believe the acceptance of recreational pole dancing as the status quo allows for the simultaneous rejection of occupational pole dancing. On the other hand, poling adversaries argue that rejection of occupational pole dancing would necessitate the simultaneous rejection of recreational pole dancing. I assert that the best option is to adopt and normalize both.

Several feminist writers, such as Kathy Whitehead and Ngaire Donaghue, have described participation in recreational pole dancing, and similar raunch culture activities, as the ultimate form of liberation. The radical notion rests on the concept of self-objectification, which asserts that in order to possess full control over her own body and personhood, a person must have the ability to fully exercise her agency (Whitehead and Kurtz 226; Donaghue et al. 445). A truly liberated woman not only has the ability to choose *not* to engage in pole dancing, but also has the ability to participate in either recreational *or* occupational pole dancing, no matter her beliefs surrounding pole dancing's effect on the gender equality movement. The concept of a woman *choosing* to be objectified only seems ridiculous to those who would never choose this for themselves. In a truly equal world, everyone would have the ability to freely choose whether or not they are objectified, regardless of gender.

When a woman attends a poling class in order to learn moves solely for her partner's benefit (as in, attendance was coerced), she has been stripped of her agency. If a woman attends classes because she has been told that she isn't "sexy enough," or has been made to feel that way, then there is a problem. But true liberation is defined by agency, and that includes a woman's ability to *choose* a career in pole dancing, just as she can *choose* to enroll in a poling class. What women choose do with their skills beyond the studio or stage is beyond the scope of the act of pole dancing itself and it is presumptuous to assert that *all* female pole dancers and polers are not acting of their own free will.

The opposition argues that whether a woman is practicing pole dancing as a means of fitness, simply to have a laugh with friends, or to perform in a strip club for a predominantly male audience, the only way she can be truly empowered is when there is an absence of monetary incentive. I

reject these arguments because, by this logic, any activity which has a monetary incentive cannot be entered into by a person's own free will. This would mean that any person who plays the lottery, competes in professional sports, or works any type of paying job, is doing so under duress because the prospect of earning money has stripped them of their free will.

All of the opposition's objections to poling stem from the belief that the entire adult entertainment industry, which encompasses occupational pole dancing, is objectifying and cannot possibly be empowering. The opposition is operating under the assumption that the moment a woman begins to work at a strip club her agency is stripped away, thus making it impossible for her to be liberated. And because empowerment stems from liberation, a pole dancer cannot possibly be furthering the gender equality movement. But this assumption, which is the basis for the dissenters' entire case against occupational pole dancing, is not inherently true. Not *all* pole dancers were coerced into dancing at a strip club and not *all* pole dancers are mistreated by their bosses or clients.

¹For the purpose of this analysis, I am defining the gender equality movement as the efforts of individuals, both male and female, to promote the elimination of gender-based discrimination in all societal sectors.

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