

# Turn-Ons for Money

## Interactional Strategies of the Table Dancer

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*In many ways, sexuality is a commodity just like any other that is bought and sold in a marketplace. It has value, it can be exchanged, and its exchange invokes distinct forms of social organization. But sexuality is unique because it is so strongly regulated as to time, place, content, and context. Paradoxically, sex also is in tremendous demand, particularly among men who are taught that an insatiable sexual appetite is culturally acceptable. Scarce resources in high demand invariably spawn markets to remove that scarcity. Table dancing, or "stripping," has emerged in part for this reason.*

*Women take off their clothes for money; the men who pay them-and they are almost always men-receive physical, erotic, emotional, and especially sexual gratification in return. The exchange is based on principle of "counterfeit intimacy" dancers act as if they are sexually interested, but their interest is only as deep as the pockets of those from whom they hope to secure tips.*

*Ronai and Ellis explore the interactional strategies that table dancers use to cultivate counterfeit intimacy-how they develop a "perceptual shorthand" (Skolnick 1966) to distinguish good tippers from bad ones, how they identify men who might be too sexually forward or expect too much, and how they single out men who might consume too much of their attention. Indeed, Ronai and Ellis observe that some men enter such clubs more in search of a girlfriend or a wife than a striptease. Table dancers generally want no part of such persons and will "lead them on" to secure gifts, money, and other material rewards, after which the man's advances are politely declined.*

*Significantly, the authors paint a picture of empowerment in a disempowering context. Stripping for money is not a high-status profession (in most cases), but it is a significant source of material rewards nonetheless, rewards realistically available in few other female vocations. Patriarchal oppression is ultimately responsible for this state of affairs, but Ronai and Ellis contend that table dancers come out ahead in the end: Gender becomes a resource with which to beat men at their own game. Dancers emerge as freewheeling entrepreneurs who carve out their own autonomous niche in an otherwise oppressive context, using expressive deviance and microstrategies of resistance to exploit men for money, goods, and services, even as they entice their male targets to believe that the men actually are in control.*

*She swayed from side to side above him, her hands on his shoulders, her knee brushing gently against the bulge in his pants. He looked up at the bottom of her breasts, close enough to touch, but subtly forbidden. His breath came in ever shorter gasps.*

This is the world of the table dancer-a world where women exchange titillating dances for money. Our study looks at the dynamic processes of interaction that occur in the exchange. Previous studies (Carey et al., 1974; Gonos, 1976; McCaghy and Skipper, 1969, 1972; Salutin, 1971; Skipper and McCaghy, 1970, 1971) have concentrated on "burlesque" or "go-go" dancers, sometimes referring to them more generally as stripteasers. Dancers' interactions with customers were restricted, for the most part, to the stage setting where they danced and received money from customers. Because investigators in these studies occupied positions as researchers or researchers as customers, and relied to a large extent on survey and interview techniques, this work led to a static description of this occupation.

Boles and Garbin (1974) have looked at customer-stripper interaction in a setting where strippers

sold drinks in addition to performing stage acts. Although they described interaction, they interpreted it in terms of norms, club motif, and customer goals. They found that the conflict between customers' goals and strippers' goals resulted in "counterfeit intimacy" (Foote, 1954), a situation in which an aura of intimacy masked mutually exploitative interactions.

Although counterfeit intimacy is a structural reality in such contexts, this description created another model of behavior that ignored the interactive, dynamic nature of the exchanges and set up in its place stiff caricatures behaving in an unbending, cardboard manner. As actors get caught up in dialogue, they exchange symbols, extract meanings, and modify expectations of what goals they can reasonably expect to reach. Interaction has a tentative quality (Blumer, 1969; Turner, 1962); goals are in a constant state of flux.

The nature of selling and performing table dances that we describe yields more opportunity for interaction between customer and dancer than in previous studies. A table dancer must be a charming and sexy companion, keep the customer interested and turned on, make him feel special, and be a good reader of character and a successful salesperson; at the same time, she must deal with her own negative feelings about the customer or herself, negotiate limits, and then keep him under control to avoid getting fired by management.

Much of the early research literature has described stripping as a deviant occupation. Later, Prus and Irini (1980) looked at stripping as conforming to the norms of a bar subculture. Demystifying this "deviant" activity even further, we show that bargaining strategies in the bar actually mirror "respectable" negotiation in mainstream culture.

We begin by discussing the methods we used to elicit indepth understanding of strategies used by table dancers. After describing the dance club setting, we turn to a description and analysis of particular tactics used on the stage, at the tables between stage acts, and then during the table dances in the pits.

## Methods

Our study approaches stripping from the point of view of dancers and the dancer as researcher, the people with the most access to the thoughts, feelings, and strategies of exotic dancers. Dancers concentrate on manipulating men as they pursue money in exchange for a turn-on. In order for their strategies to work, they must understand and coordinate them with the games of men.

Our information comes primarily from the experiences of the first author who danced during 1984 and 1985 to pay her way through school. As a "complete-member-researcher" (Adler and Adler, 1987), she conducted opportunistic research (Riemer, 1977), that is, she studied a setting in which she was already a member. She interviewed dancers to find out how and why they began this occupation and kept a journal of events that happened while dancing. Later, she reconstructed, in chronological field notes, a retrospective account of her own dancing history, paying special attention to strategies, emotion work, and identity issues. She used "systematic sociological introspection" (Ellis, forthcoming) to put herself mentally and emotionally back into her experiences and record what she remembered (see Bulmer's, 1982, concept of "retrospective participant observation").

In May 1987, the first author danced in one strip bar for the explicit purpose of gathering data for a master's thesis, chaired by the second author. With approval of bar management, but without the knowledge of other dancers, she acted in the dual capacity of researcher and dancer. This time her primary identity was that of researcher, although as a complete member-researcher she attempted to "become the phenomenon" (Adler and Adler, 1987; Jorgensen, 1989; Mehan and Wood, 1975). When she danced, she took on the identity of a dancer, suffered identity conflicts similar to those she had experienced during earlier dancing, and,

shared a common set of experiences and feelings with other dancers. She kept field notes of events, which were buttressed by "interactive introspection" (Ellis, 1988), whereas the second author talked her through her experiences, probing at and recording her feelings and thoughts. She conducted informal interviews in the dressing room with dancers and on the floor with customers. Sometimes she revealed her dual role to customers as a strategy to keep them interested in spending more money and to get them to introspect about their own motives for being in the bar.

Because this article is concerned with describing dancers' subtle manipulation strategies that occurred semiprivately, we pulled much of our material from episodes engaged in by the first author, in which process was most easily observed. Because we believe that sociologists should acknowledge

the role of their own introspection in their research (Ellis, forthcoming), the first author reveals which of the experiences in the article are hers. Throughout this article, we refer to the first author by her dancer name, Sabrina.

We realize the bias inherent in using introspection primarily from one source. For example, Sabrina, more than most dancers, tended to attract customers interested in mental stimulation as well as physical turnon. Yet we could not have gained an in-depth understanding of intimate exchange, for example during table dances, in any other way. To understand this bias, we compared Sabrina's strategies and experiences with those of other dancers we observed and other bar participants with whom we talked. Later in 1987, we conducted interviews with four strippers, eight customers, four managers, three bar owners, and a law officer. This article then uses a triangulated method (Denzin, 1978; Webb et al., 1965) to present typical responses from field work and indepth ones from current and retrospective introspection.

## Setting

An exotic dance club located in the Tampa Bay area of Florida provided the setting for this study. Since liquor was served, full nudity was prohibited by state law. Appearing individually in full costume on stage, each stripper gradually removed her clothing during a dance routine. By the end of the act, the dancer wore pasties that concealed her nipples and panties that covered genitals, pubic hair, and the cheeks of her derriere. Men handed out tips to dancers during performances.

Between acts, dancers strolled around the floor, making themselves available to spend time with customers. They made money if customers bought them drinks. However, the main attraction and source of income irr this bar was the table dance. A dancer "sold" dances in a complicated negotiation process through which she convinced the client that he was turned on to her and/or that she was turned on to him. At the same time, she controlled the situation so that she was not caught disobeying "house" rules, many of which corresponded to what county authorities considered illegal. For example, since "charging" for a table dance was considered soliciting, the dancer, using word games similar to those used by the masseuse studied by Rasmussen and Kuhn (1976), suggested that there was "generally a contribution of \$5."

After a dancer successfully sold a dance, she led her customer to one of the two elevated corners of the bar, known generically as the "The Pit," and affectionately nicknamed by customers as "Horny Holler" and "The Passion Pit." Railings and dim lights offered an artificial boundary between this area and the rest of the bar. Clothed in a bralike top and full panties or other revealing costume, the dancer leaned over a seated patron, her legs inside his, and swayed suggestively in rhythm to the music playing in the bar. Theoretically, customers were allowed to touch only the hips, waist, back, and outside of a dancer's legs. Many men tried and some succeeded in doing more. Disobeying rules prohibiting direct sexual stimulation or touching meant more money for dancers, but it also meant risking that management might reprimand them or that a "customer" would turn out to be an undercover officer or a representative looking for infractions on behalf of club management.

## Elements of Strategy

### On the Stage

A dancer used symbols that appealed to her audience. At the same time, these symbols distanced her from customers and denoted that the stage was a performance frame (Goffman, 1974; Mullen, 1985). Her appearance, eye contact, manner, and choice of music made up her main expressive equipment.

Having a "centerfold" figure was an obvious asset for dancers. But the best looking woman did not always make the most money. A dancer's presentation of self was also a crucial factor in a customer's decision to tip her. Similar to strippers described by Gonos (1976) and Robboy (1985), women often portrayed exaggerated stereotypes through their clothing style and movement. For instance, a "vamp style" dancer wore suggestive street clothing such as a leather micro-mini skirt, spike-heeled boots, and a halter-style top while strutting around the stage displaying overt sexual mannerisms such as "flushing" (opening her shirt to reveal her pasty-clad breasts). Others had a "gimmick." For example,

one woman was an acrobat; another stood on her head while twirling her large breasts. In contrast, a more sensual dancer dressed in sexy bedroom clothing such as a corset and garters or a teddy, and displayed subtle sensual behavior such as slow undulation of the hips.

A dancer chose symbols that drew a certain type of customer to her. Dressing the part of the vamp, for example, reflected an extroverted attitude that attracted customers out to have a good time. Overtly sexual dancers were more likely to perform sexual favors in the bar or meet a man for sex outside the bar. The sensual presentation of self attracted customers who were interested in a "serious," private interaction. Customers interpreted each dancer's symbols as cues to what it might be like to interact with her or, specifically, to have sex with her. For example, Tim, a regular customer, discussed Samantha, a sensual dancer: "She is nothing to look at. God, she's only twenty-six, and we both know she looks like forty. But the way she moves, man! She promises the moon stars in bed."

Most dancers used eye contact to "feel out" a patron. Managing frequent eye contact while dancing on stage usually meant a tip for the dancer and made a customer feel as if a dancer was specifically interested **in** him.

A dancer's first close contact with a customer often occurred while accepting a tip. During the exchange, the dancer formed impressions about how the customer was reacting to her, and the customer decided whether he was attracted to the woman. The customer stood at the side of the stage holding currency, which signaled the dancer that he wanted to tip her. The dancer greeted him while accepting the tip in her garter and said "thanks," perhaps giving him a "special" look.

At this point, a dancer might choose from several courses of action, such as "coming on" to a customer, doting on a customer, and using humor. When dancers "came on" to customers, they grinned, wiggled their breasts, spread their legs, struck their buttocks, suggestively sucked their fingers, talked dirty, or French kissed.

Others, such as the sensual dancer, doted on a customer for a few seconds. She caressed his arm, wrapped her arms around his neck, and smiled while he tipped her. If she felt confident of his interest, typical comments she might make were: "I would love a chance to get to know you," or "I look forward to sitting with you," which meant accompanying him to his table after her stage performance.

Humor was an effective and safe tool for generating a good impression while accepting a tip on stage. Customers generally construed a funny statement made by a dancer as friendly and spontaneous. Often it made a nervous client more at ease. Sabrina noted lines she used: "What's a nice guy like you doing in a dump like this?" or "I bet you'd look better up here than I do." Familiar with the usual "acts" of dancers, such as coming on and showing phony interest, customers were pleased when they thought a woman had "dropped the routine." Often this meant only that she had staged a less frequently displayed one. A dancer had to be careful not to use the same line more than once on the same person, or let a customer overhear it being used on another man. No matter a customer's taste, he wanted a sincere performance.

Dick, a customer who was feeling jilted one evening, commented to Sabrina:

The thing with that chick, Dana, is that she makes a big deal out of you while she is onstage, but if you watch her real close, you notice she looks at everyone who tips her that way.

Another customer reported he did not like a dancer in the bar named Tammy because she was insincere:

She frenched me and told me to insert my dollar deeply (in her garter). Now I ain't stupid. I know a come on like that is a fake.

A dancer's music affected how a customer viewed her. This was reflected in Tim's comment about Jessica: "That girl has a great body, but every time I hear her music [heavy metal] I get the creeps thinking about what she must be like." While most women danced to top-40 music, some used other music to attract a tip from a particular kind of client. Mae, an older dancer in her late thirties, played country music and presented herself as a country woman. Bikers and bluecollar workers were loyal to Mae, expressing sentiments like: "She's the only real woman in the bar."

## **On the Floor**

Offstage, interaction was even more complex. Between stage performances, a dancer circulated

among customers and offered her company. Body language, expressions, and general appearance helped define each customer's interest in her and the difficulty of being with him. Once a dancer located an interested customer and introduced herself, or followed up on a contact made while performing on stage, she then had to convince him that he wanted to spend time with her. Ordinarily, her eventual goal was to sell a table dance.

## Choosing a Customer

The ideal customer had a pleasant disposition, was good looking, had time and money to spend, and was sitting at one of the tables on the floor. Most customers did not meet all these criteria. Dancers weighed these features for each customer and also compared them against the circumstances of the evening. Sabrina often asked herself: "What do I want more right now? Money or someone nonthreatening to sit with?" Her answer was different depending upon time of night, how much money she had made already, and how she felt at the moment. Other dancers made the same calculations. For example, three hours before the bar closed one night, Naomi said, "I know this guy I'm sitting with doesn't have a lot of money, but I've made my hundred for the night so I can afford to take it easy." Another time, Vicky said,

God! I know I should be out there hustling instead of drinking with Jim, but I just can't get into it. I guess I'll just get fucked-up and blow it off today.  
Darcy displayed a more typical attitude,

It's twelve thirty already and I haven't made shit! This guy I'm sitting with better cough it up or I'm taking off.

Negotiations with oneself and with the customer were always in process. Throughout the interaction, each participant tried to ascertain what she or he was willing to give and how much could be acquired from the other.

Attractive customers appeared, at first, more appealing. They were pleasant to look at and the dancer could pretend to be on a date while sitting with them. But these men seemed to know they were more desirable than others in the bar and were more likely to bargain with those resources. The end result was that the dancer spent most of the interaction trying to convince the customer to spend money while he tried to persuade her to go out on a date.

When Sabrina was new to the profession, she decided one evening to sit with a good looking, blonde-haired man. She reported the following:

I started talking to him and eventually led the conversation to the point where I asked, "Would you care for a table dance?"

"Later," he replied.

I continued to make small talk. "Do you come in here often?"

"I stop in once every few months," he responded.

For the next 15 minutes we covered various topics of conversation such as his job and my schooling. Then I asked him again, "Do you want a table dance?"

"Are you going to go to 'le Bistro' with me tomorrow night?"

"I'll think about it," I responded, in hopes of getting a table dance out of him before I turned him down. "Do you want that table dance?"

"Will you go out with me?" he insisted.

"I'm still considering it," I lied. We volleyed back and forth for 30 minutes. Finally, he told me, "I

don't want a dance. I just want to know if you will go out with me."

This customer was aware that Sabrina would not stay with him unless she thought he might want a dance. Both used strategies and gambled time hoping one would give in to the other's goals. Each lost a bet.

Sometimes customers who were old, heavy, unattractive, or otherwise weak in social resources came into the bar. Many women avoided these men, while others, like Sabrina, realized unattractive men were eager for company and tended to treat a dancer better and spend more money than their more attractive competitors would. With the right strategies, dancers could control these men. For example, a dancer might corner a customer into treating her as he would his granddaughter by acting polite and addressing him as "sir." This insinuated that, of course, he would never act inappropriately. Some accepted the role to such an extent that they acted like grandfathers. One man told Scarlet that she was cute, tweaked her cheek, and compared her to his granddaughter.

When scanning the bar and deciding whom to approach first, a dancer tried to find the man who appeared to have the most money. Logically, the better a customer was dressed, the more likely he was to have money. However, he also had a higher probability of already being in the company of another dancer.

Making sure a customer was not spoken for by another dancer was important. It was considered dangerous (one could get into an argument) and rude to sit with another dancer's customer. Some regular customers, for instance, visited the bar to see particular dancers. These customers often turned down another dancer's offer of company by saying they were "waiting for someone." When a dancer entered the bar, she immediately scanned the room, paying particular attention to which women were seated with which customers. If she noticed later that a woman had left a table for a long period of time, she then asked her if it was okay to sit with that customer. This served the dual purpose of following tacit rules (i.e., being polite) and gave the dancer an opportunity to gather information about the customer in question.

Sabrina was warned about a customer in this manner. Upon asking Debbie if she was finished with "the old man in the corner wearing a hat," Debbie replied, "Sure, you can have him. That's 'Merv the perv.' He has lots of money, but he'll want to stick his finger up your asshole for twenty bucks a feel."

A dancer might ignore all other customers to sit with one of her "regulars." When two or more of her regulars were in the bar, she had to juggle them, first sitting with one and then the other. It was difficult to table dance for both of them and still portray "special attachment." Eventually, she had to offer an account (Scott and Lyman, 1968) to one of them. One excuse was to appeal to the principle of fairness: "I really want to be with you, but he came in first and now I have to be with him." Or she might appeal to higher loyalties (Sykes and Matza, 1957), insinuating that the decision was out of her control: "I have to go sit with another customer now. My bosses know I avoid him and they're watching me."

Time in the bar correlated with decreased spending. If a customer had been spending for a while, it was fair to assume that he would run out of money or would soon decide to leave, that is, unless he was intoxicated and freely using a credit card. Dancers in this situation risked having to deal with and control a problematic person who did not remember or pay for the correct number of dances purchased. On the other hand, a dancer might convince a drunk credit card customer to pay for more dances than he actually bought.

A customer's location in the bar indicated his attitude toward female company. In this club, sitting at the bar meant little interest in interacting with dancers. Patrons near the stage wanted to see the show. Being seated at one of the tables in the floor area was conducive to interaction with dancers and to inquiries about table dances.

## At the Tables

Once a customer accepted an offer of company, a dancer sat with him and introduced herself. Her overall goal remained fairly consistent—money with no hassle. Many women also enjoyed the attention they received and got an exhibitionist thrill out of being desired and told how beautiful they were. Others believed the compliments were just part of the game. Some liked the feeling of conquering and being in control. Others felt degraded and out of control.

The customer's manifest goal was impersonal, sexual turnons for money; a close examination showed other objectives that shadowboxed with and sometimes transcended this more obvious goal. Although most customers initially focused on the pursuit of sex in or outside the bar, they also came looking for a party, to feel good about themselves, to find a friend or companion, or to develop a relationship. A dancer's strategies varied depending on her personality and her perception of the customer.

Some women said nothing. A customer who wanted passive indifference from an attractive female willing to turn him on liked this approach. Sex, not conversation, was his goal. The dancer did not have to initiate ac

activity nor get to know the customer. Her role was to respond as a sexual nonperson by allowing him to kiss and fondle her body. Verbal interaction potentially endangered the continuance of the exchange.

Most customers wanted a dancer to interact with them. Seduction rhetoric (Rasmussen and Kuhn, 1976) became part of the dancer's sexual foreplay before the table dance as well as a vehicle for the customer to persuade the dancer to see him outside the bar. By talking "dirty" and acting "like a whore"-for example, telling stories about kinky sex in her life outside the bar-a dancer could keep a customer "going," eager to buy the next dance, ready to believe the dancer might have sex with him later.

If a customer wanted a prostitute, he dropped hints such as, "Do you do work on the side?" or "Where does a guy go for a good time around here?" or "Do you date?" Sometimes he propositioned outright: "Will you go to bed with me for a hundred dollars?" The more blatant proposals told the dancer that the customer was not a police officer; all of the requests informed her he had money to spend and opened up the possibility of using strategies to extract it.

One strategy dancers used in this situation was to mislead a customer into thinking she might meet him later if he bought table dances from her now. From the first author:

Ted bought dances from me two at a time. After several of these, he asked, "Are you going to see me at the Holiday Inn to night?"

"Why should I?" I responded.

"Because I am new in town and have lots of money."

"I don't go out with strange men," I said.

"Well, why don't you get to know me then," he said. He bought two more dances, then asked, "Do you know me now?" I smiled at him. He continued, "Why don't you meet me after you're done working. What time do you get off?"

In an effort to shift the focus of the conversation, I said suggestively, "When do you get off?"

"I get off on you baby!" He exclaimed. "I'm in room 207. Will you be there?"

To keep him going while not committing myself, I said, "I don't know." We talked a while, and then he asked again. I replied, "I've never turned a trick in my life. I'm not sure I ever will."

"So we won't do it for money," he said. "Come see me tonight." He buys two more dances and we sit down again. I start the conversation first this time to keep him interested yet deter him from bringing up my meeting him. "Tell me, Ted, what is the kinkiest thing you have ever done in bed." This conversation kept us busy for a while, until, sixty dollars later, he asks, "Do I go to the bank machine or not?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"If you are going to see me tonight, I need to go to the teller. I'm out of money."

I had a big grin on my face and asked, "Will you be back here after the teller?"

"Probably not," he replied. "Too bad," I said.

"Would you see me if I bought more dances?" he asked. I was tempted to say maybe, but I thought at this point I was being too obvious.

"Probably not," I said.

He stood to leave. "You show up tonight at room 207 if you want. It was fun."

Similar to the strippers discussed by Prus and Irini (1980), a few women used the bar setting as a place to make contacts for their prostitution careers, while many more had sex occasionally outside the bar to augment their incomes. Before accepting an offer, a woman usually asked other dancers about the customer or spent time getting to know him. Interacting with him then gave her an opportunity to make money table dancing. Most women claimed they had sex "only for the money." A few, such as Sasha, seemed to enjoy sexual contact in and out of the bar. Sasha's enthusiasm-"I'm so horny, I want a cock tonight"-was deemed deviant by the other dancers, who ostracized her-usually avoided her and talked behind her back-f her overt enjoyment.

The customer who wanted a date outside the bar could be handled in a similar manner to the customer looking for a prostitute. Often a dancer conveyed the impression, "if :. only I knew you were safe" by saying: "You' could be Jack-the-Ripper," "You could be a cop," "It's not safe to date everyone you meet in here." Then she suggested interest by saying, "I need a chance to get to know you better." The logical way for a dancer to get to know the customer was for him to spend time and money buying drinks and table dances from her. Lured by the offer of expensive dinners or vacations, and sometimes attracted by a man she liked, most dancers occasionally accepted dates.

If customers were in the bar "to party" (to be entertained) in groups, such as bachelor parties, a dancer wasted no time on interaction. She asked immediately if they wanted a dance. These men interacted mostly with each other, requiring dancers to be lively and entertaining hostesses while treating them like sex objects. Often they commented on her body-her big tits, nice ass, or ugly face-as though she were not there. Party groups purchased dances with the same attitude and frequency as they bought rounds of drinks.

Most men who came to the bar seemed to want to find a friend or companion, or in some other way be treated as a special person. One of Sabrina's customers left the bar twice during an evening to change shirts, just to see if she recognized him when he returned. The best ploy in this situation was for the dancer to put on an honest front, altercasting (Weinstein and Deutschberger, 1963) her customer into the role of being special and "different" from other men. Most successful dancers were able to hold conversations with these men. Asking his name, where he lived, occupation, and what he did with his spare time provided initial interaction. Finding common ground helped conversation run smoothly. Asking questions at a leisurely pace, making comments, and showing interest both verbally and nonverbally afforded a semblance of credibility to the conversational process. This dialogue helped the dancer to "check out" (Ras mussen and Kuhn, 1976) the customer to make sure he was not a police officer, determine how much money he had to spend and which of her interactional strategies might make him willing to part with it. Giving the customer an opportunity to talk about himself and to demonstrate whatever expertise he had made him feel good about himself. A customer pleased with his presentation of self was more apt to spend money. Sabrina told this story:

In the field, I had a regular customer, Ray, who was a systems' analyst. I was shopping for a computer at the time, so I enlisted Ray's assistance. Ray had an opportunity to show off his expertise, and feel like he was helping. He turned-on to the contrast of seeing me as intellectual and a sex object.

The best way for a dancer to convince a customer that she found him appealing and unique was to find a likable characteristic about the customer and continually tell him how impressed she was with him and with that trait. For example, some men liked to be praised for their appearance, success, intelligence, sexual desirability, trustworthiness, or sensitivity. The dancer had to convey to him directly that she preferred his company to others in the bar, or indirectly through such statements as "You're not as vulgar as the rest of these guys in here"; "You're more intelligent than most men I meet in here"; "You're not just another one of these assholes," or "I appreciate your spending time with me. When I'm sitting with you I'm safe from those animals out there." The message was that because of his specialness, she could be "straight" with him, be who she really was, instead of putting on one of her usual acts.



This tactic worked best with customers the dancer liked and enjoyed talking to; otherwise, it was difficult to muster up and maintain the sincerity necessary for a believable performance. When this strategy worked, the dancer had close to total control of the interaction. Then the customer tried hard to meet the dancer's expectations, spending money and treating her like a date or friend to avoid disappointing her. If he

stopped spending money, the dancer might say, and sometimes mean:

I'll see you later. Don't get angry with me. I know you understand that I have to make money, although I would rather spend time with you. If I don't find any thing, I'll come back and visit.

Sometimes the customer responded by spending more money to keep the dancer around. If not, he was forced to "understand" her leaving because he and the dancer had an honest relationship and she had been "straight" with him about the nature of her job. This strategy was an effective way to cultivate regular customers.

Sometimes a dancer did not have anything in common with a customer. Over time, most dancers worked up routine questions to keep conversation flowing. Sabrina frequently used lines such as: "What do you look for in a woman?" "Why do you visit strip bars?" "What is your opinion of that dancer over there?" "I try," she said, "to get the customer to share something personal with me. I like for him to feel like there is something more solid than a salesperson-customer relationship."

Some regular customers acted as if they were involved in a long-term, serious relationship with a dancer. They bought her expensive gifts such as diamonds, minks, cars, and flowers. These customers seemed to forget the businesslike nature of the bar setting.

Dancers in these interactions appeared involved with the customers. However, most did not take the relationship outside the bar, since this would have cut off a source of income. But they tried to convince the men of their desire to leave the bar scene and be saved by them, even though it was impossible now. Sabrina, for example, had many offers from men who wanted to rescue her from the bar. She developed a routine to solicit this desire from men—it usually meant more money for her in the bar—but that allowed her to reject their proposals without causing anger. She explained:

I presented myself as attractive and intelligent, but helpless, trapped by circumstances. When they asked me to leave the bar, I told them I had to work to pay for school. When they suggested setting me up in a place of my own, I told them I was independent and wanted to do it on my own. This put them off, but kept them interested and earned their respect.

Mae, a dancer mentioned earlier, seemed to have a knack for cultivating these types of relations. Sabrina describes a discussion with Mae while sharing a ride home.

Mae had been given a mink coat that night by a customer and she had given it back to him.

Always intimidated by this woman, I took a moment to get up some nerve and finally asked, "Why did you give back the mink?" "I couldn't hock it for very much, and I won't use it here in Florida. I'd rather get money," she stated.

"How are you going to get money?" I asked. "I'll get more money from him by being the type of person who gives this stuff back than if I keep it. I have lots of customers who give me nicer stuff than that mink."

She spoke to the driver, "Hey, do you remember that necklace Tom gave me?"

The driver replied, "It's true, Mae can really get them going. That necklace was a grand, easy." "Did you keep the necklace?" I asked.

"Hell yes!" she responded.

Mae had a routine that could "really get them going." But she and other dancers, usually ally the older ones, who used this technique often, took some aspect of the relationship seriously. They saw these men as "options" or possibilities for a life change. On the other hand, they felt this was too good to be true, or were unsure about making the change because of other factors in their lives, such as a husband or children. Keeping the interaction going, yet not allowing it to take place outside the bar, meant they were able to have romance, feel appreciated, and, to some extent, have a relationship while they continued making money in their occupations. However, the occasional relationship that did work out in the bar kept everyone hoping. Sabrina, for example, met her husband there.

## Closing the Sale

A dancer rapidly closed a sale on a table dance to a man who wanted sexual favors **-in** ' the bar. But since these men often violate rules regarding touching and sexual stimulation, some dancers did not feel that they were worth the trouble. For example, one night Annette came into the dressing room and announced, "I just left this old geezer who wanted me to rub him off with my knee. I'm not into it. If someone else wants to, go for it."

The same problems existed after a quick sale to men in the bar for a party. In this situation, a dancer had to concentrate on not acting offended long enough to perform table dances and collect her money. For some dancers, the money was not worth the degradation. As a result, they avoided the bachelor parties.

The customer who wanted to be treated as special took more time. Questioning allowed time for the dancer to convince him that he wanted a table dance from her. It was important that she not appear pushy, yet she needed to determine quickly whether she could make money from this person. Would he buy table dances? Did he want to spend time getting to know a dancer or go directly to a dance? Answers to such questions guided the dancer in constructing her behavior toward the customer.

If a customer purchased a drink for a dancer, she then knew that he was interested enough to spend some time with her. Some customers, however, bought drinks for dancers but refused to purchase table dances, claiming table dances got them "worked up for nothing." If a customer acknowledged that right away, a dancer then had to make a decision about staying or leaving based on the availability of other moneymaking opportunities in the bar. If the action in the club was slow, she might stay with him since she made \$1 on every drink he bought for her. Regular customers were always good for a drink: "I'll go sit with Jim today," said Sharon. "At least I know he'll buy me a drink if nothing else." Often a dancer gave the waitress a secret signal indicating that **no** liquor should be put in her glass. The waitress brought the **drink in a special glass, placed** a dollar under the dancer's napkin and the drink on top of it.

Most women closed on a dance after the first drink had arrived and it was apparent that the customer liked her. If the customer said no, most dancers left fairly quickly. But in rare cases a customer paid \$50-\$100 for a dancer to sit with him for a while. This guaranteed the dancer money without trouble and bought the customer companionship. Customers who saw themselves in an involved relationship with a dancer generally rejected table dances in favor of company. When these customers bought dances they treated the dancer gently, barely touching her for fear of offending her.

Even when a dancer was not paid for her company, it was not always a good idea for her to leave immediately when a man refused a table dance. As a rare and novel routine, staying made the dancer appear sincere in her interest and less concerned about making money. Sabrina occasionally used this approach:

"Why are you still sitting here?" the customer asked immediately after he had turned me down for a table dance.

"I'm finishing my drink," I replied. "Then you are leaving?" he asked.

"Oh, sir, I had no idea you wanted me to go. You must be waiting for someone. Forgive me for being so rude," I said  
tongue in cheek. I stood to leave.

"Hold it, hold it. Sit back down. I don't necessarily want you to leave. The girls always leave after you say no to a dance. You must be new here. You really should leave when customers say no. You won't make any money this way." During this exchange he was clutching my arm. He loosened his grip. "Wouldn't that be rude to just up and walk off?" I asked incredulously. He stares at me a minute, and then smiles. "Lady," he says. "You are a card. I want a table dance." He bought four.

### In the Pits

Once a customer agreed to a table dance, another set of complex exchanges took place. Although interaction varied with the particular dancer, and customer, common routines offered promise **of** what

was to come. Leading the customer to the pit, one acrobatic dancer followed a routine of bending from the waist and peering at her customer from between straight legs. Ascending the stairs to the pit, she performed various kicks and other gestures to demonstrate her flexibility. Another dancer sashayed gracefully in an elegant and poised, yet seductive, manner. Sabrina's style was to talk in a sexy way as she walked: "See that corner. That's my corner. I love to take my men there."

Once in the pit, a woman sat close to the man. Often she put her hand on his leg, draped an arm on his shoulder, or swung a leg over his lap. Some girls necked with their customers, French kissing with a frenzied passion. Other dancers allowed kisses only on the cheek.

If a customer tried to French kiss when a dancer did not want it, she had several "routines" to control him. Leveling a questioning look at the customer and then backing away from him was enough to stop most men. When a client voiced dissatisfaction over the limitation-"What did you do that for?" or "What's your problem? Why are you so cold?"-it usually indicated an aggressive and potentially problematic customer. Sabrina's response to this was, "Imagine if I kissed every guy in the bar like that before I kissed you. Would that be a turn-on for you. Most customers backed off then with comments such as, "You're absolutely right. I never thought of that before." By their continuous attempts, however, it was apparent that some were being insincere, assuming, like the dancer, that if they moved more slowly, they would get more of what they wanted. But sometimes the restriction reflected positively on the customer's impression of the dancer. One customer stated to Sabrina after she used this routine: "You have a lot of respect for yourself. I like that."

While some women danced immediately, many waited one or two songs before actually starting a table dance. Sabrina noted that she rarely danced on the first available song because it gave off the impression that she was just interested in making money quickly. She preferred to sit with a customer for a while, talk, drink, and get to know him better. This created a sexual or intimate atmosphere and convinced him that she liked spending time with him. Often this cultivated customers who were likely to buy a greater number of dances, and return to visit her later.

At the beginning of a new song, a dancer might say: "Would you like that table dance now?" or "Let's go for it, baby," depending on the type of interaction in which they were involved. Sexually oriented behavior on the part of the customer called for aggressive behavior from the dancer; less sexually overt actions required more subtle requests.

## Table Dances

Strategy became important during a table dance; close quarters meant a dancer's presentation could be difficult to maintain and a customer hard to control. Normally, a dancer attempted to maintain eye contact with a patron, operating on the premise that it demonstrated interest and that if he had his eyes on her, he wouldn't have his hands on her as much. Sabrina hypothesized that a customer confronting a dancer's eyes was forced to acknowledge her "personhood," and that he then was less likely to violate it. Another impression given off (Goffman, 1959) by the dancer's body language was that the intimate exchange demonstrated by this eye contact might be impinged upon by the customer's groping at her body. Sometimes eye contact was difficult if a customer caused the dancer to laugh or feel disgusted (for example, if he was ugly or panting). In this situation, a dancer could turn away from him and make an impersonal shaking of her derriere part of her dance.

Sexual activity was illegal during table dances, but it sometimes occurred. Customers and dancers acknowledged that "hand jobs," oral sex, and intercourse happened, although infrequently. Once a customer requested that Sabrina wear a long skirt during a table dance so that intercourse could take place unobserved.

More common were body-to-penis friction and masturbation. The most frequent form consisted of the customer sliding down to the end of his seat, spreading his legs, pulling the dancer in close to him where she could then use her knees discreetly to rub his genitals while she danced. Customers sometimes wore shorts without underwear to:, allow their genitals to hang out the side, or they unzipped their pants to bare their genitals, or masturbated themselves by hand while watching the dancer.

If a customer insisted on violating rules putting his fingers inside the dancer's briefs or touching her breasts-a dancer might dance much faster than normal, or sway quickly side to side, to escape the wandering hands. If he was insistent, a dancer might grab his wrists teasingly, but firmly, and say, "No, no," addressing him as if he were a misbehaving child.

These attempts to control the customer . could not be too aggressive at the outset, or the customer

would be turned off. A subtle game was being played: The customer attempted to get the dancer to go as far as she would, and bend the rules, without antagonizing her so much that she stopped dancing; the dancer attempted to keep him in line, but in such a way that he still wanted to buy dances from her. A particularly good strategy at this point was for the dancer to make it look as if she were interested in what he wanted to do, but, because of management, was unable to oblige him. "Look, this would be fine, but I'm going to get in trouble with management. They're going to catch us if you keep acting like this." This disclaimer (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975) shifted the focus of the patron's annoyance to management and away from her and reasserted the idea that this was a respectable occupation with rules (see Hong et al., 1975).

If a man continued to act inappropriately, the dancer most likely lost her money and the negotiation process broke down. If the customer did not pay after the dance, the dancer had no recourse. Her only power was her seductiveness or ability to persuade the customer subtly that he "owed" it to her.,,

between customers and dancers started occasionally because a man did not want to pay a woman who "didn't give him good dance." Management quickly squelched these and fired or fined dancers who were involved.

Most dances, however, were successful. After one of these, a dancer might give the customer a reward for "being good." Sabrina reported that she kissed the customer, closed mouthed, on the cheek or on the corner of his mouth. By gently resting her fingers on his chin, tilting up his head, and delivering a kiss, she left the impression, "I'm involved with you. I like you."

After a table dance had been completed, the next goal was to keep the interaction going so that the customer would buy more dances. If a customer continued to hold onto a dancer after the song ended, it usually signaled that he wanted her to dance through the next song. If he let her go, a dancer might look inquisitively at the customer and ask, "Is that all for now? Do you want to continue?" or "Will you want a dance later?" The questions asked depended on the dancer's impression of how involved the customer was with the dance. At the least, she encouraged him to look her up the next time he returned to the bar.

### Exchange From the Bottom Up

Interaction in strip bars reflects negotiation in "respectable" society. What is being exchanged-economic resources for sexual titillation, ego gratification, and submission-is viewed in our society as honorable (Lasch, 1977; Lipman-Blumen, 1984; Safilios-Rothschild, 1977). The strategies dancers use to sell their product are similar to those used by sellers in reputable service occupations (Bigus, 1972; Browne, 1973; Davis, 1959; Henslin, 1968; Prus, 1987; Katovich and Diamond, 1986). Unlike many deviant sales (Luckenbill, 1984), dancers and customers normally are protected by a structured, bureaucratic setting with formal rules.

Interaction in a strip club represents negotiation in a buyer's market: sexual turn-on is available for the asking. Although men show some interest in being customers simply by walking through the door, they must be persuaded to "buy" from a certain dancer. To establish control, women use facilitating

(Prus, 1987) or cultivating techniques (Bigus, 1972); much like those used by service workers trying to sell a product directly to a client. To acquire customers, a dancer must develop mutual trust. The most important weapon in the arsenal of interaction is to present oneself as sincere: be warm and imply realness, appear spontaneous, give out insider information to show loyalty, accentuate honesty, demonstrate that one is different from others in similar positions, or tell hard-luck stories. At the same time, a dancer must attempt to determine the trustworthiness of her customer: Will he pay for the dance, and will he hassle her later?

Once trust is established, the dancer must promote repeat patronage and customer loyalty (Prus, 1987). This is done by calling on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). The expectation is that the customer will repay friendship, special attention, and favors with money. Thus a hard sell often is not as productive as other more indirect techniques, such as taking personal interest in customers (Prus, 1987), nurturing pseudo friendships, or effecting obligation (Bigus, 1972). Much like any business relationship, the seller must gauge time spent in an encounter to pay-off potential.

Interaction in the bar also reflects power dynamics in mainstream society. As a subordinate group, women in general have responded to men's macromanipulation of societal institutions by using micromanipulation-interpersonal behaviors and practices-to influence the power balance (Lipman-Blumen, 1984). Women in the bar play a game that they know well; in some form, they have been forced to play it for years. They are accustomed to anticipating male behavior, pleasing and charming men, appearing to be what they want, and following their rules. At the same time, dancers are skilled at manipulating to get their own needs met. The bar is a haven for them; they are old hands.

Women who dance for a living have fewer resources or opportunities to manipulate the macrostructure than do most women. Many come from broken homes where fathers often were absent. They frequently had distant relations with parents and left home at an early age. They had sexual experience earlier than other females had. Financial crisis often served as the impetus for starting this occupation. Few have sufficient training or education to make as much money in other occupations (Carey et al., 1974; Skipper and McCaghy, 1971).

Although dancers often have few resources, they are used to taking care of themselves. The occupation of stripping demands that they be tough. It provides them with a context of control. Being the purveyors and gatekeepers of sexuality has always provided powerful control for women (SafiliosRothschild, 1977); it served this function even more for those women who make sexual turn-on into an occupation.

In male-female relationships, sex is "shrouded in romantic mystique" (Salutin, 1971). It has been okay for women to exchange sex for financial security (Salutin, 1971), as long as they confined the exchange to the context of love and marriage (SafiliosRothschild, 1977). On this level, the activity in the bar is deviant. There this shroud is removed, revealing the rawness of the exchange, the unequal distribution of macropower, and the often cold, calculating nature of the microstrategies. There, sexuality is carried out in public between people who are often strangers. The dancers use sex as a direct currency of exchange: turn-ons for money. They are not likely to have illusions of love. For them, this is a job. When they are tempted to redefine the situation, their histories with men or the realities of their lives remind them otherwise.

For some dancers then, there is a feeling that they have won the ultimate game in American society, which continues to judge the value of women by their attractiveness and seductiveness (Chernin, 1982). Dancers get validation, attention, and money for displaying these characteristics and argue that they are doing nothing more than most women do, not as much as some.

Yet, this world is not a haven for women. If they could make the same money and have the same freedom in another occupation, most dancers would pursue an alternative to table dancing, but they cannot (Prus and Irini, 1980; Robboy, 1985). Most also have internalized "honorable" exchange, without the shroud of romance, outri trading of their bodies sometimes breaks through as degrading (Prus and Irini, 1980 Salutin, 1971; Skipper and McCaghy, 1971)

They suffer identity problems as they take, on the negative attitudes of mainstream society toward their occupation (Rambo [Ronail, 1987; Skipper and McCaghy, 1970, 1971). Many are disillusioned with males to the point that they characterize their audience

as degenerates (McCaghy and Skipper, 1969), yet these same degenerates decide their take-home pay.

The negotiation process we have described then is a case study of exchange between those differentially empowered. As in other occupations in which a person's job requires emotion management, stripping has high emotional costs (Hochschild, 1983). Stripping, as a service occupation, pays well, but costs dearly.

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