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Through Pole-Dancing

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Introduction and Methodology

Our research began at Madame Peaches: we signed up for a six week long beginners pole dancing class that took place in a rented studio in St Margarets House, Meadowbank, Edinburgh. Our presence and participation in the class helped us gain a better understanding of our own bodies, and the way pole dancing can influence understandings of one's body, which became the basis of our research. We studied how the class provided a space where women could use and create their bodies in new ways free from outside judgement and alongside other women. However, we also found that patriarchal power structures - even though it was an all-female class - retained its presence and effect on female body image. While it may seem like we were reclaiming our bodies, we largely still adhered to patriarchal ideals of the female body, which created a sense of pseudo-liberation. Our study discusses the tension between these contradictory concepts, introduces the inclusion of female autonomy within this discussion, and considers how individual choice allows women to reclaim their bodies from this phallogentric "ideal" and gain sexual independence from the male gaze.

Liberation of the Pole Dancing Body

Since beginning our fieldwork, we have encountered some general assumptions from friends and colleagues that all female pole dancers are "sluts", "strippers" and "whores". However, when talking with other pole dancers, whether in or out of pole dancing classes, the conversations expressed a sense of liberation, new-found self-confidence, a space for women to exercise, and a distinct separation from the 'ground level reality' that pole dancing is taboo for women and exists for the pleasure of straight male viewers. Sam, one of our informants, told us that she attends pole dancing classes for the fun of it, for fitness and strength, mostly to hang out and exercise with friends. As Das (2013) suggests, analysing the many ways in which pole dancing is understood can provide a greater understanding of the implications and assumptions surrounding pole dancing: who does pole dancing, the reasons why they enjoy it, and support the notion that pole dancing can be understood in a multitude of ways.

Despite previous assumptions and associations regarding pole dancing simultaneously stemming from and reinforcing exploitative ideals of the female body and sexuality, our experience was not contradicted by current feminist thought, which has "always been forthcoming and encouraging of women to develop more meaningful relationships with their own bodies" (Das 2013: 696). We found that over the course of the pole classes, our perception of our own bodies changed, which granted us bodily autonomy and provided a greater understanding of how to utilise one's body in new ways which, in turn, created a stronger sense of self. This bodily autonomy is, according to Sartre, a fundamental source of identity: the "body is what I immediately am" (cited by Synnott 1993: 32). Throughout pole dancing classes, participants were interacting with the pole and their bodies in a way which granted them greater confidence and a more meaningful understanding of their own body and identity.

We found that these pole dancing classes offered individuals the space to recreate their body through conscious acts of controlled movement. Thus, where there are changes to the body there are changes to the self; through our own experience of pole dancing, we found that in physically re-creating our bodies, we altered our personality. However, this transformation is not always immediate; we noticed that progress in one's ability to pole dance did not fully correspond in time with one's own confidence: Jess, our instructor, explained that, often, individuals required visual affirmation of their pole dancing techniques to produce confidence: "[Amanda] can't see herself, she can't see what I see or what everyone else sees...it was great!" To provide an outward perspective to students, Jess frequently took photos of the class to later upload to the

class's social media page, which could then be viewed and praised by classmates. In fact, what we saw was that one's confidence came from the visual affirmation of their progression combined with positive comments from classmates and the instructor, more so than successfully completing a difficult technique. It was not until after Amanda saw pictures of herself and her classmates' comments that she realised the progression she had made.

Rather than pole dancing requiring a certain body type, our informants told us that it offered a space for people with any kind of body to build confidence, strength, flexibility and friendships. The space was explicitly made private by locked doors and curtained windows, and also through the use of an invite-only social media page. Both these physical and virtual boundaries which surrounded the pole dancing group created an environment which excluded 'the male gaze' and patriarchal assumptions of the body; rather, all participants, regardless of ability or progression, were free to use their body in any manner, that was appropriate in the class, in order to express their thoughts, feelings, femininity and sexuality.

The Male Gaze and Commodity Feminism

Despite our experience of pole dancing occurring in a closed off, bounded space with other women, we were still aware of the patriarchal systems at work in the UK and beyond, under which we have lived our lives thus far. Mahmood (2012: 157) points out that the male gaze is constantly creating and influencing women's desires: women's desires are fundamentally influenced by how patriarchal systems constructed idealised femininity. The general ideal is two-dimensional, yet unattainable. The paradox involves women being innocent, yet seductive; dependent, yet not overly attached. Established patriarchal systems work to pervert women's conceptions of their bodies, which in turn influences their desires:

Patriarchal ideologies work by objectifying women's bodies and subjecting them to masculinist systems of representation, thereby negating and distorting women's own experience of their corporeality and subjectivity. (Mahmood 2012: 158)

Mahmood goes on to suggest that women internalise patriarchal ideologies, and consequentially experience daily life from a heterosexual male perspective. We noticed this in pole dancing classes even when there was an absence of men. When we mess up a move and Jess tells us to "throw in a hair flip to cover it up", it isn't to increase the technical finesse of our routine. Instead, such a technique's goal is to continue to construct ourselves in alignment with feminine ideals in a way that would be pleasing to the male gaze. As well as witnessing pole dancing as a form of exercise and self improvement, it was continually influenced by established patriarchal systems. A common theme and source of motivation in our classes was Hollywood actor Tom Hardy. During one session, when I could not get the hang of a particularly difficult move, Jess told me to "pretend that Tom Hardy was watching!" While there was no denying Tom Hardy's appeal to our classmates, the internalised male gaze was evident in that Tom Hardy was presented as a motivational factor; we were motivated to perfect the move for a man. Though we joined pole dancing with the understanding that it was taught primarily for fitness, the sense of *wanting* to express ourselves more sexually for the approval of a patriarchal society. We learned and perfected the routines for ourselves, but there was an implicit and sometimes explicit sense of perfecting the routines for the pleasure of men, being motivated from classmates by expressions such as: "act like you're doing it for the hot guy in the club!"

Sexuality is socially constructed, and the phallogentrism of the social world configures female sexuality in order to appeal to the heterosexual male. Similar to Amy-Chinn's research regarding the lingerie advertising industry, which found that the advertising of women's underwear "restricts and undermines, rather than encourages, attempts to renegotiate the discourse that surrounds the representation of women" (2006: 155), we found that while the male may not be present, the situation is underpinned by a heteronormative narrative which involves the female behaving in a way which is sexually pleasing for the male. Even though the pole dancing studio is a space where women can express themselves and be freely sexual, there was an implicit sense that we were performing for an imaginary male audience. The lasting effect of the male gaze continues to linger largely because the feminine ideal has been commercialised and fetishised to the point where women are convinced that they can buy into being 'the perfect woman'. Goldman's proposition of commodity feminism (1992) enlists an understanding that women will willingly build themselves, and their

subsequent value, on a set of prescribed female ideals and images. However, progressions in feminism have allowed women to claim autonomous control over their bodies. Nonetheless, that control is used to manipulate their image in a way which fits into the prescribed construct; a construct which is created by the male gaze, and will perpetuate female objectification. Nonetheless, it is under the pretence that women still hold the power to create their own bodies. Within these conditions, the act of reclaiming sexuality as a female constitutes pseudo-liberation.

Female Autonomy and Reclaiming the Female Body

The inclusion of commodity feminism indeed makes the liberation we found in the pole dancing community appear to be a hoax; just another method of coercion and oppression by patriarchal gender standards. However, we have found a missing factor in Goldman's (1992) proposition which is critical in the discussion of whether pole dancing is liberating or oppressing: namely, the agency of women. Women are no longer believed to be "the most inferior forms of human evolution... closer to children and savages than an adult, civilised man" (Gould 1981, cited in Synnott 1993: 52). Goldman's argument lacks the inclusion of free female thought and awareness of the ideals they are being fed by patriarchal views on the female body and the ability to freely respond.

As discussed in the previous sections, the reasons for signing up to pole dancing classes varied just as widely as the types of bodies which participated. Not everyone was chasing the "ideal" female body or form, rather they were using the pole in different ways to create different bodies. This is achievable, as the pole itself does not create women in only one form. Rather, we found that a combination of self-motivation, the pole, the teachers and fellow students constructed bodies. In the class we participated in, attendees used the pole to make their bodies fitter, stronger, and to reclaim the body for their own pleasure.

This is not to say that commodity feminism "ideals" did not exist in the class; as previously discussed, this "ideal" was accepted in the class, directing the class towards making our appearance pleasing to an outward audience. However, the acceptance of the ideal female body came with the inclusion of scrutiny of the image and the countering of it with humour and showing the reality of pole dancing. When learning certain moves, Jess told us to "make eye contact with a person, make it really awkward" whilst performing them. We were also provided with entertaining ways to remember steps, such as the move that required us to tuck our head down to begin a twist: we were told remember to "sniff your [arm]pits" The class was encouraged to see certain techniques in amusing ways and to laugh at what we were doing. We were also provided with honest and uncensored presentations of the body and of pole dancing. Upon arriving at class, Jess was quick to make the realities of pole dancing clear and how they worked against phallogocentric "ideals" of female bodies. Jess declared there was "no shame" within pole dancing; girls got stuck on poles due to muscle cramps, others had exposed themselves in class and Jess told us that she "was spotting [helping] a girl last night and she farted in my face." She found humour in all of these incidents, and made sure everyone in the class accepted such occurrences as just normal bodily processes. Reclaiming of the body is a key feature in gaining identity and autonomy from established patriarchal systems. In social movements such as SlutWalks – which is a widespread campaign addressing victim blaming culture surrounding sexual assault – women are countering social constructions of the female body whilst presenting the reality of female bodies in these marches (Ringrose and Renold 2012). Women can be seen to do the same within pole dancing, critiquing the very image they are said to be creating, exposing the realities of female bodies, and manipulating their bodies to make them their own.

Conclusion

Pole dancing class provided women with the space and method to recreate their body. It allowed the students to reconstruct their bodies and identities in a way which would nonetheless still be appreciated by the male viewer. Some feminist views frame this process as tricking women into conforming to phallogocentric ideals of the female body and the commoditisation of femininity, which could be bought by pole dancing. However, such arguments do not take into account female agency and ability in these activities, to acknowledge patriarchal pressures and work against them to take back female bodies for themselves. As we were spinning

around the pole, being called strippers by our friends, aware that we were adhering to heteronormative ideas of sexuality; we were nonetheless claiming our bodies as our own and felt empowered by our pole dancing experience.

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