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# Boyfriends, lovers, and “peeler pounders”: experiences of interpersonal violence and stigma in exotic dancers’ romantic relationships

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic data collected during my doctoral research, in this study, I explore how women who work as exotic dancers in Winnipeg, Canada, negotiated the stigma of sex work and interpersonal violence in their romantic relationships with men. What are the connections between the stigma of sex work and the violence that occurs in exotic dancers’ relationships? What are the ways in which exotic dancers make sense of, and attempt to manage, this violence? I address these questions through feminist ethnographic research methods, including participant observation, open-ended interviews, and participant collaboration. Through an analysis of participants’ stories about their romantic relationships, I suggest that the stigma of sex work is a form of structural violence that manifests as direct violence in women’s relationships with men. I conclude by suggesting that the de-stigmatization of sex work is an important part of ending violence in sex workers’ interpersonal relationships.

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## Introduction

In this paper, I explore how women who work as exotic dancers in Winnipeg, Canada, negotiated the stigma of sex work and interpersonal violence in their romantic relationships with men based on ethnographic data that were collected during my doctoral fieldwork.

Not all of the women in my study identified as heterosexual. However, all of the participants had been in romantic relationships with men at some point throughout their lives and, like many women, noted experiencing some form of gender-based violence (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; DeShong, 2015; Dobash, 1979; Thaller & Cimino, 2017; York, 2011). In addition to the risk of harm from men that all women in heterosexual relationships face, participants also had to negotiate the stigma of sex work in these intimate partnerships (Bradley-Engen & Hobbes, 2010). In Goffman’s (1963, p. 12–13) seminal work on social stigma theory, he defined stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” and the stigmatized individual as “tainted” or

“discounted” in some way. Goffman’s (1963) theoretical framework for identifying the ways in which stigmatized individuals manage stigma in face to face social encounters has been used extensively in the literature on exotic dance and other stigmatized communities (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Bergman & Chalkey, 2007; Combessie, 2002; Grandy, 2008; Hood, 1988; Kowalewski, 1988; Kraus, 2010; May, 2000; Opsal, 2011; Robitaille & Saint-Jaques, 2009).

The majority of the sex work scholarship that specifically focuses on stigma is concerned with how exotic dancers or other sex workers manage or attempt to deflect stigma based on Goffman’s (1963) framework (Barton, 2007; Grandy, 2008; Morrow, 2012; Philaretou, 2006; Roberts, Bergstrom, & La Rooy, 2007; Rosenbloom, Rakosi, & Fetner, 2001; Thompson, Harred, & Burks, 2003; Thompson & Harred, 1992; Trautner & Collett, 2010; Wesley, 2003). Some of the stigma management techniques used by exotic dancers that are described in these works, such as attempting to maintain strict boundaries between social worlds, psychological distancing from work activities, criticizing those that shame them for dancing, and keeping a small group of confidants who are accepting of stripping, were certainly used by the participants in this study. However, I am concerned with the lack of a deeper analysis of women’s responses, as well as the thinly veiled distaste for stripping as an occupation in much of this scholarship.

For example, in their study on the stigma of exotic dance, Thompson et al. (2003, p. 564) argue that distancing their “real” selves from their “dancer” selves, or “cognitive dissonance,” was one of the most important ways in which dancers managed their stigmatized identities (Thompson et al., 2003, p. 552). In Wesley’s (2003, p. 501) study on how working as an exotic dancer impacts women’s identities, she asserts that distancing techniques similar to the ones identified by Thompson et al. (2003) are ultimately destructive to dancers’ psychological well-being because it requires the constant separation between “identity and body” and because “it may take [dancers] years, if not a lifetime, to escape the identity problems they experience.”

Similarly, in Philaretou’s (2006, p. 44), research on the intrapersonal motivations of exotic dancers, he asserts that there are only two possible outcomes for women who pursue a career as an exotic dancer: “a) succumbing to her pseudo-sexual occupational self, thus failing to maintain a healthy sense of real self, with long-term negative emotional and psychological consequences, or b) abandoning her projected pseudo-sexual occupational self and leaving the job.”

I find these studies problematic because they tend to attribute the struggles exotic dancers face to the stigma management strategies they use, and ultimately their choice of occupation, rather than to the existence of sex work stigma and the underlying power dynamics that shape this stigma. Contrary to what these scholars have theorized, I found that rather than a *source* of harm to exotic dancers, stigma management strategies were a *response* to harm or potentially harmful situations that were already present in their lives.

As this article will show, for the exotic dancers in this study, stigma management strategies are important because they are used to mitigate potentially threatening or violent situations in romantic relationships. Dancers were adept at identifying ways to

negotiate stigma in their romantic relationships, as well as acknowledging the fact that these strategies could fail to protect them from violent situations. Participants also identified stigma management strategies in relationships as a form of “extra” emotional labour on top of the emotional labour they already performed as girlfriends, wives, or lovers.

Yet understanding stigma management is only part of a more nuanced investigation of what stigma actually means for those who experience it and the reasons stigma exists.

In common parlance, stigma is often understood to mean something akin to stereotyping or discrimination. While acknowledging that stereotyping and discrimination are a part of the individual experience of being stigmatized, scholars who have researched stigmatized populations argue that stigma is better understood as an insidious and destructive social process with devastating financial, health, interpersonal, and political effects on marginalized groups (Frost, 2011; Link & Phelan, 2001; Maticka-Tyndale, Lewis, Clark, Zubick, & Young, 2000; Parker & Aggleton, 2003).

According to more recent theories that expand upon Goffman’s (1963) framework, stigma is not only conceptualized as an individual experience that requires constant management, but a system of structural discrimination and systemic violence (Frost, 2011; Hannem & Bruckert, 2012; Parker & Aggleton, 2003; Scambler, 2007). Instead of only conceptualizing stigma as derived from perceived “deviance,” as Goffman (1963) does, in Parker and Aggleton’s (2003) research on HIV/AIDS, they reframe stigma as “the social production of difference...linked to established regimes of knowledge and power” (Parker & Aggleton, 2003, p. 17). Furthermore, they argue, stigma should not only be conceived of as something personal, as in something “individuals *do* to other individuals” but as “social and cultural phenomena linked to the actions of whole groups of people” (Parker & Aggleton, 2003, p. 16).

In his study of migrant escort work in London, Scambler (2007, p. 1087) argues for an “acknowledgment that the disadvantage accruing through stigmatization is often mixed in with... exploitation and oppression” in studies that explore the stigma of sexual labour. Similarly, Pheterson’s (1993) work addresses “whore stigma,” which conveys the dishonor that women engaged in sexual labour experience through legal and social systems that seek to punish them for their deviation from traditional notions of womanhood.

According to these scholars, stigma is both a structural *and* interpersonal social process. Therefore, in this study, stigma is understood as a form of systemic violence against marginalized communities that serves to reinforce inequality and social hierarchy, as well as an individual experience (Parker & Aggleton, 2003). Much like other forms of stigma, sex work stigma is continually shaped by “broader social, cultural, political, and economic forces...inherently linked to the production and reproduction of social inequalities” (Parker & Aggleton, 2003, p. 18). This means that when exotic dancers encounter interpersonal violence in their relationships with men, this violence is part of the wider social process of stigmatization that has roots in the maintenance of patriarchal capitalism, as well as specific notions of traditional performances of gender and monogamy (Pheterson, 1993). With this in mind, the questions I address in this article include: What are the connections between the stigma

of sex work and the violence that occurs in exotic dancers' romantic relationships with men? What are the ways in which the women in my study make sense of, and attempt to manage, this violence?

## Methodology

To answer my research questions, I used feminist qualitative ethnographic fieldwork methods, including participant observation, open-ended interviews, and participant collaboration.

In Winnipeg, dancers are considered independent contractors who are booked in the city and small town bars across Manitoba and Western Ontario by Winnipeg's only stripping agency, Elegant Entertainment.

Unlike their counterparts working in other areas of Canada and the United States, while working in Winnipeg, exotic dancers rotate daily between four strip clubs that feature dancers on a full time basis: Secrets, Gilded Cage, Kisses, and Silhouettes, as well as between seventeen other pubs and bars that feature erotic entertainment part time.<sup>1</sup> Because this system of labour requires a great deal of driving for any given shift, a dancer must either own a vehicle in order to drive herself to work or ask the agency to provide her with a driver for a fee.

For the first year of my fieldwork, I worked as a driver for Elegant Entertainment in order to slowly gain rapport with dancers over time, and explain my research to them. After one year of working as a driver, in order to get a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, I spent two years working as an exotic dancer, making a total of three years of fieldwork, which I completed from 2012–2015.

In total, I spent just over 1000 hours driving dancers and working at strip clubs in Winnipeg. There were also occasions where I spent time hanging out with participants outside of work, going for coffee, lunch, dinner, or drinks, or other social activities. Some of these interactions were recorded in my field notes and used as a source of data when it was relevant, and women permitted me to do so.

I also conducted open ended interviews with six women who work as exotic dancers; Scarlett, Billie, Ivy, Misty, Lucy, and Kat; whom I met at various points during the first year of my fieldwork. These participants are white, middle-class, ranged in age from early 20s to mid 30s, and lived in Manitoba at the time of my research.

According to Wahab's (2003) recommendations for research with sex workers, in addition to traditional anthropological research methods, an important way to realize the aims of feminist ethnography is to encourage more collaboration between the researcher and the research participants in the knowledge creation process. This produces a "connection between theory and action" and acknowledges the intersubjective nature of ethnography (Wahab, 2003, p. 626). To this end, two dancers that I met at the start of my fieldwork, Scarlett and Billie, volunteered to participate in my research as collaborators. Scarlett and Billie's involvement included giving me feedback throughout my fieldwork on the types of questions I was asking in the open-ended interviews, as well as any theories or ideas that I was developing towards the end of my research.

The theories that I present in this article are grounded in the data I collected and analyzed through coding interview transcripts and fieldnotes for themes, as well as through feedback from the participant collaborators. As I mentioned in the introduction, throughout this paper, I also draw on literature that conceptualizes stigma as a form of structural violence (Bruckert & Hannem, 2012; Frost, 2011; Parker & Aggleton, 2003).

## Literature review

The literature on exotic dance is prolific (see Frank, 2007 and Wahab, Baker, Smith, Cooper, & Lerum, 2011 for a more extensive critical analysis of exotic dance research). However, past exotic dance scholarship has tended to focus on investigating power relations within the strip club, questions of whether or not women find their jobs empowering, as well as the reasons why women choose to do this work (Barton, 2002, 2006, 2007; Bell, Sloan, & Strickling, 1998; Boles & Garbin, 1974a, Boles & Garbin, 1974b, Carey, Peterson, & Sharpe, 1974; Deshotels, Tinney, & Forsyth, 2012; Deshotels & Forsyth, 2008; Egan, 2003; Forsyth & Deshotels, 1996, Forsyth & Deshotels, 1997, Forsyth & Deshotels, 1998; Holsopple, 1999; McCaghy & Skipper, 1969, McCaghy & Skipper, 1970; Mestematcher & Roberti, 2004; Murphy, 2003; Pasko, 2002; Pederson, Champion, Hesse, & Lewis, 2015; Phileratou, 2006; Pilcher, 2009; Price-Glynn, 2000, 2010; Schweizer, 2004; Sloan & Wahab, 2004; Sweet & Tewksbury, 2000a, Sweet & Tewksbury, 2000b; Wesley, 2002, 2003, 2006; Wood, 2000).

Although still limited, recently dancers' experiences of stigma in romantic relationships are being explored more explicitly in the literature (Bahri, 2014; Barton, 2006; Bradley-Engen & Hobbs, 2010; Bruckert, 2002; Colosi, 2010; Dewey, 2011; Maia, 2012). According to this scholarship, exotic dancers and other sex workers face unique challenges in their romantic relationships because their workplace activities violate expectations of fidelity in traditional heterosexual relationships. The women in my study certainly experienced particular challenges in their romantic relationships due to the stigma of their occupation. However, I remain wary of the implication in some of the literature that women who do not engage in sex work, and therefore do not experience the stigma of sex work, are safe from violence in their relationships. (Phileratou, 2006; Wesley, 2003, 2006).

Interpersonal violence against women, which can be physical, verbal, economic, and/or emotional and psychological, is not unique to exotic dancers and frequently occurs in women's relationships with men (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; DeShong, 2015; Dobash, 1979; Thaller & Cimino, 2017; York, 2011). Statistics from Statistics Canada and the Center for Disease Control show that physical or sexual violence from male romantic partners is an extremely common experience for women in North America, and these statistics are considered to be an underestimate, as they are based on criminal cases (Canada, 2013; Jeltson, 2017).

In Bradley-Engen & Hobbs' (2010) study on exotic dancers' romantic relationships with men, they note that the majority of participants settled for partners who were financially, emotionally, and/or physically abusive, or they chose to remain

single after dissatisfying dating experiences. Similarly, Colosi (2010, p. 161) observed in her ethnographic study of a lap dancing club in the United Kingdom that, “it was not unusual for dancers at Starlets to become involved in high-risk relationships.” These findings indicate that violence in exotic dancers’ relationships with men is common. However, understanding this violence necessitates a more nuanced approach that goes beyond cause and effect explanations that reduce blame to women’s behaviour. Therefore, my approach to the violence that occurs in exotic dancers’ relationships with romantic partners takes into account both the prevalence of masculinized violence against women in general, and the stigma attached to sex work in particular.

## Results and discussion

### *Perceptions of masculine violence*

The stories told by dancers in this study contradict assumptions that dancers are self-destructive and drawn to “jerks” or to men who are unemployed because they “can’t do any better.” While participants were sometimes willing to accept certain forms of violence from their romantic partners to some extent by remaining in relationships with them, dancers’ willingness to do so must be considered in the larger context of what many women in heterosexual relationships might compromise on to stay in relationships. As some participants’ responses will show, it is precisely because masculine violence is normalized that dancers, like many women, might choose to remain in violent relationships out of a sense of love and/or desire for companionship, especially if this violence is not physical. However, the stigmatization that dancers face adds another layer of complexity to the violence that occurs in their romantic relationships with men.

For example, while dancers did not find it difficult to differentiate between their romantic relationships with men and patrons, their romantic partners would often raise concerns over their apparent similarities. According to participants, jealousy or anxiety over the commodification of their emotional and sexual labor was at the root of many arguments with partners and was sometimes used to justify the perpetration of violence against them.

As I mentioned in the introduction, in order to mitigate these potentially violent interactions with romantic partners, dancers would often utilize common stigma management techniques (Barton, 2007; Goffman, 1963; Grandy 2008; Morrow, 2012; Philaretou, 2006; Roberts et al., 2007; Rosenbloom et al., 2001; Thompson et al., 2003; Thompson & Harred, 1992; Trautner & Collett, 2010; Wesley, 2003). Participants framed stigma management strategies as a way to manage violence as well as a form of emotional labor that was required of them when they engaged in casual or serious relationships with men.

It is evident from the literature that violence is often a common component of heterosexual relationships, regardless of a woman’s occupation (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; DeShong, 2015; Fernandez-Esquer & Diamond, 2013; Hatty, 2000; Levitt, Swanger & Butler, 2008; Muldoon, Deering, Feng, Shoveller, & Shannon, 2015; Reidy, Berke, Gentile, & Zeichner, 2014). Yet, for women who work as exotic dancers, this

violence is uniquely tied to sex work stigma. Participants' reports about their experiences with violence from romantic partners show how they used stigma management strategies as a way of deflecting this violence.

One of Ivy's ex-boyfriends, for example, demanded that she quit stripping, even though he would be unable to support both of them on his income.

The only relationship it really affected was my last relationship, and he was really awful to me. Dancing was kind of like my life, and I met him, and he was totally cool with it at first. Then as we became closer and closer, he didn't allow it to happen anymore, and he told me I had to quit. He didn't want me doing it anymore, and I quit. I went broke. And then it just got super tough because I felt like I had to choose between two things that I thought that I loved. I thought I loved him, and I knew I loved dancing. I had to choose, and I chose him because I thought, ok, well he's forever. Dancing I always knew was temporary.

From Ivy's perspective at the time, it was worth enduring economic violence from her partner and quitting a job she enjoyed because of her love for him, as well as a desire to avoid further conflict. Distancing herself from her dancer identity by temporarily quitting her job was a stigma management strategy Ivy employed in order to restore a sense of peace to her relationship. Although Ivy's stigma management strategy resulted in a more conflict free relationship, she still suffered financially due to the stigma of her job when she was no longer working. Ivy was forced to choose between continuing to endure verbal abuse from her partner and potentially losing this relationship, or the economic consequences of quitting her job as her partner demanded.

Ivy's story also illustrates how the structural violence of sex work stigma plays out on the interpersonal level. As other scholars have noted, lack of access to resources, as well as the constant threat of social isolation, is part of the structural violence of stigma that serves to maintain the marginalization of stigmatized communities (Frost, 2011).

### ***Beware of "peeler pounders:" dating as a dancer***

When I first heard the term "peeler pounder," it was from a dancer named Nina soon after I started stripping for my fieldwork. Nina was an experienced dancer who had worked in the industry for twelve years. I told her about my research: how I planned to focus on how stigma impacts exotic dancers' romantic relationships. She nodded knowingly and replied, "Uh huh, beware of the peeler pounders!" "Peeler pounders?" I asked. "Yeah. You know. The guys that just want to see how many strippers they can get. Strippers are basically their trophies."

During interviews, other women also referred to men who pursued dancers as "peeler pounders," and even if they did not use this term, the concept behind this label was not foreign to them. Participants all seemed to have experience with men who viewed dancers as objects to be consumed for fantasy fulfillment outside of the strip club.

Of course, it should not be assumed that all women desire normative monogamous relationships with men. For some participants, at least some of the time, pursuing casual dating or a lover was preferable to securing a long-term monogamous partner.

Or, as it is for many young women, was considered par for the course on the way to eventually finding a boyfriend or husband. However, when dancers desired a more casual romantic tryst with a man, stigma could manifest in these encounters in a variety of ways.

Scarlett describes her experience with “peeler pounders” before she started dating her most recent boyfriend:

It doesn't happen very often. I think I've gone home with, like, three guys that I've met at work. It's always a mistake because it can't not be *their* story. That they went home with a stripper from the strip club. Even if there was the most personal connection, love at first look, which it never is, you can't help but be that story. And I *hate* that story. I hate that “oh yeah, I had sex with a ‘ripper.’” A peeler pounder is what they call them. It's just so frustrating.

In this case, even when both parties desire a casual sexual experience, Scarlett is aware that a double standard exists where men attain social status through multiple “conquests,” while women, especially those with stigmatized identities, are thought to be devalued through multiple sexual partners or sexual experiences. Scarlett's desire to be free to sleep with men that she finds attractive is at odds with her desire to not be “that story,” and thus her enjoyment of these encounters is lessened by their potential to further stigmatize her as a dancer. Even if she had the most “personal connection” with someone, Scarlett felt that because she worked as an exotic dancer men could not help themselves from bragging about how they “had sex with a ‘ripper’” afterwards, thus erasing all other aspects of her identity, and making it “their story” to tell, instead of hers.

Similarly, Kat offered her analysis of men who pursue exotic dancers based on her experiences:

It's kind of like if you were to compare it to the rave scene. There's peeler pounders in the strip club scene, and there's DJ whores in the rave scene. Now, having been both the peeler in peeler pounder and the whore in DJ whore, I understand the mechanics of both. The thing is I mean, yes, you're attracted to dancers because they're limber, lithe, and all that kind of stuff. That's really great. I understand that. But the problem is that there are some people who are in it for the wrong reasons. They think it's like Pokémon where you just have to fuck all of them.

Ivy also talked about “peeler pounders”:

There are guys that seek us out just to say ‘I banged a dancer. Fucked this stripper last night. Oh yeah, I'm so cool.’ No, you're really not that cool. Not really. I'm just a regular person like you are.

Again, like Scarlett, Kat and Ivy point out the dehumanizing way that men spoke about their sexual encounters with women who work as exotic dancers, as well as the ways they attempt to manage stigma by emphasizing their own humanity as a response. Kat draws attention to how sex with dancers is treated as a game; where strippers are discarded like inanimate objects with little value beyond the “points” a man might score in his social world. Similarly, In Ivy's view, a man claiming to be “cool” because he “banged a dancer” implies that she is not a “regular person” who is worthy of the same respect as he is. If Ivy is not a “regular person” because she is an exotic dancer, then she is placed in the category of “Other,” and therefore left more

vulnerable to violence (Butler, 2009; Parker & Aggleton, 2003). Through stigmatization, women who work as exotic dancers become more vulnerable to violence, both interpersonal and structural, because their lives are seen as less valuable than others by society and in their individual social worlds (Butler, 2009; Parker & Aggleton, 2003). In this particular situation, Ivy emphatically stresses that she is “like you” as a way to resist stigmatization, and by extension, the potential for interpersonal violence to occur.

Kat also talked about her attitude towards dating while working as an exotic dancer:

I haven't really dated that many people, but the ones that I have I'm very upfront. Very like, this is what I do, take me or leave me. I kind of just say, hey, before we get into this, can you date a dancer? Yes or no? I'll give you a minute to think about this, and then we'll go from there. Take away the pink fluffy clouds around it, take away the flashy lights and the “oh my god I'm dating a stripper!” These are the facts of life that you're gonna have to deal with dating me: I sleep late. I'm up late. I don't get weekends off. I have a lot of clothes. Most of them are shiny. There will be glitter EVERYWHERE. There's a lot that they don't get.

Here, Kat is describing how she would attempt to manage stigma by asking potential dating partners to consider the realities of seriously dating an exotic dancer at the beginning of a relationship in order to avoid entanglements that might end up hurting everyone involved. Humanization, or taking away the “pink fluffy clouds” and “flashy lights” as Kat puts it, is part of this process, as Scarlett and Kat both acknowledge the tendency for men to see them as the objects of fantasy consumption they present while at work, rather than as “real” women.

Many dancers used this stigma management strategy. Participants' were upfront about what they did for a living with the men that they dated, almost presenting an ultimatum; if you want to date me, you must support my choice of work.

Scarlett describes her reasoning behind this strategy:

My thought on it is that there's already so much stigma that I deal with from strangers, from family, from friends, from everywhere. If I'm choosing a partner, I'm not going to bring someone into my life that makes me feel shitty about it. And it's hard. It's a lot to ask for. Like, “you just need to 100 percent accept this”, but I just can't have it otherwise.

Ivy also attempted to avoid “peeler pounders” through a similar strategy:

I could never dance again being in a relationship if the guy was just excited that I was a stripper. It's weird because it's like, are you dating me because I'm a stripper? Or are you dating me because you like me?

In theory, dancers could choose romantic partners who would be a source of refuge from the stigma they experienced in other relationships. However, Scarlett acknowledged, “it's a lot to ask for” because she knows it will be a challenge for most men to see her as fully human or for men to contend with the impact proximity to sex work stigma might have on their own lives.

Research on individuals who are closely associated with stigmatized people, like the romantic partners of exotic dancers, often experience what Kraus (2010, p. 439) identifies as “soft stigma.” In Kraus' (2010, p. 439) study on stigmatized leisure

activities, she explains that “soft stigma” includes, “milder forms of rejection, which lead to slight embarrassments, snubs, and name calling”. It is evident that dancers were aware of “soft stigma” and expressed empathy for the men that they dated because of it. Moreover, because the literature on intimate partner violence suggests that the respect Scarlett desires from men is in short supply for most women who date men regardless of their occupation, she faces even more of a challenge. Thus, Scarlett speaks to the feminist work that would be required of a man who wanted to date her, as well as the work that would be required of her to make him see her as a whole person and not “just a stripper.” As I have mentioned, stigma management strategies, or the “work” Scarlett refers to, were an expected aspect of dating men as a dancer.

Similarly, Ivy calls attention to the difficulty of knowing if the men she dated actually wanted to get to know her, or if they were only interested in her because she was an exotic dancer. Ivy did not want to date men who were too “excited” about her job because she was aware that this fascination does not mean that they recognize stripping as legitimate labour, or that their interest in her stripping should necessarily be interpreted as support for her choice of occupation. Instead, Ivy knows that men’s keen interest in her work is a barrier to them really seeing her as a complex subject.

Although men may pursue women engaged in other kinds of specific occupations, because sex work is stigmatized, the reasons why men choose to pursue exotic dancers will be framed by this stigmatization. Ivy understands that, had she never worked as a dancer, she would probably not have to question men’s motives for wanting to date her. Thus, Ivy reads men’s desire as not really for her as an individual, but for the imaginary stripper fantasy.

It was challenging for participants to be able to tell between a partner who was supportive of their work, and only interesting in dating them *because* of their work. However, as I will show in the following section, participants reported that time often revealed the difference, as men’s “over-supportiveness” for stripping often turned to jealousy later on.

Therefore, Kat, Scarlett, and Ivy all acknowledge the great deal of stigma management that is required on their parts if they want to engage in a romantic relationship with a man, as well as the risks that are involved when their efforts to get men to see them as more than fantasy objects fail. While the emotional labor that exotic dancers do in their relationships with romantic partners was normalized, it was also acknowledged by participants that other women did not have to do the extra work of educating men about stripping, which was seen as part and parcel of the dating experience for women who work as dancers.

### ***Negotiating stigma in relationships***

In contrast to the types of relationships described in the last section, dancers noticed that when their relationships with men became closer emotionally, men’s acceptance of stripping or experience of pride in “fucking a stripper” began to wane.

Misty talked about her relationship with her soon-to-be husband:

Calvin was okay with it at the beginning. He doesn't like it, but it's not his choice. Same with my ex. He didn't like it either, but I wanted to quit. I think it was more the socializing, because you're just socializing with men all evening and all day. So I think that was more the insecure part about it. But they're just insecure. I'm not insecure, they are.

All of the women I interviewed expressed frustration with dating because of similar attitudes to those Misty expressed; men's acceptance at the beginning of a relationship often turned into jealousy later on. Additionally, similar to what Ivy experienced with her ex-partner, even though Misty was able to avoid some conflict with her ex-husband because she "wanted to quit" anyways for a period of time, this was short lived because she eventually desired to return to dancing. Constantly having to interact with insecure men, both through her emotional labour at work and managing stigma in her home, contributed to Misty's desire to quit stripping for the time being. In this way, she could at least avoid some of the fallout from her partner's insecurity, even though she also had to face the economic consequences of losing her source of income.

However, some of the women in my study had mixed feelings about the ways in which their romantic partners expressed jealousy over their occupation. Lucy, for instance, expected acceptance and respect from her boyfriend, but she also understood her partner's jealousy as an inevitable and expected part of their relationship.

While I was driving her one day, Lucy and I talked about relationships, including the one she had with her most recent boyfriend, Tom. She had met him while she was working at Kisses, but she told me that he was not a regular and not really the strip club going kind. He came in a few more times just to see her, and eventually, they started dating. She told me how he was beginning to get jealous because other men got to see her naked all day, yet at the same time she "kind of liked" that because she thought that it showed that he cared about her. "I would be jealous, too, if someone were flirting with my boyfriend," she told me.

Lucy gave me an example of a recent argument she had with Tom: "The other day he was asking me what I do when someone puts a tip on stage, and I said, 'Well, I'll usually just give him a bit more attention.' And he was like, 'Well what does that mean?' And I said, 'Well, I just put on a little show for him.' He got mad and was like, 'So you put your pussy in his face? I thought you just walked around and you could barely see anything!'" I nodded in understanding since I had had many similar arguments with ex-partners. However, I had never met any of them at a strip club, so I thought it was rather odd that Lucy's boyfriend did not seem to know what she did while she was on stage. "I'm also having that regular, Jeff, take me to a hockey game tonight. I know Tom would be jealous, even though it doesn't mean anything to me beyond getting to go to a Jets game for free. I'm debating whether or not I should tell him," Lucy said. "Oh, well Jeff is harmless. He has nothing to worry about," I said. Right after this exchange while we were driving, Lucy saw her abusive ex-boyfriend drive past us, which understandably caused her some distress. She then decided to call Tom. They talked for a while. Lucy ended the conversation by saying, "You're the best boyfriend I've ever had. I just wanted to tell you that." I assumed that sentiment was inspired by seeing her ex-partner drive past us. When she hung up the

phone, she said “I just couldn’t tell him about the Jets game. He sounded too happy, and I didn’t want to start an argument over nothing.”

Billie also demonstrated empathy for her long term partner’s experience of facing ridicule due to her occupation:

I mean your girlfriend is getting naked on stage and everybody knows. That’s the hard part. It’s not like I’m not known in the dancer world now. It’s easier when they don’t know who I am, but now they do. “Your girlfriend is Billie the dancer oooo,” you know.

Lucy had empathy for her partner’s jealousy, and both Lucy and Billie had to constantly put themselves in their partners shoes, so to speak, in order to avoid discord in their relationship. Similarly, Bradley-Engen and Hobbs (2010) observed that dancers in their study would participate in “role-taking” behaviour by taking the perspective of their partners when trying to understand men’s jealous reactions to stripping.

Although non-sex working women in heterosexual relationships may encounter jealousy from their romantic partners as well, jealousy in participants’ relationships was directly related to sex work stigma.

Lucy, for example, understands that her boyfriend cannot give her everything she needs, but does not think that he would be able to demonstrate the same kind of understanding for her were she to tell him that she was going to a Jets game with a customer. Therefore, Lucy takes on the majority of the emotional labour in her relationship, which is not only naturalized as part of her role as a girlfriend, but is part of the extra work that is required of her because her job as an exotic dancer necessitates the constant management of stigma.

Similar to Lucy, Ivy also experienced mixed feelings about men’s jealousy after an adverse experience dating a man who was not accepting of her working as a dancer:

Other than that really bad experience, it didn’t really affect my relationships with boyfriends. All my boyfriends were kind of like, ‘my girl’s a stripper, my girl is so hot.’ Now that I think back to it, I’m like, that’s not cool. Why are you okay with your girlfriend being a stripper? Why are you okay with your girlfriend getting naked on stage for a bunch of guys? Why are you okay with that? But I guess if the guy is confident in themselves and in our relationship then, sure. Great.

In Lucy and Ivy’s experiences, men’s jealous behaviour in regards to them stripping is understood as such a natural aspect of masculinity that it was confusing to them when it was absent. If a man they were in a relationship with was not at least somewhat jealous, Lucy and Ivy thought that there must be something amiss. Indeed, throughout my fieldwork, whenever I informed a dancer about my research topic, many reacted by suggesting “that’s how men are” or “well men are just insecure,” as if these were the answers to my research questions, which speaks to the normalization of masculinized violence (DeShong, 2015). As Ivy pointed out in her statement above, she would want to know exactly why a man was “okay” with their girlfriend working as a dancer, since jealousy was so common.

According to the dancers in my study, there seemed to be a progression from excitement and pride at the start of a new relationship, to jealousy and sometimes emotional, verbal, or financial violence towards the end. In many cases, stripping was used against women in arguments with romantic partners, regardless of the original nature of the dispute.

As Misty told me, during arguments, her ex-husband would sometimes yell, “You’re just a stripper, shut the fuck up!” Insults related to stripping from men that dancers were in relationships with was something that all participants experienced and seems to be a common occurrence for exotic dancers noted by other researchers (Bradley-Engen & Hobbs, 2010; Bruckert, 2002; Colosi, 2010; Dewey, 2011; Roach, 2007).

Billie, for example, who had been in a relationship with her partner since she was in high school, told me how he would occasionally use stripping against her during arguments:

He’s never been too bad about it. Only when we’ve gotten into fights. If we got into a fight and broke up, he’d be like, “Oh you’ll end up on the stripper pole for the rest of your life” or, “Oh yeah, well go dance on that fucking pole,” you know. But for the most part, I think decent enough. I’d say six... seven... well, maybe six and a half times out of ten he’s okay with it. Which is way better than you could ever expect for a serious relationship.

Misty reported similar experiences in her current and past relationships:

My ex-husband still calls me, “Okay MISTY [mocking tone].” He’d always throw that in my face. How are you being so judgmental about something that pays very well? I just don’t find it degrading. A lot of people do, but that’s their opinion on it. Everybody is allowed their own opinion, right? But yeah, he throws it in my face all the time. Only when we fight, though. It’s like they’re hurting my feelings, but they’re not. They’re just being stupid.

What is interesting about both women’s responses to their partners’ behaviour is that they do not seem terribly surprised or hurt by it. In fact, Billie felt that her relationship was reasonably healthy, even though her partner sometimes used stripping as an insult during arguments. In her experience, a six-and-a-half out of ten acceptance level was the best a woman who works as an exotic dancer could hope for. These responses are not unusual considering dismissal of a partner’s violent behaviour seems to be a common practice for many women when it is constituted as a “natural” part of masculinity, particularly when it was verbal, economic, or psychological, rather than physical (DeShong, 2015). However, as I have stressed throughout this paper, participants’ experiences with violence from intimate partners must also be considered in the context of the wider systemic violence women encounter from sex work stigma. The verbal violence that exotic dancers describe in this section is a particular manifestation of stigma occurring at the interpersonal level that dancers attempt to manage through empathy for their partners’ position as individuals experiencing “soft stigma.”

### ***Hoping for more***

All of the women who participated in my study told me that they had experienced some form of economic, verbal, psychological, or, less often, physical violence, either in past or current relationships with men. As I have discussed, this is a common experience for many women who engage in romantic relationships with men. However, it is much more likely for this violence to surface or become exacerbated when masculinity is threatened (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; DeShong, 2015;

Fernandez-Esquer & Diamond, 2013; Hatty, 2000; Levitt et al., 2008; Muldoon et al., 2015; Reidy et al., 2014; York, 2011). For participants, violence arose in men's reactions to their choice of occupation, which was stigmatized because it involved the commodification of their emotional and sexual labour, as well as men's own experience of secondary or "soft" stigma attached to stripping by association.

However, dancers were not always forced to choose between having a romantic relationship with a man and their occupation.

Kat's husband and Scarlett's partner at the time that I interviewed them rejected hegemonic masculinity in a variety of ways, thus challenging the idea that strippers must choose between celibacy (or brief sexual encounters) or quitting their job in order to secure a compatible partner. In many ways, men who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity by engaging in meaningful and respectful relationships with exotic dancers are committing a revolutionary act; they are respecting women's bodily autonomy and personhood and defending their right to these things despite being ridiculed for not conforming to traditional masculinity. This unique kind of relationship is evident in the way Scarlett described her relationship with her partner:

I keep calling him a magical unicorn because I'm like, he's the man. He's a nice man who's sort of... he's a magical unicorn. They don't exist.

Kat identified as bisexual and had an open relationship with her husband, where feelings of jealousy were openly and respectfully discussed if and when they came up, and Scarlett told me her work as a dancer was a non-issue in their relationship. This does not mean that Scarlett's and Kat's romantic relationships were perfect; rather, that they were complex and fluid.

Thus, working as an exotic dancer presents specific challenges to heteronormative relationships (Barton, 2006; Bradley-Engen & Hobbs, 2010; Bruckert, 2002; Colosi, 2010; Dewey, 2011; Maia, 2012). However, it should not be assumed that working as a dancer precludes finding a compatible romantic partner, as some women dated men who did not conform to traditional notions of masculinity and were better able to navigate these relationships.

Focusing on stigma in dancers' romantic relationships with men sheds light on the violence of hegemonic masculinity and how capitalist logic shames women for expecting compensation for sexual labour and plays into masculine identity. Dancers were not always willing to risk their financial security or emotional well-being in order to sustain a romantic relationship. However, the threats to women's income and the constant management of stigma that was required of them in romantic relationships, no matter how temporary, shows how the systemic violence of sex work stigma materializes in dancers' lives in specific ways.

## **Conclusions**

### **Contributions**

This research contributes to the growing body of work that broadens the rather narrow focus on the reasons why women choose to work as exotic dancers, the "types" of women who choose to strip, and power relations occurring within the strip club,

and moves the analysis towards a more robust theorization of stigma and interpersonal violence in exotic dancers' lives in a specific locale.

Grounded in women's experiences, analysis of my data reveals that it is not having a career in exotic dance that "causes" violence against exotic dancers. Rather, it is the enforcement of traditional femininity, patriarchal capitalism, and normative monogamy through sex work stigma that is the source of embodied violence against exotic dancers in heterosexual relationships. In other words, it is not involvement in sex work, but sex work stigma, combined with the prevalence of violence against women in general, that makes romantic relationships with men dangerous for exotic dancers.

Returning to my original research questions, I found that the women who participated in this study had a sophisticated understanding of the role that stigma played in the violence that occurred in their romantic relationships with men, as well as what they felt they had to do to sustain intimate relationships with men while shielding themselves from potentially violent situations. The stigma management that women did was framed as "work", or a form of extra emotional labour, that exotic dancers had to do in order to engage in romantic partnerships with men. However, stigma management strategies did not immunize women against violence in romantic relationships. Instead, stigma management strategies should be understood as a response to the systemic violence that is already present in exotic dancers' lives, which, for participants, materialized as interpersonal violence from men.

As I have exposed by sharing women's stories about their relationships with romantic partners, the stigma of sex work is rooted in social beliefs about the mixing of commerce with intimacy in specific ways that do not conform to patriarchal and heteronormative ideology and traditional womanhood. The stigma of sex work, then, can be understood as punishment for making money from labor that is generally expected to be provided by women for free in romantic relationships. Building on theory that conceptualizes stigma as a form of systemic violence rooted in the maintenance of power and domination, the result of such a social positioning of sex work(ers) could manifest as direct physical, psychological, verbal, or economic violence towards exotic dancers involved in romantic relationships with men (Frost, 2011; Hannem & Bruckert, 2012; Parker & Aggleton, 2003).

### ***Drawbacks and limitations***

There were several drawbacks and limitations to this study. My data comes primarily from interviews with women who needed drivers at the time of my fieldwork, limiting the diversity of the study. Additionally, even though many women showed interest in my research, the fear of their identities potentially being revealed through participation in my project was deemed too much of a risk for some. Again, this limits my results to the experiences of women who were at least somewhat more comfortable with taking this risk of potential exposure, however minimal.

I also would have liked to recruit several more women for interviews, particularly dancers of colour, to add more voices and diversity of experiences to my analysis. Adding the perspectives of women of colour may have prompted me to investigate the intersections of race and stigma more thoroughly, as I had not thought to ask

participants questions about race or pay as much attention to the role whiteness may have played in how stigma was negotiated in dancer's relationships during my fieldwork.

Trust building with participants is an essential component to studies of sexual labour, and one that takes a great deal of time. Having dedicated three years of field work to this project with the outcome of six women willing to participate in interviews for my research speaks to the issue of time in ethnographic research. Had I been a little more persistent, I am sure I could have convinced more women to participate. However, I considered it more important to follow my professional and personal ethical principals as closely as possible, and so I erred on the side of caution by ensuring I was respecting the boundaries of participants when it came to scheduling interviews.

Unfortunately, the nature of the exotic dance business in Winnipeg, where dancers were often scheduled on short notice, also added to interview scheduling difficulties. Some of these concerns were mitigated by the fact that some women still allowed me to write about them from my field notes, rather than participate in interviews. Related to this issue, another limit to my study is its regional context, which means participants' experiences may have been different if I had chosen to conduct this research in another geographical location. Therefore, there are limitations to the generalizability of my data.

Many of these drawbacks are common issues for studies of sex work and other stigmatized communities (Shaver, 2005). Thus, as exotic dance and other forms of sex work become de-stigmatized, problems related to rapport building and access should become less troublesome.

### ***Recommendations and future research directions***

When sex workers encounter violence in their romantic relationships, knowing that they can come forward and seek professional services without judgment towards them or their occupation is imperative. For therapists and other professionals who treat sex workers, an important aspect of this will be recognizing that encouraging women to quit sex work is not a solution to the suffering that stigma causes in interpersonal relationships. Instead, professionals must endeavor to challenge their own biases against sex work(ers) in order to provide women with the same quality of service offered to others. Future research might look at the ways in which health care and other service providers approach women who work as exotic dancers and in other forms of sex work when they report violence in their interpersonal relationships and identify points of intervention for improving these services.

It is my hope that this research will contribute to the de-stigmatization of sex work by creating awareness about the struggles dancers face in relationships and promoting a more open dialogue between exotic dancers and their loved ones. These areas of research are important because consistently attempting to understand, challenge, and dismantle stigma may ultimately help reduce instances of interpersonal violence in sex worker's lives.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Note

1. The name of the agency, strip clubs, bars, and all other specific locations have been changed, and pseudonyms were used for all individuals who are mentioned.

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