

**Mental Health Benefits of Stripping for Sex Workers
And Therapeutic Implications**

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree of

Master of Counselling (MC)

City University in Canada

Vancouver, BC

January 2025

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Abstract

The goal of this capstone is to both explore and propose the mental health benefits of stripping. Gaps in research will be addressed by putting forward valuable input based on personal experience, emerging studies and sex worker community collaboration. A brief look at North American colonial history rooted in systems of oppression sets the foundation for understanding the problem of why negative beliefs about women who engage in stripping have been perpetuated across centuries. In the literature review, an analysis of recent empirical research and psychological literature about sex workers underscores the field's focus on unhelpful pathology and stigma. A critique is made of inaccurate, biased research that has compounded over time, highlighting the need for resilience-focused research informed by stripper and sex worker participation and meaningful consultation. The result in chapter 3 is a bold redefining of stripping through its experienced mental health benefits compiled by an award-winning stripper with 20 years in the industry along with contributions from sex worker colleagues. The proposed benefits of stripping may be employed as an educational resource to inform counsellors, future researchers, the larger field of psychology and anyone seeking to be a sex worker ally, including pole dance hobbyists. Implications for counsellors working with this population are provided towards clinical practice that is anti-oppressive, grounded in client-centered care and sex worker advocacy.

Keywords: stripper, sex worker, positive, mental health, resilience

Dedication

This writing is dedicated to all women worldwide who are strippers and sex workers. Misunderstood and marginalized as we may be, we are incredibly powerful. May we know our worth, collaborate as a community, and through our inherent courage, may we inspire revolution. To every stripper sister I have known, your kindness has shaped me into the person I am. To Victoria Chase, thank you for being an angel on earth while you were here. To Caitlin Bradley, I'm so sorry justice was not served for you. I vow to do my part in destigmatizing advocacy.

To my colleagues who joyfully contributed their personal experience of the mental health benefits of stripping, thank you with all my heart. To fellow sex worker writers and storytellers who are courageously speaking up, using their voices and telling our stories, thank you for inspiring me. This is just the start!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Women who work as strippers in North America experience benefits from their vocation, including factors that contribute positively to mental health and well-being (Frances, 2017). However, the mental health benefits enjoyed by strippers from their employment have largely been overlooked in decades of research dating back to the 1970s. Within this academic literature during the ensuing decades until the present day, strippers have been stigmatized and pathologized, often through stereotypes centering around traumatic childhoods, broken homes and drug dependence (Benoit et al., 2019b; Benoit et al., 2019c). Upon examination however, much of the existing research conducted about strippers reveals bias and faulty, misleading outcomes, setting the stage for more inaccurate research to be generated (Burnes et al., 2018; Burnes & Dawson, 2023). Furthermore, stripper and sex worker voices are often excluded in research published about them, replicating researchers' inaccurate and harmful perspectives (Sherman et al. 2017; Terplan et al., 2018). These stigmatizing perspectives, which continue to be perpetuated, skew practitioner awareness across the medical and psychological fields, with the potential to negatively impact counsellor competency when working with strippers. Burnes et al. (2017) states, "sex-positive counseling frameworks assert that sexuality is a critical aspect of the counseling process that is often overlooked or purposely ignored by mental health practitioners" (para 1). When sexuality is disregarded by counsellors intentionally or not, by extension, strippers may be adversely impacted by ill-equipped mental health practitioners who may hold conscious or unconscious biases about sex workers similar to those perpetuated in research. Where do these negative beliefs about strippers originate?

Overview of the Topic

To understand the social stigma strippers face in the present day, it is crucial to examine the background of these issues rooted in historic colonialism imbued with patriarchal and religious discourses that asserted control and ownership over women's bodies, purpose and pleasure. Egan (2006a) quotes a seminal 1871 text on reproduction and its biological, moral, and social underpinnings by William Acton that states, "the best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. Love of home, children and domestic duties are the only passions they feel" (p. 3). During this timeframe of establishing colonization in North America with deeply indoctrinated Christianization, in order to be considered good, women were to be sexually uninterested and submissive with heteronormative sexual function that was viewed as being in the service of their husbands. As Egan (2006a) posits, "religious and patriarchal discourses promoted women's chastity thereby making the idea of women's sexual autonomy an oxymoron and any woman who liked sex suspect" (p. 3). With these beliefs as the backdrop, the first record of stripping in North America was met with scrutiny. When burlesque was introduced to the American public in 1868 through traveling dance troop, *British Blondes*, the performances were "deemed 'immoral,' 'obscene,' and 'dangerous,' the women who participated in these shows were viewed with suspicion and often wrongly accused of prostitution" (Egan, 2006a, p. 6). How fascinating that 156 years later, the same wrongful accusations continue to occur in academic scholarship.

When the Minsky Brothers first coined the term "striptease" during wildly popular Burlesque shows that emerged from Broadway's Lower East Side theatres in the 1920s, the acts were celebrated for their craftsmanship that combined comedic timing with "the art of seductive teasing" (Egan, 2006a, p. 7). These performances were sites of resistance where women could play out parodies that challenged the restrictive dominant discourse surrounding feminine

sexuality. As stated by Egan (2006a), “challenging traditional women’s roles, burlesque performers mocked ideas of demure female sexuality and balked at traditional marriage” (p. 7). Jealous theatre producers who were seeing lower revenues than the thriving burlesque performances prompted police raids framed under the guise of Christian morals, which led to restrictions and the eventual closure of most burlesque theatres by the late 1930s. Looking at this troubling history, Frank (2007) documents the fallacies that continue to be generated in academic literature on strippers including attempts at historical erasure and undermining of writing that validates stripping work. Pointing to gaps that often exist in researcher’s arguments and positionality regarding strippers, Frank (2007) problematizes the pattern of “claims that research on strip clubs is virgin, unstudied territory, and not to be taken seriously” (Abstract). This contentious history begs the question: what does the stripper literature say and is there any research that frames the positive, beneficial aspects that strippers experience from their work?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this capstone is ultimately to uncover the mental health benefits of stripping and where there are gaps in the literature, to propose beneficial features based on personal experience and community collaboration. There is the intent to answer the question of what is said about strippers in research while challenging inaccuracies and seeking to uncover any positive studied benefits from stripping. My prediction is that there will be gaps in the literature and potentially a near total absence of any documented mental health benefits experienced by strippers from their work. By doing a deep dive into the literature in chapter 2 in order to demonstrate gaps in research, I embrace this as an opportunity to contribute my expertise to the field as an award-winning stripper with 20 years of experience working as a dancer and feature entertainer in strip clubs across BC. Along with the voices of my community

that are integrated in chapter 3, I propose that there are many mental health benefits from stripping work. With community members, I redefine stripping not only as legitimate work but a radically subversive, affirming employment for many women that inherently challenges patriarchal power structures, providing opportunity for marginalized women. As a contribution to the field, in chapter 3, I use my privileged position in higher education in combination with my access to stripper communities to elevate the voices of my peers in a way that can serve as the basis for future research. Drawing on my experience as an educator elevating awareness in the realm of sex work and stripping, chapter 3 can also serve as an educational resource for counsellors and practitioners across the psychological and medical fields.

This capstone is a call for academic researchers to do better when it comes to research involving strippers as well as an invitation for counsellors to participate as sex worker advocates. This call to action is followed up by the contribution of chapter 3 towards understanding the mental health benefits of stripping grounded in the first hand experiences of strippers. There is a real need for respectful representation of strippers and sex workers in research and it is crucial to involve their voices and meaningful participation (Benoit et al., 2021). When research subjects are not meaningfully consulted, harmful perspectives can be generated in research outcomes, which further contributes to social stigma. As a marginalized group, the harms perpetuated in research result in stripper and sex worker criminalization, violence and murder (Belak & Bennett, 2016). The stakes are high hence the importance of this work. Language is a key feature in destigmatization therefore, research on pole dance as a sport rising in popularity that seeks to erase its origins in stripping and sex work is also challenged in this capstone. While pole dance emerges globally as a celebrated sport with research enough to generate recent meta-analyses on its many benefits (Li et al. 2024), it is crucial that this growing body of research honour the roots

of pole dance instead of erase and sterilize through language that contributes to stigma. With many studied benefits of pole dance documented through this rise in formal research, the same beneficial features must also be considered applicable to those who pole dance as employment, not simply as a hobby for sport. There is significant work to be done in the pole dance community, including within the emerging field of scientific study on pole dance, towards stepping up through social advocacy and sex worker allyship. These issues are examined in chapter 2 with the educational resource of chapter 3 providing the opportunity for increased awareness among potential allies whether they be researchers or counsellors.

Theoretical/ Conceptual Framework

As a conceptual basis, this work is done joyfully. Why is this important? The work of putting forward the features of stripping that are beneficial to mental health inherently involves a bias of positivity. This purposeful perspective that aligns with positive psychology is necessary to zoom in on the good aspects of stripping and potential benefits the work provides. As chapter 2 illustrates, there is an abundance of negative perspectives in writing on stripping, inaccurate as that research may be (Burnes et al. 2018). Dismantling these harmful perspectives that are often rooted in misogynistic bias involves resistance through the opposing view, one that values the joy of stripping work in its celebration of femininity, freedom and expression. To embrace the benefits of stripping work is to resist and dismantle patriarchal structures that seek control and assert ownership of women's bodies. Therefore, this capstone is written with a feminist lens. The collaborative nature of chapter 3, which incorporates the views of fellow strippers from both conversation and literature, illustrates feminist values of collaboration and advocacy. In fact, feminism and stripping share foundational features including community collaboration, a studied protective factor amongst the stripper sisterhood (Burnes & Dawson, 2023). Creativity is another

overlapping principle of feminism and stripping, which, as described in the history of striptease, subverts the status quo. Strippers' creative expression resists dominant power structures by empowering women to profit from their sexuality instead of being punished for it or submitting to male control. In this way, the work of stripping can serve as a form of feminist resistance and activism. Through this conceptual framework, the historic oppression of strippers and sex workers in research is resisted by naming it and describing its problematic, harmful elements in chapter 2. The balancing view, the empowerment paradigm that can be found in some research, will also be explored in chapter 2 with its alignment to feminist and positive psychology theoretical orientations. Where I am most free to express my voice is in chapter 3, through the collaborative research presented; this chapter was a joy to write.

Strippers and sex workers have always had a voice, regardless of whether it is accurately represented in academic silos.¹ While a problematic pattern of inaccurate representation exists in historic depictions of strippers in some research as well as in popular culture, sex workers have remained powerful cultural icons throughout history. Speaking to our places of work, Wahab (2011) states, "culturally, strip clubs are still subjects of contested community debates over morality (Perez 2009; Blakley 2009) but they are also iconographic, with dozens of Hollywood films featuring exotic dancers and clubs" (p. 57). Consider Demi Moore in "Striptease", Cardi B and Jennifer Lopez in "Hustlers" and Julia Roberts in "Pretty Woman" for examples of strippers and sex workers that are emblazoned into cultural consciousness. When it comes to the cultural obsession with strippers in popular media, glamourizing music, and pole dance as fitness, Egan (2006) posits, "fascination does not equal cultural acceptance" (p. 10).

¹ Now more than ever, there exists a wealth of published material authored by strippers and sex workers in the form of autobiographies, novels, podcasts, blogs and more. Several local examples include Apple (2024), Danica & Riley (2019-present), Sia (2019-present).

There is a need for feminist consciousness raising when it comes to some of the false narratives and tired tropes about the stripper or sex worker who needs saving and has no other options (Burnes & Dawson, 2023). Strippers are aware of other work available to them, are educated in many cases and choose stripping as an empowered choice (Benoit et al., 2021). There is a need for advocacy within research and among mental health and medical practitioners to protect the safety of sex workers by destigmatizing their valid work and beyond that, understanding its benefits. My hope is to contribute the proposed mental health benefits of stripping to the field of counselling psychology and psychological research by amplifying the voices of my fellow strippers. My aim is also to provide education for counsellors and any practitioners who may work with this client base since sex workers are worthy of respect and competent care. However, regardless of whether a counsellor works with strippers or sex workers and ever intends to, there is benefits in seeking education about this population as a form of social justice advocacy. Joyfully through this work, I encourage practitioners across disciplines to check their biases about strippers and to dispel myths towards more positive perspectives.

Reflectivity and Positionality Statement

Since the most basic information is usually lacking on researcher positionality in the realm of literature about strippers and sex workers, I want to ensure I cover the basics and provide important background about myself and my employment history in the field. While my legal name was changed after being adopted, my name at birth was Tempest Jade. Born on Treaty 6 territory in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, I was adopted through social services as an infant into a white, Christian family on Treaty 4 territory in Regina. I am a queer, cisgender female, I use the pronouns she, her and hers. My adoptive family was middle to upper socioeconomic

status with both parents coming from lower to middle socioeconomic families then working to receive higher level education with white collar professional designations. Both parents from my adoptive family are of Norwegian ancestry, I know next to nothing about my ancestry as I was part of a closed adoption and have been unable to make contact with my birth family in spite of efforts. In receiving higher education, I acknowledge my privilege and seek to use my privileged position in the pursuit of social justice as it pertains to giving a voice to fellow women who are sex workers towards their increased rights, safety and destigmatized social status. Growing up, I received formal training as a dancer with testing at the highest levels in ballet, jazz and tap dance modalities. At age 18, I came to Vancouver to pursue dance and acting and was accepted into a professional cabaret jazz dance company. This dance company performed as part of an event at Vancouver's historic The Penthouse Nightclub, established in 1947 as a jazz venue that hosted the likes of Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra and Louis Armstrong to name a few. Presently, The Penthouse is a popular downtown strip club. My debut performance there in 2006 marked my first foray into this unique underworld and what would become my vocation as a stripper named Tempest Jade.²

My return to The Penthouse many years later after a break in dancing to pursue an honours degree from UBC involved working hard to get onstage as a stripper, also known as a feature entertainer. What I initially discovered is that in BC, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and other parts of Canada, women who perform onstage as feature entertainers are represented by agencies. Much like actors have agents, stripper agents audition potential strippers and the industry is highly competitive. By this point, I had sought pole training from a stripper mentor

² Dancing as my birth name feels like a way of honouring my unknown roots. It also allows me to answer the question that every stripper gets asked a hundred times per night, "what's your real name?" with "that's it."

and pole dance studios as an investment in my prospective business along with buying costumes, hair extensions and perfecting my stage make up. After a couple auditions in the form of amateur nights at various strip clubs, I was offered the opportunity to travel to Victoria for a week-long booking at a club there called The Fox. I was on the ferry the next day with my bags packed in what felt like an adventure and the start of a new life; this turned out to be true. In the following decade until the present day, I have toured BC working at more than 17 clubs, all booked through the same agency. The agency takes a cut for every booking, which involves being paid per show through a daily show schedule, usually for one week at a time then the dancer rotates to another club. The rules and expectations in each province and at each club are distinct with some requesting elaborate stage costumes along with elevated performances such as having pole and aerial hoop skills or fire performance abilities. When a dancer receives cash tips onstage, she is expected to tip out the DJ and potentially the bar and security staff. Feature entertainers are not the only strippers at most strip clubs in Canada with many having house-based women who are not booked through an agency but rather who freelance and provide lap dances only. These freelancing strippers pay to show up for work, paying what is called a floor fee and with each lap dance sold, they give a cut to the house. Some clubs take up to 40% of the price paid for a lap dance, which is a set rate that varies from club to club. Strip clubs are legal in most parts of Canada. However, under Canadian law, specifically Bill C-36, the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA), strippers are considered sex workers, an umbrella term that includes some criminalized forms of work such as prostitution.

I provide this information as helpful context to frame the remainder of the capstone and my experience in the industry. While stripping is a legal form of employment in parts of Canada, Bill C-36 criminalizes many other aspects of sex work in ways that further marginalize and

endanger sex workers. While this will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2, there are also prohibitive laws designed to limit strip clubs with some blatant efforts to put them out of business such as changing bylaws to increase strip club business licenses exponentially (personal communication with strip club owner, 2020). Just as Bill C-36 states its intention is to, “reduce the demand for prostitution and its incidence” (Department of Justice Canada, 2014, p. 1), many Canadian jurisdictions pass policy that essentially leads to the shut down strip clubs, which does nothing to reduce demand for sex work and effectively endangers strippers by ensuring they are out of work in secure environments. In Canada, sex workers are harmed and endangered by misguided laws and policies that stigmatize and seek to erase their chosen form of work. Importantly, *stripping and sex work is a choice*. Many policies globally conflate stripping and sex work with human trafficking; *they are distinct*. When they are falsely conflated, policy makers justify criminalizing sex work, which further harms and endangers sex workers, forcing their work into more underground, unprotected environments (Argento et al., 2020; Benoit et al., 2019d; Benoit et al., 2019e). Another myth that has been busted in recent literature is the tired trope that strippers and sex workers are coerced into their work, which for the most part, is untrue (Burnes & Dawson, 2023). This capstone is specifically about women who choose stripping consciously and joyfully as their line of work.

The positionality I bring to this writing includes extensive personal experience taking joy in my work as a stripper with dedication to the art and craftsmanship involved in stripping. I have won several strip club contest titles as well as competing in pole dance fitness through the Canadian Pole Fitness Association with wins at the local, national and international levels. In 2021, I began teaching pole dance in studios while still stripping plus attending grad school and I continue to be an educator in pole studios. Recently, I have begun traveling to teach workshops

aimed at raising awareness among pole dance hobbyists about the roots of their beloved hobby and the realities of being a stripper. In these workshops when I educate students on the joys of being a stripper, I also balance my message with pragmatism by asking questions to help pole students uncover biases they may hold. For example, if strippers are considered sex workers and a sex worker goes missing, how might police and media potentially treat the case differently? The personal experience I bring to this research comes with awareness that there are real and devastating draw backs that strippers encounter when navigating oppressive systems that perpetuate sex worker stigma. To use non academic terms, the benefit of my perspective is that when engaging with historic research in chapter 2, I see through the bullshit. Immediately, because of my personal experience, I am able to detect inaccuracies, researcher biases and point out the cascading effect this has created in research on sex workers over time. While there is some modern research grounded in strength-based perspectives that incorporate meaningful consultation and contribution from sex workers when conducting studies, this change is slow, especially in academia. Is my perspective biased? Yes, I have made it clear that this work embraces a bias of positivity. However, let this conscious bias serve my research positionality in order to honour the autonomy and freedom of sex workers who experience many benefits from their chosen work. My aim in seeking to uncover the mental health benefits of stripping in research in chapter 2 and consulting with my community to put forward such benefits formally in chapter 3 is intended to be radical advocacy towards the better understanding and treatment of sex workers everywhere, particularly by those in the psychological field.

Definition of Terms

Erotophobia: a way of understanding the negative messages and social conditioning received by individuals and cultures about the erotic, generally resulting in destructive consequences and

poor mental health outcomes. Burnes et al. (2017) quote one definition of erotophobia as, “the ‘irrational reaction to the erotic which makes individuals and society vulnerable to social control’” (p. 478). Furthermore, “individuals are socialized by certain erotophobic messages about sexuality, resulting in shaming erotophobic fears and attitudes that have a direct negative impact on individuals’ resilience, or ability to bounce back from adverse events” (Burnes et al., 2017, p. 478.)

Exotic Dance: a term that has recently been challenged and resisted based on awareness raised about its racially charged origins that referred to people of colour in touring performance acts. Until recent months, this term was used to describe the style of movement characterized by strippers. It is being replaced in pole studios and online environments like social media with a wealth of different terms to describe this style of dance classes such as “heels”, “erotic pole”, “sexy style” and even “stripper style.”³ By extension, referring to a stripper as an exotic dancer is an outdated term; just call us strippers. Stripper is not a derogatory term. (See Stripper.)

Internalized Whorephobia: experienced by people, particularly sex workers, who internalize whorephobic violence. This may result in negative beliefs and attitudes about oneself leading to poor mental health outcomes. Tempest (2019) describes, “whorephobic beliefs may lead intimate partners to dehumanize us, and refuse to respect our boundaries, while internalized whorephobia

³ On most social media platforms, there is extensive censorship. Many terms related to pole dance and stripping are subject to becoming “shadow banned” or unsearchable and in some case, deleted altogether. Even carefully curated stripper profiles that are compliant with social media guidelines are subject to vanish without notice, which has consequences for a sex worker’s business. Pole studios and pole dancers are also subject to such events therefore, coded language is often used on the internet. For example, “skripper” and “seggs work” or acronyms like SW to denote sex work become vernacular.

may lead sex workers to feel powerless in the face of this abuse” (p. 335). (See Whorephobia.)

Pole Dance and Pole Fitness: interchangeable terms that, in this instance, refer to the sport of pole, which involves dance studios and fitness environments where pole classes are instructed.

Kim and Kwon (2019) assert, “pole dance has recently become an international sensation among women as a fitness workout that builds body strength and flexibility” (p. 2). Not restricted to any gender, pole studios see students of all genders with some offering classes specifically for trans and non-binary students. While many pole studios offer “heels” or “erotic pole” classes that more directly mirror the style of dance belonging to strippers, in many instances these studios seek to distance themselves from the origins of pole in sex work. Articulating the boundaries that separate pole dance from its stripper roots, Kim and Kwon (2019) put forward,

As the community of pole dancers and instructors identify pole dance as pole fitness as well as using other terms such as pole sport or pole art, the International Pole Sport Federation (IPSF) has currently been provisionally recognized for pole sport to be accepted as a conventional sport. (p. 2)

Sex-Positive Counselling Frameworks: an understudied area of psychology and is often overlooked by mental health practitioners. After finding very few articles that examined this area in a content analysis of peer-reviewed articles in sex research journals, Burnes et al. (2017) put forward,

Although an examination at the intersection of positive psychology and sexuality may be difficult to find within certain domains of professional psychology, we argue that sex positivity is particularly aligned with counseling psychology values because it

conceptualizes sex and sexuality as part of healthy development, enhancing client wellness and resilience throughout the lifespan. (p. 471)

Sex Positivity: “a term used to describe individuals and communities who emphasize openness, nonjudgmental attitudes, freedom, and liberation about sexuality and sexual expression” (Burnes et al. 2017, p. 471). Additionally, Burnes et al. (2017) offer the following,

Sex positivity has become a framework that integrates the physical, somatic, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual aspects of sexual practice and sexual being in positive, enriching ways (Syme, Mona, & Cameron, 2013). The World Health Organization has noted that within a sex positivity framework, an individual’s sexual intimacy, orientation, and eroticism are viewed as enhancing the individual’s personality, communication, and love (2006). (p. 471-472)

Sex Work/ Sex Worker: a broad umbrella term for workers in sex industries. Burnes et al. (2018) quote a definition of sex work found in literature as, “one or several services in which sex is exchanged for money or goods. Specifically, these authors conceptualized sex work as different from sexual identities or sexual orientations and as jobs of 'streetwork, ship work, parlor work, escort work, working independently, mistressing, peep show work, stripping, telephone work and topless dancing’” (p. 1541). Important to distinguish since it is notably absent from this definition is the fact that *not all sex work involves sex or the performance of explicit sex acts*. It is common in research to conflate all sex workers as providing full service, as in sexual intercourse or sexual acts, however, some sex workers do not even come into contact with clients. Strippers in Canada specifically are examples of sex workers who do not provide sex as part of their work

in strip clubs. This distinction is not intended to perpetuate whorearchical rankings, instead it is for the purpose of properly defining and distinguishing different forms of sex work.

Sex Work Researchers' Positionality: represents one of the biggest gaps in most sex work research. Egan and Frank (2005) note that while researchers who have worked as strippers are publishing literature that “theoretically [explores] these sites, researcher/ customers have not yet explicitly done so, and their reflexive, self-conscious analyses of such practices could add another crucial layer of depth to existing analyses of the sex industry providers and consumers” (p. 314).

Stripper: a courageous woman.

The word stripper emerged from the term striptease used during the 1920s burlesque era in New York's Lower East Side theatres to describe a subversive style of performance that combined comedy and dance while removing clothing items. Strippers are sex workers, usually women, who may or may not work in strip clubs. Strippers are also described as healers, therapists, entrepreneurs and business women (Frances, 2017). Strippers may or may not have formal dance training in pole dance as well as other cirque, acrobatic and artistic modalities such as aerial hoop, silks, fire spinning, poi, gymnastics and burlesque, which may be incorporated into stage shows. Strippers are usually independent contractors yet the expectations and rules with which they must comply vary dramatically depending on the strip club and geographic location. The information about strippers in this capstone emerges largely from awareness centred in Western Canada, where stage dancers are booked through agencies as feature entertainers. Within this region, each strip club has its own particular bylaws with which it must

remain in compliance. For strippers, this means that some clubs strictly prohibit client contact in lap dances while others permit partial contact where the dancer may touch the client yet the client cannot touch. Most strip clubs require full nudity during stage shows and lap dances however, clients are never to touch dancers while onstage and in lap dances, the stripper has autonomy over the amount of contact she makes with a client. *Lap dance* and *private dance* are interchangeable terms and an integral aspect to most strippers' work. Lap dances are generally one on one time with a customer who pays the dancer per song, she then must divide the pay with the club. *Stripper* and *dancer* may also be used interchangeably depending on the situation and desired level of disclosure. Amongst each other, most women refer to themselves as strippers and prefer the term as it is more direct.

Importantly, if you ever see a stripper perform onstage or if you receive a private dance, tip her every time. There is a misconception that strippers are well paid by strip clubs; this is not the case and while I will not get into specific dollar amounts, what I will say is that strippers absolutely depend on tips, especially when they are expected to tip out numerous club staff.

The Sexual Stigma Theory: contends that society collectively attributes negative judgment, lower status, and diminished power to any sexual identity, behaviour, relationship, or community that deviates from traditional norms. Additionally, Weimer (2023) puts forward, “the sexual stigma theory further clarifies that any act... that promotes or supports the non-conventional usage of bodies is looked down upon... The engagement in, or support of, a sexually deviant behavior receives stigma” (p. 13). Therefore, any sexual expression that is not heteronormative for the purpose of procreation is subject to stigma and inferior status in dominant discourse.

Whorearchy: formally used in the field of sex work literature to denote a derogatory approach that stratifies sex workers where those who experience intersections of oppression are viewed as the lowest. Weiner (2023) states that whorearchy is,

A term used to create a hierarchical system based on the level of intimacy between clients and [sex workers]. This term displays the classification of sex, race, and type of sex work through an erotophobic lens that creates a separation between what is more acceptable in the sex work community. (p. 8)

An unhelpful construct informed by social stigma, whorearchy perpetuates the harms of oppressive systems. Building on this principle, Fuentes (2022) puts forward,

Within the whorearchy, systems of oppression that are present throughout everyday life are magnified and ageism, racism, ableism, classism, and the type of work that a research actor engages in define their sex worker experience. Where the umbrella of sex work may serve to unify some workers, it is also prone to its own forms of stratification. (p. 230)

Many sex workers resist whorearchy by opposing the constructed stratification when it appears. Particularly for sex workers that have awareness of social justice, those who may hold more relative privilege, resisting whorearchy is part of destigmatizing sex work and advocating for the rights and safety of all sex workers, in particular those who may hold less relative privilege.

Whorephobia: a term used by scholars to describe the fear held by individuals or systems including, “negative attitudes toward individuals who pair sexual expression with economic gain” (Burnes et al., 2018, p. 1542). Whorephobia is the form of stigma that sex workers specifically experience with Burnes et al. (2018) noting, “the criminalization of sex work contextualizes how larger political, social, and economic systems inaccurately understand sex

work” (p. 1542). The implications of this stigma are wide reaching with a range of negative outcomes from sex workers’ inaccurate and biased representation in research to laws endangering sex worker safety leading to an elevated risk of violence and death (Argento et al., 2020; Belak & Bennett, 2016).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In historical writing from a North American perspective dating back to the 1970s, research about female strippers has been inaccurately trauma and illness-focused. According to Burnes and Dawson (2023), “faulty baseline assumptions in mental health research have led to even more faulty research — in this case, specifically about the reasons that people enter sex work” (p. 46). Misleading outcomes have been reconstructed across research over decades, creating a compounded stigmatizing effect that has been detrimental for strippers through falsely psychopathologizing perceptions that act as a barrier to helpful clinical care (Burnes et al., 2018; Burnes & Dawson, 2023; Weimer, 2023). In recent scholarship seeking to support female strippers, Weimer (2023) questioned, “how come most of the readily available research is focused on stereotypes, consequences, and negative implications?” (p. 74). In order to understand the need for research that highlights the *strengths* and *resiliency* of female strippers along with positive mental health benefits they experience from their work, it is necessary to first engage with the research riddled with stereotypes. Therefore, this literature review will be categorized according to parameters put forward by Burnes and Dawson (2023) in their acclaimed text, *Essential Clinical Care for Sex Workers: A Sex-Positive Handbook for Mental Health Practitioners*. The two categories of research are described as the harmful “Oppressive Paradigm” and a newer “Resilience/ Empowerment Paradigm” (Burnes & Dawson, 2023). Both paradigms will be explored in literature with the resiliency lens providing a foundation on which future, constructive research and helpful clinical practice can be conducted (Burnes & Dawson, 2023). Resiliency-focused research will be provided in chapter 3, which integrates the perspectives and experiences of strippers, to serve as a starting point for consciousness raising among counselling clinicians and the larger psychological community.

[Theme A] Oppressive Paradigm

In their handbook designed for use by counselling clinicians, after outlining troubling and inaccurate portrayals of sex workers in western literature and media throughout the twentieth century to the present, Burnes and Dawson (2023) inquire about the potential impact of such unquestioned representation on a systems level. Responding to the systemic effect, Burnes and Dawson (2023) state, “research with a lot of bias created a baseline of illness and stigma” (p. 43), which then became the basis for more studies that perpetuated harmful stereotypes . In this scholarship, women in particular are viewed through a pathologizing lens with speculation that work as a stripper is the outcome of early trauma while the early experiences of male strippers do not receive similar scrutiny (Ronai & Cross, 1998, p. 102). Deviance scholars have made assumptive claims that women who strip are forever damaged from their work, citing the experience of a lifelong identity crisis without longitudinal research to back up such statements (Wesely, 2003). When formal research on female strippers has been conducted in recent decades, the influence of historic bias shows up in assumptions baked into study parameters about drug use, HIV risk and presumed prostitution (Lim et al., 2017; Rosen et al., 2020; Sherman et al., 2017; Terplan et al., 2018). While the tired trope of associating strippers with drug misuse is perpetuated in the very construction of these studies, Burnes and Dawson (2023) note, “a discussion of resilience factors in the analysis of these diagnoses is noticeably absent” (p. 46-47). Investigation of this absence is necessary towards the aim of this capstone.

Problematic Samples and Data

A trend in psychological research has been observed in which psychopathology, trauma and substance use in sex workers is overemphasized while resilience factors and positive coping is completely ignored (Burnes et al., 2012; Burnes et al., 2018; Wahab et al., 2011). The

consequence of omitting sex worker strengths results not only in perpetuation of stigma but also patterns of criminalizing and incarcerating certain sex workers. Burnes et al. (2018) describe,

With such a lens, prevalence data of sex workers are often based on statistics derived from arrests and legal issues, creating an inaccurate lens through which sexologists conceptualize sex work in research and practice. Further, methodological bias (e.g., convenience samples, no control groups) in sex work research consistently emerges (Bernstein, 2007; Wahab et al., 2011; Weitzer, 2010). (p. 1542)

With the exploitative use of convenience samples from prisons and institutions, sex work research conducted in these facilities causes inaccurate generalizations to be made about the entirety of sex workers. Wahab et al. (2011) notes, “the methods and motivations of researchers remain somewhat murky... [while] the majority of researchers did not specify their strategies for sampling, data collection and analysis” (p. 70-71). While stripper and sex worker resiliency is often overlooked in research, so too are the positions of power held by researchers.

Researchers’ Positionality. Weiner (2023) posits, “the perception about sex work being ‘dirty’ permeates society’s ability to explore the benefits of being an exotic dancer” (p. 74). This unexamined perception poisons the foundations upon which most existing research about female strippers is constructed without consideration of the biases baked into study parameters and the privileged positions held by researchers. When conducting research, Barton (2006) became curious about the questions asked of strippers in literature and the intent in which such inquiry was rooted. Prevalent questions about sexual abuse in childhood, alcohol and drug use are often grounded in the researcher’s unstated and perhaps unconscious intention of proving that such factors caused female strippers to pursue their line of work, with lacking consideration of the frequency of such experiences in non-strippers. Elaborating on the individual researcher’s

unchecked assumptions and stereotypes, Barton (2006) points out,

I began to realize that these basic assumptions about the nature of sex work and sex workers, along with the power differentials that often exist between researchers and their subjects in terms of gender; education level, economic resources and cultural capital, were influencing not only the questions that were asked, but also *who* was studied, in what manner, and how the findings were represented. (p. 33)

In perceiving researchers' absent positionality, the results being sought in studies are assembled with pre-conceptions and biased questions, ignoring the political nature and cultural context of those doing the asking. This repeated process has been called out and critiqued by feminist, post-modern, and post-colonial scholars who describe it as, "a strategy of containing, othering, and regulating those with less socio-economic power" (Wahab et al., 2011, p. 57). These same scholars have called for what Wahab et al. (2011) describe as, "research methods that recognize how researcher subjectivities impact the knowledge production process" (p. 57). What specific practices have been employed in the strategy of "othering" female strippers?

Strategic "Othering"

One strategic method used by researchers in the practice of othering female strippers is to undermine their positive understandings of identity, which are nuanced and interwoven with the intentions fuelling their work. Let us look at an example of the problematic. In a dismissal of female strippers' positive framing of work identities, Mavin and Grady (2013) cite, "these identity roles are of good girls in dirty work, as the dancers distance themselves from the stigma attached to their work and reposition themselves favourably. They construct barriers to separate themselves from the other, bad girls" (p. 247). While self awareness of work identity underscores a female dancer's ability to embody multiple roles in life including her identity outside of work,

whorephobic perceptions devalue this practice (Burnes et al., 2018). Ultimately, strippers in this research cannot win since their work will never be perceived *by the researchers themselves* as anything but dirty. Notice researcher positionality in the following statement,

in constructing and drawing upon the temporality of the dirty work as a means to rationalize their position in the sex industry, the dancers in this research construct life or career dancers as an Other — they are bad girls; viewed less favourably and given lower status in the hierarchy. By contrast, if it is a means to an end for an exotic dancer, then is it legitimate work done by good girls. (Mavin & Grady, 2013, p. 246)

In a process of othering, Mavin and Grady (2013) seek to classify strippers as either good or bad in whorearchical research that aims to pit dancers against one another by stratifying them.

Ironically, the authors here claim that some strippers *other* themselves from fellow strippers by constructing good identities of dancing only temporarily to distance themselves from those with a supposedly lower status who do so as a career. These claims are simply false and illogical. In most professions, those with more experience hold the potential for more advanced positions and higher rank. From personal knowledge, career strippers are often accomplished dancers with extensive experience, valuable insight to share through mentorship and in some clubs, higher paid stage prices due to their developed skill. In the same way that future doctors do residencies when in medical school, strippers starting out have a lot to learn, often receiving guidance from more experienced dancers. Instead of using this logic, Mavin and Grady (2013) state, “temps position themselves as superior to the lifer and in doing so highlight their ambition, drive and businesslike approach to the work, which is often associated with masculinity” (p, 246). The bias of the researchers is cemented into their findings yet the problematic gender associations remain invisible to them; they assume that those who strip temporarily display a more masculine and

thus superior ambition to exit the industry. The sexist inference is thus that strippers who are career entertainers are less-than with somehow diminished ambition yet without any research to back up this claim. This research fraught with strange gendered bias and sexism against female strippers, particularly those who strip longer term as a career, has been critiqued and resisted in scholarship (Egan & Frank, 2005; Ronai & Cross, 1998; Weiner, 2023).

(Sexual) Double Standards. Ronai and Cross (1998) observed the trend in researcher attitudes whereby men who strip were viewed as fascinating and novel whereas women were viewed through the lens of deviance as a threat to society. In reference to sexual double standards (SDS), Weiner (2023) describes SDSs as the following, “the disproportionate valuation of binary genders that supports judgement of women’s sexual behavior more harshly than men” (p. 102). When SDSs emerge in research, the positionality of those making the judgement is often concealed within the privileged researcher position through study construction based on gendered assumptions, as we have seen. Noting the gendered structure of strip clubs as sites where gender roles in performance are commodified, Egan and Frank (2005) posit, “the sex of the researcher, his or her gender identity, and his or her sexuality is intimately implicated in any interaction had inside” (p. 304). Misogyny has been named by Burnes et al. (2018) through the overemphasis in research of women in sex work, pathologizing their sexuality while simultaneously erasing the existence of sex workers of other genders. Feminist ethnographers Egan and Frank (2005) problematize the researcher with no acknowledged gender identity or pre-existing perspective, pointing to “inequities in the relationship between the observers and the observed... [while being] critical of the power of the authorial position which posits their academic analysis and writing as the final word on the contexts in which they study” (p. 304). Across the literature, academics employ misogynistic language and attitudes towards female

strippers, putting forward their biases and negative labels as truth.

The SDS can be seen clearly in statements such as, “for some dirty workers, specifically exotic dancers as sex workers, doing gender well will not be enough to reposition bad girls (bad, dirty work) into good girls (good, clean work)” (Mavin & Grady, 2013, p. 232). Female strippers cannot win under these imposed language structures where foundational beliefs centre around their work as inherently *dirty*, making them *bad*, while strengths and resilience go unnoticed. Sexism is abundant in this research including an example cited by Ronai and Cross (1998) of a study conducted by male researchers on stripper breast size and mental instability. While deviance scholarship on strippers continues to emerge in the last decade (Mavin & Grady, 2013), homophobia appeared in research starting in the 1970s. Speaking to the emergence of 1970s sociological literature on stripteasers as they were called, Egan (2006a) states, “searching for causal origins, deviance scholars theorized that strippers had poor relationships with their parents and were easily led and more prone to other deviant behaviors such as drug abuse, prostitution, and lesbianism than other women” (p. 8). However, homophobia is hardly a thing of the past in the study of female strippers. In the past decade, a cluster of research emerging out of Baltimore has been riddled with discriminatory issues.

Lim et al. (2017) released a study titled *Psychosocial Characteristics and Sexual Risk Behaviors among Female Exotic Dancers Who Have Sex with Women in Baltimore: A Brief Report*. Researchers Lim et al. (2017) state their aim, “to compare psychosocial characteristics and sexual risk behaviors that may increase sexually transmitted infection risk among women who have sex with women compared to women who have sex with men only who are female exotic dancers” (p. 318). A thin veil of concern for the vulnerabilities such (queer?) strippers may experience obscures several biases including the problematization of people who have sex

outside of heteronormativity, exemplified here through the fear perpetuated in the study of potential disease spread (Wiener, 2023). Noting the novelty of their research, Lim et al. (2017) state, “few studies examine how sexual risk might be shaped by multiple social identities such as same sex behavior and simultaneous participation in the sex industry” (p. 323). To analyze some of the problematic elements built into this research, women who strip who also have sex with other women are the subjects of scrutiny here for the risk they hypothetically may pose in spreading infections. There is an undertone of homophobia. The study is built on an investigation of the sex strippers have outside of work and the researchers’ assumption of risks and social circumstances associated with homosexual behaviour. Harkening to the 1970s panic in research that stripping causes lesbianism, homophobic perspectives in this study fuel a strange and unclear investigation. While queer people do experience marginalization as do sex workers, this study claims to be about strippers when it is actually investigating risky behaviour in sex workers who engage in paid sexual services. In the limitations of the study, the researchers admit to unclear investigation in which they wrongfully conflate strippers with full service sex workers (FSSW), a common trend observed in stripper research (Sawicki et al., 2019). Another admitted limitation, the researchers did not bother to ascertain participant sexual orientation, a strange disconnect when investigating hypothetical risk of infections by those who engage in queer sex along with apparent concern about its larger social implications. In addition to homophobic undercurrents and convoluted investigation methods, the results are presented as though all strippers engage in sexual services at strip clubs or outside of work, which is untrue.

Similar claims are presented in further studies out of Baltimore by the same researcher group, who used an intentionally selected marginalized population with limited participants, while acknowledging lacking relevant information in data collection (Sherman et al., 2017;

Terplan et al., 2018). Purposefully selecting a geographically specific, small study sample with potentially more extreme outcomes, Sherman et al. (2017) state, “our pilot research [was] conducted on a concentrated block of urban and socially marginalized EDCs [exotic dance clubs] called ‘The Block’ in Baltimore City” (p. 2148). Using such a site allowed the researchers to play into stereotypical stripper tropes however, the study construction is riddled with bias and data that is carefully curated to present worst potential outcomes. One of these studies sought to investigate contraceptive use in new female strippers, once again conflating stripping with FSSW and presenting outcomes as though the two are synonymous (Terplan et al., 2018). Particularly egregious are the assumptive gymnastics in the work of Sherman et al. (2017) titled, *The Development of an HIV Risk Environment Scale of Exotic Dance Clubs*. Sherman et al. (2017) cite, “there has been limited research investigating the nature of exotic dance clubs (EDCs) as indoor HIV/STI risk environments, despite many functioning as illicit indoor sex exchange venues” (p. 2148). Using sweeping, assumption-riddled terms, Sherman et al. (2017) build an entire study conflating stripping with FSSW.⁴ Based on this wrongful assumption, researchers construct study parameters with limited samples, admittedly lacking data and inflammatory language resulting in incomplete analysis that becomes generalized as a hypothetical worst-case scenario in which strippers are becoming infected with and spreading HIV. There are also homophobic undercurrents here that harken back to hysteria during AIDS crisis in the 1980s-1990s in which homosexual people were vilified for the spread of the disease. While full service work, brothel work and all facets of sex work must be de-stigmatized towards reducing harm to sex workers, it is vital to clearly distinguish between various forms of sex work.

⁴ It is possible that some strip clubs in the world offer sexual services. In North America, I am personally aware that this is strictly prohibited in clubs across British Columbia, Alberta and Manitoba. As for the United States, an author with lived experience, Egan (2006a), states sexual services were strictly prohibited at clubs on the East Coast in the New England area.

Researchers must be made aware of bias and potentially harmful generalizations through meaningful consultations with those being studied instead of going in with inaccurate, unquestioned notions about participants.

Feminist Response To Stigma

Speaking to this documented phenomenon, Weimer (2023) notes, “the unique experiences of women performing various types of sex work are not recognized. Therefore, *the various experience and forms of sex work are grouped into one category*” (p. 101, emphasis added). Many have called for greater reflexivity among researchers and meaningful inclusion of sex workers in study design and construction towards more accurate and helpful outcomes for those being researched (Burnes et al., 2018; Egan & Frank, 2005; Wahab et al., 2011). In the words of a former stripper now working as a registered therapist with her own private practice, when it comes to research about sex workers, she states, “nothing about us, without us” (personal communication, September, 2024). Wahab et al. (2011) and others demand greater accountability in research, citing, “we call for researchers to provide more detailed accounts of their methods and data analysis processes” (p. 72). Additionally, study design must *start* with a de-stigmatizing lens that legitimizes sex work and seeks meaningful consultation with sex workers in study design (Burnes et al., 2017). Such action enables true “researcher reflexivity” which Wahab et al. (2011) states will provide richer contextual consideration in research towards improved cultural sensitivity and greater knowledge of how strippers meaningfully integrate into society (p. 72). Investigating the imposition of those who collect data with no declared positionality, Egan and Frank (2005) remark how this makes the researcher vulnerable to assert their perspective without awareness of how they are irrevocably implicated in the process. Through this lack of conscientiousness, researchers contaminate their data and outcomes in harmful ways.

Looking at the problematic studies out of Baltimore, it is clear to see the researchers' fingerprints all over the very construction of their studies, causing contamination through assumptions and generalizations. Rosen et al. (2020) sought to uncover patterns of drug use among female dancers to point out occupational risks with notably absent remarks on rewards of the work, cultural context and worker resilience. Out of touch concluding statements note how female dancers should simply be connected to employment agencies to find better work in order to avoid "financial strain that induces risky workplace behaviors... and, subsequently, drug use" (Rosen et al., 2020, p. 8). Feminist reflexivity observes the lack researcher awareness in such statements made by a highly educated, privileged group of white-collar scholars about study subjects with whom they have *little to no meaningful, humanizing interaction*. While researcher positionality continually goes unchecked amongst this group, looking at who funded the studies paints a clearer picture of the vested interests involved. In the case of this research group (Lim et al., 2017; Rosen et al., 2020; Sherman et al., 2017; Terplan et al., 2018), all studies note funding was provided by groups including, "the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the Johns Hopkins University Center for AIDS Research, and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease" and others (Lim et al., 2018, p. 323). The implication of targeting the most marginalized group of female strippers allows for more extreme study outcomes that provide greater reward to funders who favourably view findings that align with institutional interests. Meanwhile, nothing is mentioned of what stripping makes possible for women from "The Block" who experience multiple marginalizing intersections and systemic oppression that inevitably impacts opportunity and employment. Nowhere are the strengths of these women mentioned.

While no conflict of interest was declared in any of these studies, consideration of the impact of funding in shaping study design, execution and outcome must occur. Does this

research contribute to increased stigmatization, criminalization and the potential incarceration of an already marginalized group of strippers and sex workers? Does this research help or harm those being studied and were the voices of any participants meaningfully consulted at any point in the process, particularly during early stages? The studies note that their data collecting methods employed surveys on tablets in order to be minimally intrusive. However, this does not erase the underlying problematic structure of the research itself, the biased questions being asked and to whom. Egan and Frank (2005) call for scholars to do better, stating, “researcher reflexivity in such a scenario is not an unscholarly admission of bias, a form of extraneous and irrelevant information, or a type of self-serving indulgence, but can actually be a responsible and theoretically significant contribution to one’s analysis” (p. 304). Particularly relevant to feminist theory is the aim of consciousness raising. In this context, revealing blind spots in researchers’ privileged positions leading to gaps in understanding between study designers and study participants can be remedied by meaningful inclusion of those being studied in study construction and throughout the research process.

Clinical Implications

When considering how stigmatizing research can harm sex workers in clinical contexts, skewed study outcomes may negatively impact mental health clinician perspectives and reinforce systemic barriers to accessing care. Burnes and Dawson (2023) assert, “inaccurate studies also lead clinicians to focus on psychopathology and mental health symptoms in sex workers *that the clinician begins to believe have been caused by (or led to) their desire to enter sex work*” (p. 46). While guidelines for care will be outlined in chapter 3, clinicians with sex worker clients must check their biases to avoid perpetuating harmful, pathologizing stereotypes. An issue upholding the oppressive paradigm is an overemphasis in literature on a person’s entry into sex work, which

many researchers assume is based on mental illness or past trauma (Burnes et al., 2018; Burnes & Dawson, 2023). Weiner (2023) cites an interview with Dr. Theodore Burnes who problematizes biased analysis, stating, “there is a lot of desire to... know why people enter the industry. Which is really interesting because we often don't ask people... why did you want to become an accountant?” (p. 56). Rife with inaccuracies, historical writings on a person’s entry into the sex industry have depicted an individual who desperately needs to fund a drug habit, has no other employment options, lacks basic needs like housing and is manipulated to start by. Burnes and Dawson (2023) note of these troubling portrayals, “several biased assumptions and methodological flaws inhabit these previous writings on entry into sex work” (p. 44). To elaborate on the consequences of unempowered and false perspectives about a woman's reasons for entering sex work, “mental health practitioners then see the sex worker as a female who entered the field because of some past sickness” (Burnes & Dawson, 2023, p. 45). This problematic perspective may then obscure suitable clinical care.

Addressing the common stereotypic motivators that circulate about engagement in sex work, Weiner (2023) interviewed a clinical psychologist who remarked, “a lot of people have had sexual trauma. Presumably, a lot of feminine presenting people will have experienced sexual trauma, just by nature of statistics of women experiencing sexual trauma” (p. 60). To reinforce the stereotype that every female sex worker has experienced trauma in a way that motivates her to enter the field of sex work would be, as Weiner (2023) states, “a disservice to acknowledging how prevalent trauma is for women in general” (p. 60). The psychologist highlighted even higher statistical rates of trauma and sexual violence experienced by trans-women and gender diverse folks (Weiner, 2023). Going back to scientific research basics, statistically high rates of sexual trauma among women and feminine presenting people in the general population and, by

extension, the possibility of trauma history in sex workers demonstrates *correlation not causation*. Barton (2006) put forward that many reasons draw women to stripping including financial gain, personal motivation and cultural context, with positive experiences marking continuation in the employment. There are many positives to report in my chapter 3 on the benefits strippers receive from their work. In clinical practice, client-centred care may include conversation about the benefits workers experience along with key features lacking in research such as how sex workers are impacted by systemic oppression rooted in sexism and racism.

Evolutions in Perspective. Observing the evolution in research over what is now six decades of scholarship, Wahab et al. (2011) note slowly changing language that less often refers to stripping as “dirty work” for “bad girls” or a “deviant occupation”, however, articles published after 2010 still employ this language (Mavin & Grady, 2013). While some scholars have pushed towards the acceptance of sex work and stripping as forms of legitimate labour, many oppressive systemic barriers continue to exist. The gendered pay gap persists as per the following example, “when comparing the median hourly wages of women and men aged 15 years and older, women earned 84 cents for every dollar earned by men (Statistics Canada, 2024)” (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2024). When women face marginalizing intersections such as Indigeneity, racialization, disability or non-heteronormative sexual orientations, the gender pay gap worsens. For those with marginalized identities, Barton (2006) speaks to disparities in accessing higher education and professional skills citing that stripping provides higher pay than most “pink-collar jobs” (p. 24). While it has been extensively documented that students around the globe engage in sex work to help cover the cost of school, whorephobia is documented as a barrier to carrying out meaningful research to understand the implications (Trautner & Collett, 2010; Sinacore et al. (2015). Burnes and Dawson (2023) put forward, “increasing numbers of university students are

entering sex work in response to the increasing costs of tuition and fees, and the reduction of government financial support” (p. 45). While whorephobic barriers may prevent research on student sex worker rates from being carried out, Sinacore et al. (2015) cited a study carried out in London, UK that found, “16.5% of a sample of 315 undergraduate students endorsed a willingness to engage in sex work in order to finance their studies” (p. 40). In a capitalist economy, those who seek conventional employment while also experiencing systemic barriers may work low paying jobs with long hours while struggling to pay rent let alone tuition.

Resistance towards conventional minimum wage jobs has been documented by those who choose to engage in sex work. Benoit et al. (2019b) explain, “based on the information shared directly by tens of thousands of people who sell sexual services and reported in peer-reviewed journals, the vast majority are aware of, and have some access to, other income opportunities available to them” (p. 1903). Far from desperate stereotypical depictions, many sex workers and strippers are aware of other employment options, work multiple jobs simultaneously or have previously worked other jobs and have chosen to enter and remain in the field of sex work as a logical choice. Particularly for sex workers who experience marginalized identities, Benoit et al. (2019b) posit that while challenges may be experienced in their work, the same or worse adverse circumstances would exist within other employment. Clinicians must recognize systemic oppression in the form of racism, sexism, and homophobia and take an anti-oppressive stance in order to support sex workers effectively. This means acknowledging that strippers have agency in how they choose to navigate systemic oppression.

The oppressive paradigm falsely suggests that sex workers are coerced into their work and exploited, which feeds into narratives of desperation and lacking choice. Presently, scholars are doing important work to refute the myth that sex work is coercive, proving through

systematic analysis incorporating sex worker voices to demonstrate that it is a choice for the vast majority (Benoit et al., 2019b; Benoit et al., 2019e). Since false narratives around coercion exist abundantly in discourse, the work of rejecting false claims with data and logic is of particular importance on a policy implementation level. In the following section, harmful Canadian legislation grounded in misguided information will be looked at more closely. As opposed to an uninformed perspective that sex work is inherently exploitative, Benoit et al. (2019c) clarify, “the strongest empirical evidence is for adoption of the second perspective that aims to develop integrative policies that reduce the intersecting social inequalities sex workers face in their struggle to make a living and be included as equals” (Abstract). Anti-oppression involves inclusivity and acceptance of sex workers and strippers in society for *their work is not what oppresses, exploits and marginalizes them but the stigma embedded within systemic oppression they experience*. The effective clinician must engage in meaningful, anti-oppressive practice.

Stigma: A Closer Look at Laws and Implications

While much of this oppressive paradigm section has addressed various facets of stigma, it is imperative to speak directly about its impact on strippers, implications in therapeutic settings, and the broader context. While stripping is legal in some areas of North America with varying levels of nudity and alcohol restriction or consumption permitted depending on the province or state, strict laws about women’s bodies and liquor licensing in many places make it impossible to operate strip clubs, something which has been termed “gender policing” (Anasti, 2020).⁵ Strip clubs can contribute significantly to local economies and do not lead to elevated crime rates in

⁵ Some provinces like Saskatchewan have no strip clubs due to restrictive gender policing legislation. Some strip clubs like The Paramount in New Westminster do not permit alcohol consumption due to their liquor license. While still other venues like the now shut down Whiskey Richard’s in Chilliwack required strippers to wear nipple covers (“pasties”) and underwear at all times.

the areas in which they are located (Anasti, 2020; Egan, 2006a; Wahab et al. 2011). Through unsubstantiated fear-based claims in policy, strip clubs are essentially criminalized through prohibitory laws across many locations (Anasti, 2020; Frank, 2007; Weiner, 2023). Looking at the bigger picture, Burnes et al. (2018) state, “understanding both stigma, such as whorephobia, and the criminalization of sex work contextualizes how larger political, social, and economic systems inaccurately understand sex work” (p. 1542). Noting the consequence of stigmatizing strippers in policy that devalues their employment status, Nadas (2022) speaks to the vulnerabilities that exist for strippers as a result. Nadas (2022) posits, “systemic discrimination leaves strippers vulnerable without proper worker’s rights and legal uniformity to protect them... leaving them without a safety net will only lead to more risky behavior, stress, and health issues” (p. 368-369). Across all forms of sex work, stigmatizing laws and policy endanger and further marginalize sex workers, often under the guise of protecting them.

In recent decades, a wave of scholarship has looked at the impact of stigmatizing legislation on sex workers along with how it affects their access to healthcare (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2010; Argento et al., 2020; Basil, 2015; Belak & Bennett, 2016; Benoit et al. 2021; Davidson, 2006; Sawicki et al., 2019). Overall, the consensus among this accumulating research is that sex workers lack basic human rights and protections while decriminalization laws would improve their health and safety. A major focus in this emerging field of research is an emphasis on dispelling myths about sex work through empirical evidence. Dispelling the myth that criminalization protects sex workers, Benoit et al. (2019b) assert, “we found that measures to outlaw sex work intensify prostitution stigma and hamper sex workers’ right to fair access to health and social services and social justice, and increase negative judgment by the public” (p. 1903). Repressive laws impact those working in all areas of sex work compounded by

judgmental attitudes that extend indiscriminately against all sex workers. While this capstone focuses on the stripping, since strippers are swept into the same category as all sex workers, including FSSW, all are impacted by discriminatory laws. By extension, the work of collective sex worker liberation through evolving attitudes reflected in policy that enable human rights, and the validity of their work must extend to all sex workers. What models best support the freedom, rights and safety of sex workers?

Laws. In the same way that sex workers are all lumped together in one category in research, Bill C-36 does the same, viewing strippers as victims of sexual exploitation in spite of strip clubs being legally operated businesses that must abide by strict, specific legal codes. The updated criminal law states, “[the] regime seeks to protect the dignity and equality of all Canadians by denouncing and prohibiting...the institutionalization of prostitution through commercial enterprises, such as strip clubs” (Department of Justice Canada, 2014, p. 1). The language here perpetuates fear, implying that strip clubs secretly operate as brothels, which is untrue in Canada. While a variety laws and policies across North America criminalize certain aspects of prostitution depending on the location, many are rooted in refutable claims about protecting vulnerable people while accomplishing the opposite of what they claim to attempt. For example, according to the Department of Justice Canada (2014),

Bill C-36 treats prostitution as a form of sexual exploitation that disproportionately impacts on women and girls. Its overall objectives are to...Reduce the demand for prostitution and its incidence... It also seeks to encourage victims... to leave prostitution. (p. 1)

According to the Canadian government, sex workers are viewed as exploited victims who should just leave their employment. With this sex worker as victim model, the exchange of sexual

services between consenting adults is considered sexual exploitation with criminal punishment potentially for both parties as a deterrent. Additionally, advertising and verbally communicating terms of the sexual service are subject to criminalization in spite of the need for sex workers to negotiate boundaries for safety in their work.

In a scathing report, Belak and Bennett (2016) systematically deconstructed the harms done by Canada's Bill C-36 (PCEPA). Belak & Bennett (2016) state, "the PCEPA inculcates stigma and cuts sex workers off from legal protections, perpetuating conditions that have allowed predators to murder, rape, and abuse sex workers with impunity" (p. 60). They note that the unconstitutional nature of this legislation that violates the fundamental Charter rights of sex workers, preventing vital conversations around consent and safety for those selling or trading sexual services. Argento et al. (2020) had similar findings about Canada's current laws, concluding that the PCEPA replicates and intensifies the harms of past criminalization strategies. In a global call to action, Argento et al. (2020) insist, "there is a critical evidence-based need to move away from criminalization of sex work worldwide to ensure full labor and human rights for sex workers" (p. 8). Instead of protecting as it claims to do, Canada's current ineffective end-demand legislation that attempts to eradicate sex work by criminalizing certain aspects has been proven to perpetuate harm, stigma and violence against sex workers, in some cases leading to murder.

New Zealand leads the way having integrated expert suggestions through full decriminalization of sex work in all sectors, with policy based on research as well as the voices of sex workers (Abel et al., 2010). While legalizing FSSW comes with more potential stigma through targeted regulations specific to sex work operations, Sawicki et al. (2019) inform that, "unlike legalization, a decriminalized system does not have special laws aimed solely at FSSW

or sex work-related activity” (p. 5). Much of the argument against decriminalization centres around refutable arguments that sex trafficking will be the result from decriminalizing efforts (Benoit et al., 2019b; Davidson, 2006). The opposite has been shown however, for in a decriminalized system, FSSWers are freer to come forward and report potential exploitation or trafficking since the danger of being personally criminalized has been removed (Sawicki et al., 2019). An extensively published research team with cutting edge work out of Victoria, BC has made substantial steps in reframing Canada’s criminal code and international policies addressing the so-called prostitution problem by clarifying that prostitution and sex trafficking are substantively different phenomena (Benoit et al., 2019d). Making considerable efforts to unlink prostitution and sex trafficking as well as dispel common myths and false arguments perpetuated in sex work literature and legislation, the team out of Victoria presents research based on systematically collected data (Benoit et al., 2019a; Benoit et al., 2019b; Benoit et al., 2019c; Benoit et al., 2019d; Benoit et al., 2021). Furthermore, in addition to a need for evidence-based approaches in policy on sex work, this research offers logic to refute commonly made false claims in this field of study, part of which can be accomplished by integrating the voices and lived experience of sex workers (Benoit et al., 2021). Modern research utilizing models where there is participant contribution and action within research can accomplish the important goal of sex worker inclusion.

Sex Workers’ Experience of Stigma. Ask a stripper and she will tell you her work is stigmatized with many stories exemplifying how these experiences impact her life. Importantly, Benoit et al. (2019c) remark, “sex workers are not powerless when confronting occupational stigma” (Abstract). Not surprisingly, social science literature has often overlooked sex workers’ strengths in managing work stigma by problematizing the person, not the stigmatizing social

circumstances. Such writing on female strippers cites that they employ coping strategies such as, “(1) detachment; (2) depersonalization; (3) compartmentalization; (4) dissociation; or, (5) idealization (i.e., believing a customer will rescue her; Parker, 2009)” (Weiner, 2023, p, 38). Language rooted in pathology overlooks stripper strengths in facing work challenges, instead framing it as reliance on emotional and cognitive dissonance (Burnes et al. 2012; Weiner, 2023). In the resilience and empowerment paradigm, principles of resisting stigma will be explored more in-depth. One such example from Benoit et al. (2019c) employed thematic analysis from in-person interviews with a diverse sample of 218 adult sex workers in Canada using the perspectives of participants to categorize four main strategies of how they managed “a high degree of occupational stigma” (Abstract). While some participants experienced the internalizing of negative discourses about sex workers, others consciously reserved disclosure for a trusted few thus they “controlled access to information about themselves” (Benoit et al., 2019c, Abstract). Several studies demonstrate that strippers face real threats including potential violence when disclosing their employment to romantic partners and care providers (Jansson et al. 2023; Le Grice, 2017; Tempest 2019.) Therefore, thoughtful consideration around disclosure in most realms is part of protecting sex worker safety (Benoit et al., 2019a). In many contexts, the choice not to disclose sex worker status is valid and vital.

Sex workers are often blamed when they are the victims of assault. Investigating stigma theory, Sprankle et al. (2018) found that in the case of sex worker rape, there was “statistically less victim empathy and more victim blame than participants who read an article describing the rape of a non-sex worker” (p. 242). These attitudes translate into severe barriers for sex workers navigating criminal justice and healthcare systems. More favourable conditions exist when sex workers are relationally supported. Jansson et al. (2023) found, “intimate relationships provide

positive experiences for many people who sell sexual services and that these relationships could be stronger if societal stigma was reduced” (p. 890). With the problem being stigma, not the employment or the person, social and relational support is a key factor to be emphasized in future research. In more strategies to manage stigma, Benoit et al. (2019c) found that some participants, “rejected society’s negative view of their occupation” (Abstract) while others reframed sex work to emphasize “its positive and empowering elements” (Abstract). Clinicians too can practice reframing negative perceptions through educating themselves with emerging resources on the strengths and resilient qualities sex workers possess.

Managing Stigma as a Clinician. In an interview, a clinician who works extensively with sex workers and strippers stated that less than 1% of these clients come to therapy with the presenting problem being sex work (Weiner, 2023). When asked about his theoretical approach, this clinician cited the most beneficial orientation as “unconditional acceptance... the main idea here is to treat all sex workers and non sex workers as regular clients who deserve the same respect for privacy, therapeutic exploration, and honoring their therapeutic experience” (Weimer, 2023, p. 63). At the same time, to ensure clinicians are well equipped to provide supportive care for sex workers, an educated, anti-oppressive stance may require training along with simultaneous unlearning. Finding support through qualified supervision to help process biases plus consultation and training with sex positive mental health advocacy groups is a start. Burnes and Dawson (2023) provide helpful resources including, “Self-Examination of my History with Whorephobia” (p. 69). Many biases are carried unconsciously. Specifically, when working with female strippers, there may be blind spots to be processed with a qualified supervisor. In the spirit of unconditional positive regard in combination with feminist theory when working with strippers, consciousness raising work is worthwhile.

If the counselling community aspires to provide affirming care, the courage required for a stripper or any sex worker to reveal their employment in a therapeutic context considering the consequences they could face and stigma they may have experienced must be recognized. Therefore, this disclosure is privileged information and must be respected with utmost confidentiality. Benoit et al. (2019a) found these concerns prevented some sex workers in Canada from disclosure with some clinicians however, those who did had positive experiences overall through receiving affirming, competent care. For the minority who experienced negative outcomes, Benoit et al. (2019a) note these included, “judgment, stigma, and inappropriate health care” (p. 329), resulting in a call for providers to do better through learning efforts towards providing informed care for sex workers who already face significant stigma. Weiner (2023) offers that erotophobic bias, reflected as clinicians’ fears and barriers in speaking about sex and sex work with openness and acceptance is dispelled by the practice of speaking about these topics with nonjudgment. As clinicians, *let’s talk about sex* and sex work with nonjudgmental attitudes supported by supervision, consultation, education and specialized training.

Grey Area: Pole Dance

Beyond focusing on the common adage in the feminist workers right movement that “sex work is work”, sex work is so much more. To reduce sex work to its labour misses key elements. Specific to this capstone, stripping for female dancers can be part of confidence building, self development, creative expression, community connection, goal setting, financial stability, time freedom, improved physical fitness, mental wellbeing and so much more (Barton, 2006; Wahab, 2011; Weiner, 2023). These benefits will be explored in chapter 3 however, there is a grey area to navigate. What about the people who dress like strippers, learn to dance like strippers and enjoy the empowering benefits of this practice without the stigma and real dangers strippers face as sex

workers? What I am addressing are pole dance students who train at pole dance and fitness studios.⁶ Experiencing many of the aforementioned benefits minus compensation for stripping as employment, studio-based pole dancers enjoy a long list of positives including the tremendous workout pole fitness provides (Nicholas et al., 2019; Dias et al. 2022). Emerging quantitative research has shown positive cardiovascular adaptations in pole dancers often associated with elite athletes (Dias et al. 2022). As documentation on the benefits of pole dance as a sport proliferates, a divide is created between this positive research and those who pole dance as employment who are not featured positively in studies. Therefore, this section on pole dance studios and students remains in the oppressive paradigm. Moreover, since the roots of pole dance as fitness come from strippers, pole students must do more to be sex worker allies instead of perpetuating stigma.

At studios, pole students have a wide variety of selection ranging from fitness-based barefoot “polefit” classes through to “erotic pole dance” classes in which students wear tiny bikinis and 8 inch “stripper heels.” While it can be affirming for these students to learn pole dance while exploring the taboo of sexual expression within a protected studio environment, there is contention within the stripper community since sex worker allyship from pole dance students is largely lacking. Furthermore, at times pole dance studios and students demonstrate subtle or outward whorephobic attitudes.⁷ Essentially, erotic pole dance students get to cosplay as strippers, sometimes occupying strip club spaces in problematic student showcases, without

⁶ There are also many pole dance students with at home pole set ups who take online classes, sometimes through studios, through independent “celebrity” pole teachers’ websites or social media and less commonly, from strippers themselves.

⁷ A hashtag rose to popularity some years ago within the very active Instagram pole community, it was #NotaStripper. This hashtag expresses contempt towards strippers. Furthermore, signage at some pole studios features messaging that it is not an environment where strippers are welcome.

ever experiencing the negative stigma from stripping. While some of the responsibility is on studio owners to educate their students and employ instructors who are or were strippers, particularly to teach “erotic” stripper style classes, this simply does not occur in most instances. Information exists on how to be an ally to strippers, yet a lack of meaningful, demonstrative support from pole dance students results in further isolation and alienation of an already marginalized sex worker population (Berrett-Ibarria, 2018). While there are many ways to be an ally, pole students must start by educating themselves on the history and present circumstances that inform their chosen recreational activity, including some of the devastating consequences sex workers have experienced, particularly relevant in BC (Belak & Bennett, 2016).⁸ To be allies, pole students must learn from and have meaningful engagement with strippers, including by supporting them at their work places, strip clubs. However, some student and pole instructor attitudes subtly or not so subtly reflect an “I would never” stance on stripping, a “better than” mindset or a complete disconnect from pole dance history representing willful ignorance (Li et al., 2024.) While these attitudes are harmful, pole students and instructors may also be subject to some stigma due to the association of pole dance with sex workers and therefore attempt to distance themselves from the history of their chosen activity.⁹ Contributing to the contention, pole studios occasionally occupy strip club spaces for competitions and student showcases, resulting in a loss of income for strippers who are prevented from being able to work during these events.

The Climb of Pole. Within the past decade, pole dance has proliferated globally as a

⁸ I am referring to Robert Pickton.

⁹ I know one instance where a pole dancer in law school with a pole instagram account was prevented from articling at a law firm when they found her social media and took issue with her hobby.

sport that is becoming increasingly legitimized, accompanied by a wave of body positive, supportive scholarship (Dimler et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2023; Li et al., 2024; Oxtoby, 2022). Around the world, pole competitions have multiplied showing up in most major cities with throngs of enthusiastic pole students enrolling as competitors (Kim & Sun-Yong, 2019). High performance pole dance athletes achieve celebrity status with hundreds of thousands of followers on social media, personal clothing labels, and television appearances while becoming in-demand teachers at international pole workshops and retreats. Pole dance studios have proliferated throughout cities and towns globally in recent decades with concentrations in European and Slavic countries, Australia, Asia, South America and North America. Pole students become part of pole studio communities, sites where they train, make friends, feel belonging and construct identity (Kim & Kwon, 2021).

Kim and Sun-Yong (2019) released an article titled, *'I'm a Poler, and Proud of It': South Korean Women's Managed Experiences in a Stigmatized Serious Leisure Activity*. Observing the association of pole dance with strippers and deviance in literature alongside stigmatizing perspectives historically, Kim and Sun-Yong (2019) discovered the following,

Regardless of their occupations, participants' serious pole engagement emphasizes their identities as "pole dancers", "pole athletes", and "polers". Participating in high-level classes and competitions differentiates them from novice participants and frames them as serious leisure participants, which enriches and enforces an "unstigmatized" identity.

(p. 12)

This unstigmatized identity is constructed when polers compete in pole competitions, go to great lengths to upgrade their skills and become involved in a tight-knit social atmosphere at studios.

Through these efforts, Kim and Sun-Yong (2019) postulate, "participation is not taken with

stigma but rather with serious dedication to form their own interpretation of pole dance” (p. 1). Due to the absence of strip clubs in South Korea, negative perceptions towards pole dance stem solely from Western media. Being a competitive poler provides distance from negative perceptions and greater legitimacy as noted, “competitions such as the World Pole Sports Championships organized by the IPSF and The International Pole Championship (IPC) organized by the International Pole Dance Association (IPDFA) are held annually for competitive pole athletes” (Kim & Sun-Yong, 2019, p. 2). An emphasis on seriousness and competitiveness legitimizes the activity while absolving students of its origins and implications in sex work.

Cutting off pole dance from stripping, pole students consciously or unconsciously sever themselves from the stigmatized origins of their beloved, rewarding hobby. Some studios claim to embrace the stripping-based background of pole dance while others reject it entirely. In both cases, there is largely no concerted effort to educate students on stripper and sex worker allyship. In my personal experience, I recall one pole studio manager asking me in conversation why strippers are considered sex workers anyway and why it matters to be an ally (personal communication, March, 2024). Blatant disconnect from the stigmatized reality in which strippers exist and, in some cases, contemptuous disregard for their experience of systemic discrimination as sex workers means that pole studios and students are contributing to the problem. Academic scholarship on pole dance disconnected from stripping is also making matters worse through the perpetuation of bias across recent studies. Framed as a serious sport combining the art of dance, which requires dedication and perseverance, scholars are starting to publish investigations on the positive physical and psychological benefits of pole in bolstering confidence and self esteem (Li et al., 2024). Notice the use of language by Li et al. (2024.) in the following, “initially perceived as an activity confined to strip clubs, pole dancing has transcended its origins to be recognized as

both a reputable form of fitness and an expressive art form” (Introduction, Para 2). The transcendence of pole out of strip clubs cleanses the activity, granting it legitimacy as an art form while referring to its origins in problematic ways.

Pole dancer ≠ Stripper. With volumes of glowing reports generated in a few years of formal scholarship, pole dance research is already receiving meta-analyses praising its psychological benefits, which are described as, “a burgeoning non-pharmacological intervention” (Li et al., 2024, p. 1). Many of the same benefits described in pole dance research are experienced by strippers, however, once again, these positive factors are overlooked or pointedly ignored in sex worker research (Burnes et al., 2018). Importantly though, being a pole dance student does not qualify someone to be successful as a stripper. To use a metaphor, a person who plays a race car video game will be ill equipped to work as a professional race car driver. The same applies to erotic pole students who may be talented in studio contexts yet do not possess the skillset to navigate as actual strippers in often harsh strip club environments.¹⁰ The skills from taking erotic pole dance classes have minimal relevant crossover with sex work as a stripper, which involves highly developed customer service skills, sales abilities, a sharp business sense and much more. While some strippers do pole dance onstage, experiencing many of the same studied benefits in pole student literature, some strippers do not go onstage thus never touching a pole. The work of stripping is a broad category however, all strippers need specialized skills to do their job well. The point is, a pole dance student does not a stripper make.

With such a specialized skillset necessary to succeed as a stripper, a focus on stripper resilience factors is needed in research now more than ever as called for by Burnes et al. (2018).

¹⁰ This is a phenomenon I have witnessed in which winners of amateur contests at strip clubs attempt to work directly after winning and make no money from interacting with customers since they do not yet possess the skillset required to successfully sell lap dances.

As researchers garner long lists of the physical and mental health boosting benefits of pole dance, Li et al. (2024) describe advantages like community connection and improved sense of self noting that such factors are “a cornerstone of resilience and mental wellbeing” (p. 2). In pole dance literature, consciousness raising among writers must occur by checking biases towards use of destigmatizing language when referring to strippers and the history of pole dance. Among pole studios and students, greater education and consideration of the origins of pole is necessary, along with meaningful engagement in stripper and sex worker rights advocacy. Pole dance is *inherently political* considering its origins and ongoing roots in sex work, thus requiring resistance against the continuing oppression of those who strip as employment; no amount of puritanical linguistic gymnastics will erase strippers from pole dance. As an educator in pole studios as well as a stripper, I can do some of the work to inform and call for advocacy from the pole student community. However, the work of educating and organizing allyship cannot rest entirely on the shoulders of sex workers; pole studios and students must assume responsibility.

[Theme B] Resilience Paradigm

Amplifying a philosophy on sex worker rights, Egan (2006a) quotes, “I’d lie down in front of an oncoming train to defend a woman’s right to strip for a living. But that doesn’t mean I grant rubber-stamp approval to the business” (p. 144-45) Expressed here is the sentiment that underscores the resilience paradigm, which focuses on the autonomy and strengths of strippers and sex workers within an often harsh and challenging industry. Sex positive research about sex work and specifically stripping is an emerging field with growing scholarship interested in the inclusion of sex worker voices that have historically been absent in academic literature (Burnes et al., 2012; Burnes et al., 2018; Benoit et al., 2019c). To clarify, Sex positivity refers to individuals and communities that promote openness, acceptance, freedom, and empowerment

when it comes to sexuality and sexual expression (Burnes et al., 2017). This philosophy provides the foundation for sex positivity within counselling contexts where clients can be met with non-judgemental attitudes when it comes to discussions of sex and sex work. Burnes et al. (2017) observe the intersectionality of sex positivity with counseling psychology frameworks, both sharing orientations that include, “social justice, wellness, and resilience” (p. 470). Within this overlap exists shared approaches of client centred unconditional positive regard. This positive regard has been expressed in emerging studies through the inclusion of sex workers such as work conducted by Burnes et al. (2018), utilizing “a participatory action research (PAR) paradigm” (p. 1541). When models such as PAR are skillfully employed, sex workers shape the study design, influencing what questions are asked along with research procedures and participation at every step to provide meaningful outcomes that reflect lived experience accurately.

Stripping (Re-)Defined

As studies emerge that include the voices of sex workers, the consensus is that past representation in research has created “a knowledge that many sex workers claim does not reflect their realities”(Wahab, 2003, p. 626). This inaccuracy includes the very definitions of sex work, specifically stripping in this instance, which has been demonstratively conflated with other forms of sex work in research. Weimer (2023) notes, “there is not one defining category of being a ‘woman,’ just as there is not one defining category of ‘sex worker’” (p. 101). The act of stripping includes removal of clothing, yet depending on location and legalities, this may include partial or full nudity. Stripping does not inherently involve contact with customers and in many clubs, there are strictly enforced no contact rules. Weimer (2023) quotes a historical definition that stripping involves, “using one’s body through nude dance in an erotic, seductive, and sexually suggestive manner while working in a business for financial profit” (p. 101). However,

researcher subjectivity must again be brought into perspective for who defines what is dancing seductively and suggestively? What of the athleticism of the woman dancing, what of her training and skill? Why does a woman's partial or full nudity equate to being seductive and thus sexualized? While I am not denying the erotic nature that can be involved in the art and work of stripping, what I seek to illuminate is that there is more to it than traditional definitions suggest.

Does stripping even belong in the category of sex work? Quoting a description of sex work as a job distinct from sexual identities and orientations, Burnes et al. (2018) cite this understanding of sex work, "one or several services in which *sex is exchanged for money or goods*" (p. 1541, emphasis added). The work of stripping is excluded from this definition since *no exchange of sex or sex acts is performed by the stripper*. Other definitions specify that sex workers are compensated through any means for sexual services (Sawicki et al., 2019). Again, subjectivity is key for who defines what is a sexual service if no sex acts are performed? Is the experience sexual for the woman performing the work of stripping? What if she is experiencing something entirely different? Why does she not have a voice in these definitions? While I am onstage at work in ornate, handmade costumes performing moves I have trained thousands of hours to be able to accomplish, I experience intense focus, awareness, creative flow and intense enjoyment. However, it is not necessarily a sexual experience for me, the stripper. Canadian, American and indeed global laws are biased in reflecting sexual stigma theory as it pertains to strippers through the stigmatization of bodies that are used unconventionally (Weiner, 2023). To elaborate, Weiner (2023) explains, "the *sexual stigma theory*, which extends from *stigma theory* (Dovidio et al., 2000), stated that society collectively assigns 'negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness' to any nontraditional sexual identity, behavior, relationship, or community" (p. 13). While pole dance emerging as a praised sport in research, working in strip

clubs means that strippers' similar performances become tainted through social and moral codes that ascribe sexuality as inherent to women's unclothed bodies performing nontraditional work.¹¹

While a nude woman's body is not inherently sexual, strip clubs are venues of artistic, erotic performance fuelled by fantasy, acting plus emotional and physical labour. Egan (2006a) describes forces informing the experience of strippers at work, "the discourses of traditional femininity, sexual availability and sexual liberation, and service requirements of emotional labor shape how women workers experience... these spaces" (p. 45-46). Considering that strip clubs operate legally, many with tight security, under the legally-defined umbrella of sex work, strippers are in a privileged position overall. Many other forms of sex work such as FSSW involve significantly more risk, vulnerability, and criminalization. Fuentes (2023) studies how criminalization complicates the relationships between various distinct sex workers as they experience the intersections of systemic oppression. Whorearchy or stratification within sex work is often used in unhelpful ways to uphold oppression while advocacy for sex work decriminalization along with sex worker rights is a collective effort. For example, traditionally within the whorearchy, elite escorts and sugar babies are at the top while street-entrenched, survival-based sex workers at the bottom. For myself as a stripper, it is tempting to want to distance myself from the label sex worker altogether, particularly when the term serves as such a far-reaching umbrella. However, I recognize my privileged position as a stripper, a fully legal job not requiring me to perform any sexual acts, as well as someone receiving higher education. To hold this privilege means I can serve as an advocate with lived experience towards destigmatizing sex work, particularly criminalized aspects, and fight for sex worker rights.

¹¹ While in some erotic pole performances, there is occasionally the removal of clothing, there is generally no compensation involved. While the pole dancer may be subject to scrutiny for removing clothing, the stigmatizing sex work designation comes from being employed.

Calling for unity towards collective sex worker liberation, Fuentes (2023) puts forward a plan through research outcomes that include, “the conceptualization of the sex worker-informed stratified social hierarchy – described as the “whorearchy” – and the ways that collective care is used to combat it” (P. 224). While various forms of sex work are distinct, sex workers and our allies must work together for basic human rights and for the safety of all sex workers to be protected in policy and across society.

Stripper Writers. Wahab et al. (2011) state, “the more nuanced and complicated explorations and representations of exotic dance may be linked to the increased involvement of current or past sex workers doing exotic dance research” (p. 71). A trend that has significantly shaped stripping literature is the writing of scholars who have worked as strippers in order to report on the experience in academic research. There is value in the positionality that results through reflecting lived experience in literature as well as the ability to be a privileged insider when conducting research interviews with stripper colleagues (Kim & Sun-Yong, 2019). However, there is also the risk of othering strippers by studying them under the guise of temporarily being one of them. One such example, Egan (2006a) states after a stint working as a stripper while conducting research, “I have tried to avoid romanticizing dancers as either completely liberated women or deeply wounded victims... dancers’ narratives illuminated the limits of binaries and evaded dualistic flatness” (p. 144-145). Indeed, Egan’s many works challenge binary labels often associated with strippers, painting them as multifaceted people working in complex, challenging environments and deserving of dignity. With a significant body of literature emerging from stripping while conducting research at two strip clubs on the East Coast of the United States from 1996-2000, academic and author Danielle Egan went on to become a Professor at Connecticut College, Dean of the Faculty and Chief Academic Officer

(Egan, 2000; Egan, 2003; Egan, 2004; Egan, 2006a; Egan, 2006b). Having made such contributions to the field of stripper literature, it is critical to recognize the privileged position held by Egan who was receiving higher education while working in strip club environments.

With the educated language to articulate elements of stripping, Egan (2006a) states, “acting interested and supportive, dancers use emotion to create a comfortable environment... A particularly useful skill, emotional labor helps dancers procure regulars and is thus essential for their financial well-being” (p. 41). Speaking to the performative nature of the work, likening it to other service industries that involve customer facing workers, Egan highlights the relational nature of stripping that benefits those who do it well. Similar to the outcomes put forward by Benoit et al. (2021) and Weimer (2023), Egan represents an early pioneer in calling for greater recognition of the legitimacy of stripping as work along with its destigmatization. Furthermore, personal experience working as a stripper gives depth and richness that is often lacking in academic literature, particularly as it pertains to sex worker strengths and resilience. Paving the way for future sex positive inquiry, Egan (2006a) posits, “illuminating *female agency* in seemingly oppressive areas, such as sex work, fosters a critical exploration of the ways in which inequality and *resistance* are manifest in women’s lives (both inside and outside of the workplace)” (p. 148, emphasis added). Recognizing the multiplicity of resistance strategies enacted by strippers to subvert the status quo and challenge oppression within work environments marks a key feature to Egan’s sex positive literature. By putting forward the mental health benefits of stripping in chapter 3 based on lived experience, my hope is to start contributing to literature that positively frames strippers, recognizing their intelligent entrepreneurial skills, resilience and resistance.

Resistance as Resilience

In a foundational study, Burnes et al. (2012) published *A Resilience-Based Lens of Sex Work: Implications for Professional Psychologists* with the aim “to help psychologists consider strength-based and empowerment-focused approaches for work with this population” (p. 137). This study provided the basis for future research that is building a new structure for scholarship on sex work focusing on strength and resiliency. What has been enabled within psychological practice is a move away from historical perspectives that pathologize towards what Burnes et al. (2018) describe as, “a subsequent, emerging paradigm shift of how [practitioners] understand the impact of sex worker agency on sex worker well-being” (p. 1542). With this perspective, the very act of recognizing sex worker agency as a marker of resilience within psychology is an act of resisting dominant stigmatizing discourse. One of the four results that arose from the PAR study by Burnes et al. (2018) included a category titled, “Validating Sex Work and Eliminating Whorephobic Oppression” (p. 1545). While chapter 3 of this capstone will discuss specific ways for practitioners to implement this approach and eliminate oppressive bias, to focus on often overlooked sex worker resilience is itself an act of resistance. Part of stripper-specific agency involves narrative resistance against stigma, a practice that has been studied as an effective strategy to promote well-being (Benoit et al., 2019c). Re-authoring and rejecting harmful narratives strategically is work with which strippers are familiar.

Ronai and Cross (1998) explored early iterations of narrative resistance amongst strippers, describing it as follows, “an active speech behavior which serves to decenter the authority of specific individuals or society to dictate identity” (p. 105). The authors interviewed female and male strippers, noting the gendered bias in the stigma female dancers faced, describing it as a socially constructed reality through language. In a process involving biographical re-authoring, Ronai and Cross (1998) remarked that through narrative resistance,

“we become the authors of our identities, charting for ourselves a place in social space which transforms negative discourses into more positive identity resources for ourselves and others to draw upon in the future” (p. 117-118). While more positive narratives to draw upon exist through consciously shifting language, resistance for strippers is an embodied enactment. Egan (2004 & 2006b) observed multiple strategies in which strippers resist oppressive conditions at work through exercising agency. From musical choices to strategic ways of managing surveillance, “exotic dancers enacted resistance on a daily basis” (Egan 2006a, p. 146). Particularly with regard to unfavourable management or customer behaviour, strippers develop strategic resistance such as the use of humour, bluntness and collaboration that enables their continued resilience.

Speaking to various savvy forms of resistance strippers exhibited towards power that produces both oppressive as well as resistive possibilities, Egan (2006a) states, “dancers spoke of feeling ‘powerful,’ ‘stronger,’ and ‘like [they had] a say’ when they engaged in strategies of subversion. Far from falsely conscious, dancers felt agency in the clubs” (p. 146). The experience of feeling agency at work through resistance creates the potential for strengthened resilience. For example, calling out customers who are rude with wit and humour is one way to raise consciousness and potentially enlist others in the customer’s social group to behave better. Surveillance cameras may make some strip club customers uncomfortable in lap dances, however the dancer can frame it as “not everyone is a nice guy like you,” leading to conversation about how poorly some customers behave and thus potentially enlisting better behaviour (personal communication, ongoing). When a customer does attempt to touch in a contact-free lap dance, the stripper may gesture to indicate “put your hands up”, which signifies to the camera that there is unwanted touching occurring. This embodied enactment, a form of resistance, can signal to security to intervene if necessary when club cameras are monitored in real time or she

may simply walk out of the dance.¹² Strippers continually exercise agency and a multitude of narrative resistance strategies, often cleverly guised to enlist conformity of male clients. Having to continually enlist strategies to protect your personal safety on the job illustrates the exhausting emotional labour, the risks and the nuanced high-level communication in which strippers must be proficient. These agentic scripts and strategies are performed in collaboration with other strippers through behind the scenes communication, mentorship and skill sharing in a strong social network built upon sisterhood and solidarity.

Social Connection as Strength

Burnes and Dawson (2023) propose, “another way to shift the research lens about entry into sex work is a focus on social support” (p. 45). Highlighting the shortcomings of traditional mental health support, research has shown that sex workers are more likely to seek support from each other while rarely accessing outside help (Burnes & Dawson, 2023). Arguing that strippers’ marginalization in club environments and through social stigma is a force that brings them together, Barton (2006) posits, “women isolated by idiosyncratic social norms about female purity and pollution... may use this social isolation to deepen their connections to and form bonds with one another” (p. 130). Indeed, the bonds between strippers run deep because non-sex workers do not recognize the impacts of the work, both positive and negative. Recognizing historical bonding environs for women such as convents and menstrual tents, Barton (2006) describes the dressing room for strippers, “a sequestered social site that ‘dominators’ rarely enter, shared by women who each experience the toll of stripping. And under these circumstances, dancers develop close, supportive relationships” (p. 131). While in my experience, dominators in

¹² Many club cameras are monitored in real time with no contact rules actively enforced by security. Other times, even gesturing to a camera that no one is watching in real time is enough to prompt customers to behave better.

the form of male managers do enter the dressing room, sometimes literally smoking cigars like out of a movie, largely dressing rooms are private and somewhat safe social spaces where strategies are discussed while support is expressed and experienced.¹³ Stripper strategies are infinite and can include detailing positive interactions with a customer and what worked, commiserating over poorly behaved customers, discussion around navigating the challenges of the job including in relationships, professional needs pertaining to costume, makeup, hair and hygiene as well as safety protocols when leaving work such as the buddy system. Collaborative social support amongst strippers ensures their well-being and also safety.

Observing research, Burnes and Dawson (2023) note that social support provides protection while mitigating the impacts of discrimination experienced by sex workers. Described as a way of insulating individuals who may experience isolation, “more specifically, such social support has been found to help buffer the discriminatory services that sex workers have experienced from social service providers, including legal services, police, social services, and mental health services” (Burnes & Dawson, 2023, p. 46). While recognizing cultural and racial correlates associated with sex worker discrimination, social support may bolster resilience against oppression. For example, Egan (2006a) names racism that is upheld by the patriarchal structure upon which society resides and by extension strip clubs, a dominant power that often goes uncontested. As such, in strip clubs, “the dominant practices construct and reinforce rituals

¹³ Based on interactions I have had with retired strippers, the strip club industry has changed over time with a greater emphasis now on camaraderie over competition. At most clubs where I have worked (around seventeen), there are usually two change rooms, one for the stage performers and one for the freelancing lap dancers who mostly do not go onstage. While in my career, I have largely done stage and had the comfort of a larger, more private change room with mostly friendly interactions, freelancers share a change room yet do not necessarily know each other due to the nature of their work being come-and-go as you please. This transience provides less change room security overall with more girls coming and going and the potential need for lockers. Factors like having a friend on the job can provide additional layers of security.

of masculinity, where men watch other men watching dancers and watch each other reifying, through repetition, the space as a white, heterosexual boys' club" (Egan, 2006a, p. 39). What I have continually heard expressed and seen documented by dancers who are Indigenous and people of colour is how much they are impacted by racism in strip club environments both by customers and management (Fuentes 2023; Khan, 2019). While the existence of racism within strip club management is well known amongst strippers, proving it and challenging it can be complex when jobs are at stake. However, private chat groups on apps like WhatsApp are sites where I have been part of strippers speaking more openly to challenge and resist racism. Various means of social support thus serve as a protective factor for, as Burnes and Dawson (2023) state, "scholars have reported that a lack of support correlated with discrimination against sex workers based on sex, gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status" (p. 45). Therefore, social support amongst strippers strengthens likelihood of resiliency, safety and even survival.

Author Khan (2019) calls for greater intersectionality in the study of strippers particularly beyond what is described as "the U.S. black–white racial binary [towards] a more nuanced understanding" (p. 702). Indeed, Canadian strippers of colour have often expressed the blatant racism they experience in strip clubs including racist comments from managers or clients as well as being excluded from some hiring opportunities (many personal communications, including October 2024). However, some strippers capitalize being exoticized and racially fetishized as Khan (2019) states, "participants draw on racialized, gendered, and sexualized tropes to benefit racialized erotic capital" (p. 702). Furthermore, in the context of the strip club, strippers who experience multiple intersections of oppression through marginalized identities are able to find like-minded peers who share overlapping challenges. Friendships formed among strippers are a source of strength both at and outside work. Quoting an anthropological study, Barton (2006)

explains, “subordinate groups resist domination through the use of... a ‘hidden transcript’ of their thoughts about and experiences of oppression, as opposed to a public revolt (p. 130). The hidden transcript is shared by strippers through subtle verbal and physical cues while on the job, sometimes to warn coworkers of poorly behaved customers, along with more explicit critiques in the privacy of the change room. If a customer has behaved rudely, a stripper may openly share this with her colleagues in a way that the customer can hear or see as a way of shaming him, security may also be informed depending on the inappropriate behaviour. The opposite may also occur where strippers inform each other of a great customer or one with specific interests like a fetish for being humiliated (there is no shortage of strange fetishes.) Strippers forced to do floor time by management (a mostly outdated practice where you are not allowed to go to the change room for lengths of time) may resist forced interaction with customers by simply playing with their phones or chatting with each other. This unique language represents tremendous solidarity arising from the shared challenging and triumphant experiences among strippers resulting in uniquely profound bonds that *provide* a protective factor strengthening mental health resilience.

Summary: Gaps in Research

As a stripper, I am a life-long trained dancer, an award winning International pole dance competitor and a traveling entertainer with multiple strip club championship titles. My touring schedule is booked through an agency. My show schedule during bookings is rigorous, with multiple, strictly timed stage shows that last up to 20 minute each at clubs that close as late as 3am. Strippers like myself are hard-working athletes that must be in peak physical and mental condition to do the job sustainably. Audience members remark that watching my show is similar to a Cirque de Soleil performance and I am not alone in the calibre of entertainment I seek to provide. Many feature entertainers represented by my agency do fire shows, aerial hoop, aerial

silks and a broad range of performances complete with custom-tailored, bespoke costumes. All of this represents a tremendous amount of work, cost and creativity.¹⁴ I take pride in my work and I have enjoyed immense benefits from it, particularly as it pertains to physical fitness and mental well-being. Almost none of the benefits that I have experienced over nearly two decades of performing as a burlesque dancer and stripper are reflected in the research that exists about strippers. Furthermore, as Burnes et al. (2018) have noted, largely lacking in literature is consideration of the multitudinous resilience factors exhibited by strippers and the strengths they must inevitably possess to thrive in work environments that present challenge.

Moreover, I am largely dismayed and disappointed by the historical scholarship on strippers that indeed does not reflect my reality along with continued resistance against sex positivity within the field of counselling psychology (Burnes et al., 2018; Burnes & Dawson, 2023). Particularly problematic is the lack of distinction amongst types of sex work leading to the conflation of stripping with prostitution. While there is much to unpack regarding what more can be done by practitioners, which will be examined in chapter 3, a start is self examination of clinician bias. In conversation with a clinician who works with stripper clients, Weimer (2023) quoted this guidance, “when exploring the clinical, therapeutic, struggles that exotic dancers face in a therapeutic setting, it is less about how they view stigma and morality and more about how societal impacts, the stigma and morality impact them” (p. 63). How does stigma and judgment impact strippers? Researchers have found poor mental health outcomes not due to the work of stripping but the effects of continuous stigma from all directions (Benoit et al., 2019a). While I have been harmed by stripping stigma through romantic partners, family, friends, and colleagues

¹⁴ Stripper costume designers represent a vital aspect to the industry. Many of the ornate, hand-made, jewelled and feathered costumes can cost thousands of dollars, a professional expense that strippers shoulder.

from other fields in which I work, I enlist several of the strategies for coping outlined by Benoit et al. (2019b). Specifically, I limit who has access to information about my work as a stripper, I re-author narrative discourse internally and verbally with privileged persons in my life to align my understanding of stripping as beneficial and empowering, and I categorically reject misguided moralization and judgment.

Additionally in my own sphere through workshops, classes and other means, I educate. In chapter 3, I will elaborate further on how education can serve as a way forward to destigmatize all sex work and particularly stripping where my experience resides. While education is especially relevant for mental health practitioners, there are also key potential allies who can contribute to the work of destigmatizing including recreational pole dancers. Where my interest resides is in providing educational resources comprised of the perspectives of strippers answering the question put forward by Weimer (2023), “what are the benefits of engaging in this form of employment?” (p. 74). The answer to this question can serve as a starting point for future, critical and currently limited research focused on the mental health benefits of stripping. How are the lives of people who work as strippers improved by their employment and what features motivate them to continue in this work? What are positive mental health outcomes from stripping? What are the drawbacks of stripping and how do strippers take care of themselves and each other when navigating challenges in ways that exhibit resilience?

While I have begun preliminary work in proposing categories of the beneficial features of stripping outlined in chapter 3, what I found in conversation with fellow strippers is that the benefits are vast and far reaching. As such, community involvement with a wide cross-section of strippers is encouraged for future research with their involvement in every aspect as per the PAR paradigm that seeks to conduct, “research-as-advocacy, a practice hallmark to sexuality research”

(Burnes et al., 2018, p. 1548). In roads for respectful access to and interaction with this community will be explored chapter 3 along with potential for qualitative and quantitative research possibilities that would serve the well-being of strippers and all sex workers. Perhaps most important in the possibility of this future research is how it too could contribute to positive mental health outcomes for strippers and sex workers by reducing stigma, potentially with life quality improving implications. Improvement in sex worker life quality cannot occur without allies such as counsellors. Allyship cannot occur without proper education involving consultation with sex workers, unlearning and re-learning. In conclusion to this chapter, I would like to propose as a starting point for future research, a radical and ongoing redefining of stripping work by strippers. This bold new understanding must include distinct features that are informed by location and situation. The starting point of this redefinition will serve as a basis for chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Discussion and Application

Discussion

In concluding dissertation remarks, Weimar (2023) put forward the following on stripper research, “future research would be greatly improved by including the communities that we are researching, to provide spaces where muted voices can be heard” (p. 77). I wholeheartedly agree and am creating that space presently in collaboration with the voices of my colleagues, the sex worker community. For me, stripping is a powerful act of resistance. Resisting the injustice of an oppressive patriarchal capitalist system means that as a stripper, I trick the system through playing by its gender rules. I navigate sexism by performing a literally elevated version of femininity in 8-inch heels in order to earn a good living and *I am in on the joke* of this gendered performance. Many have documented the performativity of gender within the patriarchy, a dualistic construct that harms everyone who attempts to conform to its impossible standards (Butler, 2009). Particularly as a woman experiencing the pressure of unattainable beauty standards, resisting these confines as a stripper means operating with self awareness within the system to my benefit. Strippers resist beauty standards by engaging with them for financial gain with a false-lashed wink by night then living however we want by day, often without makeup.¹⁵

While our voices have largely been lacking from formal research and academic literature, many strippers and sex workers have written books including autobiographies, novels and manuals for navigating the sex industry. Moreover, with the expansion of information technologies, now more than ever there is an abundance of stripper-lead podcasts, social media pages, blogs, and editorials that allow us to share our stories and experiences (Apple, 2024;

¹⁵ In conversation with stripper colleagues, one downside of stripping is that unless we are getting paid to dress up and wear makeup, the arduous unpaid feminine labour involved in attempting to meet beauty standards in everyday life feels more precarious.

Danica & Riley, 2019-present; Sia, 2019-present). What these platforms enable is strengthened solidarity among us, a documented phenomenon, as well as the sharing of valuable insights and resources that promote sex worker awareness, resilience and safety. A feminist dimension to the proliferation of stripper and sex worker information sharing is the potential for consciousness raising among non-sex workers. While not every non-sex worker knows a sex worker directly, although they are more ubiquitous than most realize, today there is greater access to the stories and experiences of sex workers than ever before. For clinicians, Arczynski (2023) describes how access to this information can be beneficial by, “increasing the reader's cultural competence for working with sex workers” (p. 592). In service of this increased competency, since positive literature is largely lacking, I am compiling a participatory-based understanding of the mental health benefits of stripping.

The Benefits of Stripping

A great start in redefining stripping in positive terms is the work of Canadian stripper, writer, illustrator, filmmaker, educator and comedian, Jacqueline Frances, who published a graphic novel in 2017 titled *Striptastic: A Celebration of Dope-Ass Cunts Who Like Money*. Frances (2017) writes extensively about what there is to love about stripping describing,

I love that stripping is a real job that I do to pay my bills, cultivate my work ethic, and be a contributing member of society...When I'm at work, there's no doubt in my mind that I'm exactly where I need to be. Stripping has shaped me into a fearlessly ambitious entrepreneur; I know my power and how to wield it to build the life I want. (p. 157)

By highlighting what there is to love about the job through interviews and survey research with hundreds of strippers who are quoted in the book, Frances (2017) defines stripping work in all its glory. What stripping entails is vast, nuanced and different for everyone however, one theme that

emerges consistently is empowerment. This is one of the few beneficial features put forward by strippers that I found reflected in a single piece of academic literature by Weimer (2023) who states, “sex work can provide a space that affirms [the stripper] that performs in the moment. These spaces, wherever sex work is engaged in, can be highly empowering” (p. 59-60). While there are many dimensions of empowerment, one can be the positive effect it has on others.

Strippers as Healers

In an interview with a psychologist who works with sex worker clients, Weimer (2023) cites, “sex work can also be better understood as a form of caring for others... To dive deeper into this idea is to understand sex work as a form of healing and caring” (p. 62). The purpose of this capstone is explicitly not to centre the benefits experienced by strip club customers. However, Egan & Frank (2005) have called on researchers who have conducted research in strip clubs to exhibit greater reflexivity towards consciousness raising around the customer’s experience. What I can confidently say as a stripper is that I was a therapist long before I ever went to grad school. Before I ever engaged in an unpaid internship, I was paid handsomely for many therapy sessions, disguised as lap-dances, by men who swore up and down that they did not need therapy. What this says to me is that while strippers face work stigma, many men continue to face stigma around seeking mental health help including in the form of therapy and strip clubs present low barrier access to care. Egan (2006a) describes past experience with strip club customers stating, “regulars were complex individuals who were plagued by loneliness and mired in narcissistic privilege, who wanted love and made unreasonable demands” (p. 21). In my experience, many strip club patrons are deeply lonely and the connection they receive from strippers, the ability to tell us anything in private, represents an experience that is perhaps not available in any other area of their lives.

Some of the most honest things I have ever heard a person say have been in the privacy of the lap dance room. A confession booth of sorts, men open up to me about their love life, relationship challenges, addictions, what is going wrong in their world and the powerlessness they feel. From what I gather, some of these men have very little social support, which speaks to larger issues around the barriers to meaningful connection as well as mental health care experienced by men. Perhaps what makes therapeutic conversation more accessible for some men in the strip club is that I am wearing a bikini while playing into specific feminine tropes that contribute to male comfort thus they are willing to pay for my services. Currently, I am part of an online community of strippers turned therapists; there are many of us employing our unique range of skills that lend to providing mental health care. Speaking directly to colleagues, Frances (2017) concurs, “my fellow strippers are entertainers, healers, and the most radical DIY queens known to existence. I am richer, wiser, and kinder having basked in their lights” (p. 156). While there are volumes I could write about how I have been impacted and enriched by my stripper colleagues, what I will say is that I completely agree. Strippers have taught me profound lessons about courage, kindness, strength, honesty, grit, collaboration and who I truly am. Based on this knowledge, I would like to propose the following categories of benefits that contribute positively to the mental health and well-being of strippers.

1. Autonomy, Agency and Freedom

The mental health benefits experienced by strippers as a result of their work are interlocking and generative. This is not an exhaustive list but represent a start towards generating broader conversation on sex worker agency and resilience that has been called for in research (Burnes et al., 2012; Burnes et al., 2018; Burnes & Dawson, 2023; Weimer, 2023). While the experience of freedom looks different for every stripper, it is an emerging theme as a reported

benefit. For those impacted by various intersections of oppression and marginalized identities, freedom through sex work is unique to the individual. For Ana Hitta, a stripper who immigrated to Canada from Iran, after having grown up in the danger of an oppressive regime that blames women for not covering up properly when they are harassed or assaulted, stripping “hits a sweeter spot” (personal communication, November 3, 2024). Recounting that women can quickly lose everything under these circumstances, Ana Hitta states, “I really appreciate the fact that I can not have any clothes on, be admired and be safe” (November 3, 2024). Finding her way to stripping after completing a masters in chemistry then working in a lab with robotics technology, Ana Hitta exercised agency after recognizing the confines of conventional work were not a good match for her. Taking pole lessons, winning a strip club amateur contest and transitioning into full time stripping gave rise to the freedom she experiences from this work. The freedom from stripping is distinct from what is experienced in pole studios, as expressed by Ana Hitta, “this is something that pole studio doesn't provide, because pole studio gives you the skills but what gives you the confidence as a woman to embrace your femininity and sexuality... stripping specifically provided me with that” (November 3, 2024). As someone who has navigated pole studios as a student and teacher, I share Ana Hitta’s experience of a freedom that is unique and specific to stripping.

In an age where women’s bodily autonomy is under siege in many parts of North America, exercising the right to make choices with one’s body as a woman provides an elevated experience of freedom. Frances (2017) quotes Cara, a stripper from Washington DC who explains,

I feel like I’m in control of the male gaze. When I’m being looked at, I control what they

see and how they see me, and if they say something I don't like, I can defend myself without having to worry about my safety. Stripping has made me more feminist than I ever knew I could be. Sometimes I forget how fucking scary it is to be a woman outside of the club. (p. 152)

Under the protection of video surveillance and security provided by burly bouncers, male patrons who assault dancers through unwanted touching face swift and immediate consequence, justice that is largely not served for women outside of strip clubs. Venues where women working as strippers learn “to speak up [and] to never be afraid of taking control of the situation” (p. 148), the boundary setting education that occurs in strip clubs is a valuable life skill (Frances, 2017). Many strippers speak about how they will no longer tolerate poor treatment from partners, family and strangers having strengthened their sense of agency at work.

One stripper who is pursuing education to become a clinical counsellor brought integrated self awareness about agency to the forefront as the greatest benefit she has experienced from stripping. Katie Petter also known as the performer Hailee Camryn elucidated,

I would easily say the most positive experience I've gotten from dancing, that I don't think I could get anywhere else, is the experiential learning of setting my boundaries and knowing my worth, and that was elevated and strengthened by the stripper community. And it's not just boundaries with “men” or customers, it's boundaries with my employers, my friends, partners, family, and myself. It's survival in the industry but it's survival in life, and a survival that doesn't depend on you conforming or minimizing yourself, it depends on the exact opposite. (personal communication, October 14, 2024)

The benefit of learning nonconformity as a woman in a culture that seeks to minimize women's work and worth cannot be understated. With knowledge that affirms survival, strippers are better equipped to function in life with uniquely developed awareness of autonomy having engaged in countercultural, subversive work. The act of not conforming to social tropes and expectations around condoned feminine behaviour means surviving and thriving in ways that embrace resistance, autonomy and freedom based on wisdom acquired from stripping.

2. Financial Stability and Flexible Work

While financial stability is important, what I appreciate about stripping is the time freedom it enables. As an independent contractor booked through an agency, I have the autonomy to choose when and where I work or do not work, which has allowed me to strip during grad school semester breaks in order to fund my education. Through effortful and exhausting shift work, brief stripping stints have continually allowed me to pay my way through this very masters program. A dimension of sex worker agency recognized by Dr. Burnes in an interview, Weimer (2023) quotes, "one part of the industry that attracts people is flexible hours and the ability to make a certain amount of money" (p. 56). For those like myself who have benefitted from a work schedule in which I have self determination around time, other important pursuits are made possible. Ana Hitta speaks to this topic stating, "I love the fact that it's flexible to create space for whatever else you want to do to move on to the next career" (personal communication, November 3, 2024). Having grown up in a nation where she could not travel freely, global adventuring thanks to the flexibility afforded by stripping has become one of Ana Hitta's favourite pursuits. She elaborates, "I really appreciate that it allows you to... travel, or if you're taking care of someone, or if you're in school, if you're transitioning... it just creates that

buffer time if you want to figure out your next step” (November 3, 2024). Over the years, I have observed many strippers navigating these situations including care providers and students. For those seeking next steps in life and career, stripping can make it possible to save time and money.

Frances (2017) quoted stripper Yasmine who put forward what she loves about stripping, “the compensation that’s allowed me to move socioeconomic classes and allows me to continue to further my educational and career goals” (p. 153). For many women, stripping represents the opportunity to elevate their financial position with outcomes that can positively impact quality of life. Higher socioeconomic status (SES) is known to positively impact mental and physical health long term while the opposite is true, lower SES can result in higher instance of negative mental and physical health outcomes. For those with racialized identities, systemic oppression will be experienced in strip club environments that reflect patriarchal structures. When Frances (2017) asked Yasmine about the one thing she would change about her work environment, she responded,

Racism. The white women in the club consistently make the most money every night, followed by Asians, followed by Latinas, followed by black women... I wish me and my friends could hustle as true equals. It’s obviously something that’s a worldwide problem, but damn I have to fight so hard to keep it from getting to me at work.” (p. 151)

It is important in reflecting on the benefits of stripping that honesty is at the forefront of discussions; racist social realities are replicated in strip clubs and necessitate resistance, particularly by white allies. As per Kahn (2019), some strippers capitalize on sexualizing racialized tropes however, this does not diminish the severity of experiencing racism.

Muslim, queer stripper with a degree in human rights, Misty Blue addresses benefitting

from racializing attitudes while experiencing distress from racist oppression. Misty states,

I don't like being called exotic or... fetishized, but I make more money playing along with someone... instead of dealing with racist managers at work [at a minimum wage job]. At least a racist customer is gonna give me \$300 to sit with me and... talk about how exotic I am... at least I'm profiting from the racism. (personal communication, October 15, 2024)

While pursuing post secondary education, Misty described working three low wage jobs simultaneously and still not having enough income to cover living expenses. Reflecting on how therapy could only accomplish so much, Misty powerfully remarked, “*you can't mental health away poverty*” (October 15, 2024, emphasis added). While there are numerous positive aspects of stripping, Misty echoed many in recognizing an enhanced quality of life from increased SES. Addressing how her mental well-being is impacted, Misty put forward, “the main positive takeaway for dancing is the time back... Financial stability, that'll fix your mental health more than antidepressants” (October 15, 2024). Having financial security from flexible work with shorter hours allows Misty to enjoy life, no longer feeling burn out from when she worked long days at low-income employment.

3. Creativity, Flow and Presence

A stripper named Cash put forward, “I love being on stage, performing, feeling the music, and just letting myself go... and having all the money falling on me while I do it” (Frances, 2017, p. 152). One area where strippers experience agency is through the creativity inherently required by the job, which may be beneficial to mental health. One of my core stripping memories involves a moment onstage when time slowed and I was completely absorbed. It was

the pinnacle moment of a song I carefully chose, in a costume I selected as part of a thoughtfully curated show. The final garment was shed at the perfect moment, the movement concluded, the song ended and the crowd erupted similarly to a touchdown at a football game. These moments of extreme enthusiasm from the crowd represent an elevated form of appreciation I receive nowhere else. As a lifelong trained dancer, being onstage showcasing what I have worked my whole life to refine allows me to shine, let go and attain a state I often call creative absorption. The technique from training is in place along with the confidence from having repeated the dance moves hundreds if not thousands of times in past stage shows. While I still get nervous before a show, once I am onstage moving, under optimal conditions, I enter a flow state and merge with the music; it is an experience unlike any other. Many dancers have shared that during those ten to twenty minute windows onstage, their problems in life dissolve, nothing else matters but the moment.

Misty described this experience as the following, “sometimes it feels like my own little concert. It's just for you, especially on the weekends, when people are tipping, it feels so good. It's twenty minutes of this... whatever's going on in your life... it's just gone” (October 15, 2024). Recounting the devastating discovery of the loss of her cousin then having to go to work, Misty described feeling okay only while she was dancing. Through various physical and mental health challenges, Misty related that while was onstage, stresses were alleviated: “I get to be free for twenty minutes” (October 15, 2024). To reach this unique form of freedom represents the intersection of preparation meeting opportunity. Strippers in many provinces in Canada must go through multiple rigorous audition-type processes by performing in amateur nights. Winning an amateur contest does not guarantee interest from stripper agents and when a dancer does finally

potentially get the opportunity to perform onstage, that is just the start of investing in your personal business and brand as an independent contractor. Strippers must invest in a multitude of elements behind the scenes to execute the performances seen onstage including buying a business license in some provinces. From custom designed costumes for themed shows (e.g. mermaid, devil, giant Vegas-style feathered ensemble are examples of costumes I had custom made) to mountains of 8-inch Pleaser brand heels to match, strippers spend thousands on elaborate apparel to accomplish their unique artistic vision. The expectations from clubs and agents is also that dancers show up with nails and hair done, a full face of makeup and other cosmetic processes including hair removal, all of which come at a cost. While the business of stripping involves a pay to play approach, one of the rewards is creative freedom. I love designing my costumes, choosing my music and getting lost in the flow while dancing. The findings from Burnes et al. (2018) concur, “the data from this study highlight how sex workers’ agency is multifaceted... creating a greater understanding of sexual expression as a job/form of work” (p. 1548). In an age where people can stream and re-watch almost anything that has ever existed from the comfort of their couch, the artistic expression of a stripper’s performance occurs live as a fleeting, magical moment that exists then is gone forever.

The Altar. At a time where the worst behaviour by men can lead to reward through rise to power, women with what could be considered low societal status are celebrated at strip clubs, showered in appreciation and cash. While strip clubs may replicate oppressive power structures, they also defy certain social norms allowing for outright appreciation of women in distinctive ways that many strippers find empowering. Ana Hitta describes this process of uniquely appreciating women, “for me, how I see strip clubs is literally like an altar... you see how people

donate money, they admire, they worship. It's literally an altar for celebrating femininity” (November 3, 2024). Whether this worship occurs onstage, in conversation at the bar or in the privacy of a lap dance, the ability of customers (mostly men) to express admiration can be astonishing. Egan (2006a) offers a contextual explanation of strip club interaction noting, “the social cartographies give dancers and regulars an understanding of what is expected and acceptable behavior in these spaces” (p. 46). Those who adhere to the accepted social standards in strip clubs involving the worship of women are rewarded with what is otherwise stifled in society and inaccessible to many, the company of women who are free to safely express their sexuality. For the stripper, she has autonomy in how she creatively expresses and performs sexuality through thoughtful curation, conscious interaction and boundaries. Misty weights in on the idea of worship stating, “it is spiritual. I don't like being perceived... but when you're being seen on stage, it's completely different” (October 15, 2024). Indeed, my experiences of a flow state onstage could be described as spiritual while the unique vulnerability of the interactions with customers, the appreciation and admiration does correspond with an altar.

4. Identity and Self

“Everybody wants to be seen and accepted for who they are. Stripping taught me to love and accept myself, which makes it easy to do that for others” (Frances, 2017, p. 149).

Highlighting some of the profound mentally beneficial outcomes of this work, this passage rings true. To be naked, smiling and interacting with strangers as a job requires incredible confidence and strength that comes from courage and vulnerability. To have the fortitude to embrace this vulnerable experience continually as a stripper holds the potential to strengthen an individual's sense of self including radical acceptance and self love. In a literal sense, there is nothing to hide

as a stripper. However, what this can accomplish on a deeper level is a reckoning with internalized shame and conditioning that asks women to make themselves small, to not be bold, ultimately to hate themselves and especially to be ashamed of their sexual nature. As someone who recovered from eating disorders prior to when I started stripping, what the job asks of me fortifies the healing process; I must take up space, I must be bold, I must love myself and I must own and celebrate my sexual nature. Research is starting to catch up with this understanding as it pertains to pole dance. While Li et al. (2024) posit, “pole dancing has been linked to reductions in depression and anxiety, increases in positive affect, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, and reductions in negative affect and loneliness” (p. 2), remember pole dancing comes from strippers who also experience these benefits. Research that acknowledges the experiential benefits by those who pole dance professionally as strippers is lacking.

However, the stripper turned academic researcher or therapist is an observed phenomenon that can help illustrate the mental health benefits of stripping based on valuable lived experience (Wahab et al., 2011). Katie Petter, my colleague who is completing a masters in clinical counselling, speaks to the strengthened sense of self that stripping provides,

I am firm in my knowledge of my experience that I wouldn't have been able to show up as 100% of myself in my own life if I didn't have to practice and execute that through dancing, and I don't think that could be replicated in any other industry... Hailee Camryn was always a part of me but it was a part I felt was unacceptable to share. I'm so grateful I don't feel the need to hide any part of me now, I have Hailee to thank for that. (October 14, 2024)

When considering who may benefit from the experience of no longer needing to hide, women as

well as gender diverse people and those with non dominant sexual identities come to mind.

Interviewing a psychologist who works with gender diverse, queer and trans sex worker clients, Weimer (2023) quoted, “exploring sexuality and the connection between identity was ubiquitous for the clients” (p. 59). For those who have had to hide aspects of themselves that felt unacceptable, sex work can provide the opportunity for identity exploration, personal growth and greater self acceptance.

In those with marginalized identities, factors that bolster sense of self can reinforce entry into sex work and the desire to stay in it (Burnes and Dawson, 2023). The very identity of being a sex worker can connect individuals into a powerful sex worker network, often a close-knit community. Weimer (2023) describes the benefits some sex workers with marginalized identities may be receiving, “the ability to affirm their gender, receiving affirmation from others, and feeling included within a community... they put themselves in a space to receive affirmation for various characteristics, whether the level of femininity, gender, body type, or sexuality” (p. 59). With the potential to have identity positively affirmed and reinforced by community, whether it be sex workers’ clients or fellow sex workers who provide support, identity may be formed and strengthened through sex work. While strip clubs have traditionally employed cisgendered women and men, there are certainly exceptions with non-binary strippers becoming more prevalent. Strip nights that feature trans and gender nonconforming performers have been occurring locally at some Vancouver bars and nightclubs. Within pole studios, I have had the pleasure of instructing trans students who are able to embrace their true identity through the creative expression of pole dance and the safer studio environment. Whether it is through sex work, stripping or the supportive pole studio community, identity can be affirmed through the experiences made possible in these spaces. The protective factor that is community support

cannot be underestimated during the process of self exploration and identity development that occurs from sex work, particularly for those with marginalized identities. As communal beings, identity is inextricably intertwined with the sense of belonging that comes from being part of community.

5. Sisterhood and Community

Frances (2017) articulated, “the dressing room is the dopest girl gang clubhouse of all time” (p. 157). As demonstrated in chapter 2, social support is the most documented feature in existing research of all the mental health benefits being proposed here with the dressing room named as a site of resistance (Barton, 2006). Describing the support that exists among strippers, Barton (2006) cites, “dancer after dancer shared that meeting other dancers and making friends with them was an unexpected reward of stripping. ‘Cool,’ ‘wonderful,’ ‘funny,’ ‘smart,’ and ‘supportive’” were the adjectives dancers most often used to describe one another” (p. 139). I am in agreement with this statement. The types of people who are drawn to stripping are openminded individuals, rebels who challenge the status quo through nontraditional employment. There are many shared commonalities that unite us. Furthermore, Barton (2006) outlines how social allegiance among strippers sets the foundation for critique of injustice and inequity, leading to the formation of a shared language with the opportunity for resistance against oppression. What I would add is that collaboration among strippers provides the basis for respectful communication and coordination that contributes positively to our experience at work. What I attempt to demonstrate through professionalism is the benefit of working together, an approach that I observe most strippers embracing. Whether that is complimenting a fellow stripper or calling her over when a customer wants a second girl for a private dance, the spirit of community collaboration amongst us creates a positive work environment.

Burnes and Dawson (2023) put forward, “mental health practitioners have noted the importance of social support as an aspect of resilience and such resilience could be helpful for sex workers navigating dangerous and stress-inducing work environments” (p. 45). While social support as a protective factor has been observed by some practitioners, the majority of mental health research on sex work overlooks this resiliency factor (Burnes et al., 2012; Burnes et al. 2018; Burnes & Dawson, 2023). Using the PAR framework to study how social support can buffer potential dangers of the job, Burnes et al. (2018) quoted one study participant who stated, “it’s a network like you wouldn’t believe... These people are my kindred. They know more about me than my family” (p. 1547). This resonates with me and what I would add is the crucial contribution that mentorship plays as part of this social support. When I was interested in starting to strip after performing burlesque as the early show at The Penthouse, I would stay after to watch my favourite stripper, Rose, with fascination and admiration. As a trained dancer, I could clearly see Rose's refined technique, the strength in her movements that was balanced with grace and the appearance of ease; importantly, I would tip her to express my appreciation. Finally, I worked up the courage to ask her for guidance towards becoming a stripper as I was aware she taught pole lessons out of her home. For many months, I went to Rose’s home on a weekly basis for pole lessons where she shared pole skills and more nuanced performance techniques including hand and finger movements that contribute to elegance along with moving slowly to accentuate sensuality. Even more valuable however, was the mentorship she provided around best practices for success in the business.

Crucially, Rose made it clear that she did not drink on the job or at all for that matter. While inaccurate depictions exist in literature and popular culture about the wild lifestyle strippers lead, sobriety is a growing movement amongst sex workers that is bolstered by social

support. Sobriety is an often-discussed topic in the change room partly because alcohol is so prevalent in our work environments and while not all strippers are sober, many are and more still are interested. For stage dancers, our performance and touring schedules are incredibly physically demanding therefore, it is vital to be in peak physical and mental health. I first learned about sobriety from a dancer at the Number 5 Orange who attended twelve step recovery and had been sober for an extended time. As a new dancer in an environment where I was constantly surrounded by alcohol, drugs, and peer pressure, the subtle mentorship this dancer provided through leading by example was enough to inspire me to pursue recovery. Seven years of continuous sobriety later, I too aspire to lead by example. Many young women who enter stripping with little to no prior mentorship or strip club experience benefit from experienced strippers who are willing to provide guidance. Ana Hitta calls these mentors “pole moms” describing them as “the friends you make and how they help you to gain experience. They really take your hand, they teach you the etiquette, how to navigate the whole club environment. So yeah, the sisterhood. I absolutely, absolutely appreciate it” (November 3, 2024). Another description for what pole moms provide, Frances (2017) terms it “the infinite wisdom of the matriarch in the dressing room” (p. 143). Thankfully, I have been profoundly enriched by the stripper sisterhood and forever changed by this community.

6. Celebration, Confidence and Empowerment

Much could be said and much has already been expressed about the celebratory altar that is the strip club where feminine creative expression is showered with affection and cash. The mental health benefits that have been outlined are interlocking and overlapping with much that already encompasses empowerment. What I can add is that to get to a place of solid confidence where I am consistently empowered as a stripper has taken continual work, which is never-

ending. Part of this work involves the *choice to be empowered*, to step into my power, to authentically own what I do. I make that choice for myself, I give myself permission to be all that I am and I do this over and over. In doing so, I reject stigma, I turn down the noise of other's judgment and I do what I love without shame. Of course, I still centre my safety; not everyone deserves access to knowledge about the sacred altar where I work. Decisions around selective disclosure to those who have proven trustworthiness in tandem with the choice to be empowered is a form of self care that allows me to continue taking care of others as an entertainer.

While touring as a stripper, I simultaneously seek to maintain my physical and mental health while refining my craft; it is a constant balancing act. To continuously improve as a dancer, I attempt to schedule at least one pole training session per week and stretch whenever possible in addition to hours of arduous physical labour on the job. Contrary to popular belief, my confidence as a stripper arises not because I am young and hot.¹⁶ The empowerment I experience from stripping comes largely from working hard for everything I am. From the countless hours spent training, to collaborating with costume designers for meticulously, hand crafted costumes, to financial investments in shoes, hair, makeup, and nails, I am a business woman and I must contribute to my business to reap the reward. Inherently, I know my worth; I am worthy without all the glitter and glam. Yet I must work within the system as a stripper to perform with excellence and meet the standards that are expected of me at each club. I must embrace the demands of a schedule that involves working until 3am night after night in spite of being exhausted. I must be resilient in the face of rude and drunk customers, which requires self regulation work and daily meditation for me. The self care that this job demands of me is imperative and what has allowed me to be a confident and empowered person.

¹⁶ One of my pet peeves is hearing people say, "if I was young and hot, I would totally strip." I hear it often as though anyone thinks they could do it, which could not be further from the truth.

While the effort to make stripping sustainable as a career takes work, it is worthwhile and rewarding. Frances (2017) quotes stripper Brett Ashley who describes the benefit she experiences:

The sense of empowerment it has given me. Some people assume it makes us feel cheap and degraded, but stripping has given me so much confidence... I feel like I get the male attention I need while I'm getting paid which has made me much less interested in dating douche bags. I am learning a lot about myself and how powerful I am. (p. 152)

Stripping can underscore a person's sense of worth, which has ripple effects. Personally, I find that I am more capable of standing up for myself and advocating for others as a result of having to be outspoken at work. Being a skilled advocate was beneficial when in my clinical internship I worked with clients to secure housing, to connect with employment programs and set important personal boundaries. Applicable crossover skills from sex work are expressed by a psychologist with sex worker clients, "[sex work is] about actively caring about other people and celebrating oneself. And a form of expression. It's a healthy piece of their exploration and identity" (Weimar, 2023, p. 62). From this healthy exploration that fortifies identity, what I witness as one of many strippers who are becoming therapists is that empowerment from stripping enhances communication skills. The ability to care for others with boundaries is a key strength with applicability across multiple contexts including therapeutic settings.

As this chapter transitions towards clinical implications, one of the biggest aspects put forward in emerging research is the need to recognize sex worker resilience (Burnes et al, 2012). Often, the career of stripping is rewarding yet what may not be working as well are relationships where there is insecurity from a partner or judgements that negatively impact connection (Jansson et al., 2023). What counsellors can help accomplish for strippers is to externalize stigma

towards emphasizing existing resilience therefore bolstering empowerment. A strength-based approach means honouring that the client is making the best decisions as the expert of her life. For countless strippers with whom I have worked and read about in literature, stripping is the best career choice for them at the time with so much to learn and with many potential opportunities. June elaborates,

Stripping has been the best career choice I've ever made. Beyond being able to live a lifestyle I enjoy (rich in time, mobility, and cash), I value myself and my time so much more. I stick up for myself and have finally cured that "over-accommodating female" sickness I was raised with. I feel no guilt about saying no. I never thought of myself as a savvy businesswoman, but as enterprising as they come. (Frances, 2017, p. 148)

Part of therapists acknowledging and doing away with their own biases involves celebrating the savviness of the enterprising businesswoman who has chosen the bold work of stripping. Using an intersectional lens means recognizing that for people with marginalized identities, there may be additional challenges in sex work yet hopefully resilience factors such as community can help offset. Counsellors can help increase resiliency by building on strengths that are already there and emphasizing what is working. Strippers are worth celebrating; they are brave in the face of adversity, they are hardworking, and they are part of a powerful, global network of sex workers who are not going anywhere. What does it mean for the psychology community, researchers and practitioners alike to stand as allies with strippers and sex workers?

Application: Future Directions

In starting the process of naming some of the mental health benefits experienced by strippers, what I am beginning to generate is much needed positively-focused research. With the use of models such as PAR, similar research rooted in firsthand experience as reported, guided

and overseen by sex workers could be vastly expanded through future efforts. As was explored in the oppressive paradigm, much of the existing literature operates through a biased, inaccurate lens to pathologize and problematize sex workers therefore, looking for the good, nuanced as it may be, is necessary towards greater competency within the psychological sphere. This type of research is in its infancy as put forward by Burnes et al. (2018),

There have been an increasing group of empirical studies (e.g., Van der Meulen 2011; Wahab & Panichelli, 2013) that have begun to incorporate sex worker agency and perspectives as part of the research process. These studies have begun to document the need for more inclusion of sex workers' perspectives and agency-focused experiences as a methodological tool for more robust sex work research." (p. 1542)

While the need to include sex worker perspectives has been documented, the work to incorporate them meaningfully is just beginning and must be expanded. Not only will resilience-focused research contribute to greater accuracy of sex worker representation in ongoing research, clinicians providing treatment will also benefit. Weimer (2023) explains, "focusing on how professionals can support women within this community, Dr. A [the psychologist with sex worker clients] discussed the importance of engaging in research that demonstrates the positive and healthy attributes within this community and providing spaces for more discussions around these topics" (p. 61). Providing the space for positive discussion around sex work cannot rest solely on the shoulders of sex workers; allies are needed.

For Clinicians

First off, check yourself. Or, in other words, engage in what Burnes and Dawson (2023) term, "self-examination of attitudes toward sex work" (p. 55) with the use of tools designed to check biases provided in their book specifically created for clinicians. Humorously observing

that many clinicians will say they “get it” to avoid truly evaluating their attitudes and biases about sex workers, this tendency is described as “clinical development bypassing” (Burnes & Dawson, 2023, p. 57). Importantly, Burnes and Dawson (2023) empathize with clinicians,

Some of us may say that we understand the importance of reflecting upon our biases about the sex-work industry and people in it, but we do not actually do the work to know what we think (and what we feel) about a lot of the issues that many of us are socialized not to talk about. (p. 57)

When confronting some of these challenging truths, it is important for clinicians to recognize they are not alone, many are conditioned to experience discomfort when reflecting upon and discussing sex and sex work. While the entire book is helpful, specific worksheets provided by Burnes and Dawson (2023) may prove especially enlightening such as “Self-Examination of My History with Whorephobia” (p. 70-71) which I have included in Appendix B. Upon first meaningfully engaging with tools to examine biases and social conditioning, it becomes imperative to continually do so as an unpacking process.

Beyond the preliminary work of honest self reflection and continuous bias checks, Burnes and Dawson (2023) lay out a step-by-step guide for clinicians that is aimed at increasing competency towards working with the vast and varied sex worker population. In a review of this source, Arczynski (2023) puts forward what the book enables for clinicians, “to provide more effective psychotherapy to current and past sex workers via two pathways: (1) increasing the reader's cultural competence for working with sex workers and (2) deconstructing individual, collective, and systemic erotophobia and intersectional oppression” (p. 592). This deconstruction process involves unlearning and relearning on a personal level in order to engage in anti-oppressive practice. Through the individual journey towards dismantling internalized

whorephobic oppression, allyship can start to exist, which challenges oppressive systems that limit sex workers rights, freedom and access to proper care within these systems. Practitioners must begin by learning about the challenges and limited rights sex workers experience as a basis for even considering work with this population. Furthermore, allyship may involve advocating on clients' behalf, particularly if the area of sex work in which they are involved is criminalized. Engaging with research on the need for decriminalization and understanding the implications of legalization represents foundational awareness. In research recommendations, what consistently emerges are calls for education such as that expressed by Burnes et al. (2012) stating, "from a practice-focused standpoint, psychologists must be competent and knowledgeable about sex workers before treating them" (p. 142). Without existing competence prior to working with this population, therapists run the risk of perpetuating harm and stigma that sex workers may already experience at high levels. The misguided therapist may accomplish the opposite of trauma informed practice, they can cause trauma.

As an extension of continuously checking biases, therapists must avoid making assumptions about how a sex worker feels about their work and why they are seeking therapy. Burnes et al. (2012) elaborate, "when working with sex workers in the therapeutic context, a resilience lens highlights the importance of therapists not assuming the sex worker's occupation is the reason for entering therapy" (p. 142). Would a therapist ever ask a plumber if their occupation was the reason for seeking therapy? Remarking that "the topic may or may not arise in therapy at all" (p. 60), Weimer (2023) cites, "Dr. A mentioned that none of their clients came to therapy with a primary concern of their employment" (p. 60). Having explored some of the mental health benefits experienced by strippers, career may be an area where the client is confident, supported and thriving. Working with a sex worker may mean that taking an anti-

oppressive and trauma informed approach involves attuning with them to address their presenting concern, which may have nothing to do with their work. When considering orientation, Sawicki et al. (2019) reiterates this recommendation for clinicians, “first, they can remain client-centered even if their own values may not align with those of the client. It is recommended that clinicians seek out consultation for any potential internal bias towards or against sex work” (p. 366). The importance of seeking competent supervision from a qualified supervisor cannot be underestimated. Instead of clinically bypassing the potentially unseen, therapists will benefit from a supervisor who can make visible the invisible, helping acknowledge and work through biases towards improving the quality of care for clients.

Education Recommendations

Consultation also involves education from and support for organizations that work with sex workers. Locally, there are many groups offering trainings that would benefit therapists such as Swan Vancouver, an organization which elevates “the rights, health, and safety of im/migrant women engaged in indoor sex work through frontline service and systemic advocacy” (2024 SWAN Vancouver, homepage). As one of their many projects, Swan addresses irresponsible media representation, directly engaging with the media to shift unethical coverage of im/migrant sex workers. An online resource hub designed in consultation with the women supported by Swan encourages evidence-based reporting of im/migrant sex work, “while highlighting the harms that come from conflating it with human trafficking” (2024 SWAN, What We Do, Projects). Greater responsibility in journalism and across media means centering accuracy and ethics in order to ensure for sex workers “rights, not rescue” (2024 SWAN, homepage). Increased media literacy to understand stigmatizing sex worker representation throughout social systems can benefit therapists. Since this competence may be considered niche,

sharing valuable resources and education with colleagues through consultation is encouraged. Burnes et al. (2018) elaborate, “future professionals in various domains of sexology can train their colleagues and students to understand the worldviews of individuals involved in the sex work industry... with an emphasis on sex worker agency” (p. 1548). While formal research emphasizing agency and resilience may be an emerging field, abundant sex work advocacy groups and organizations exist, many offering educational resources such as WISH Drop-in Centre Society’s page “Research & Reports” (WISH Drop-in, Resources). Making the effort to receive education and become equipped with resources from advocacy-based organizations increases the likelihood of serving as an ally and contributing to valuable advocacy.

Therapists can advocate for more sex work education within the institutions that educate them. The only class where sex workers were acknowledged favourably in a way that did not stigmatize during my time at CityU was in CPC 523 Psychology of Sexuality and Human Development with Lynden Neudorf, MSW, RCSW, who was an excellent instructor.¹⁷ More could be done to bring in experts from various organizations to speak about working with marginalized groups such as sex workers as part of graduate school for therapists. Sawicki et al. (2019) suggest “clinical trainings about the specific needs of sex workers as well as working to move through biases can be offered to the mental health community, such as graduate students and medical students as part of the curriculum” (p. 367). Doctoral students may conduct research in collaboration with sex workers, considering the importance of including their voices and perspective in research about them. Reflecting on her doctoral dissertation’s limitations, Weimer (2023) posits,

It became evident at how beneficial it would have been to include interviews from

¹⁷ A different CityU instructor used terms like “hookers” when referring to sex workers and “junkies” when referring to those experiencing substance use disorders. It was disappointing.

current or former exotic dancers. By including these women within the dissertation, I would have provided a space for clinicians to hear their point of view as to what they feel is necessary to know about how to work with them, how they feel about society's perception of what they do, and how they think the clinical community can grow" (p. 77)

As research incorporating stripper's perspectives slowly emerges, with it comes the appearance of significant gaps in the small body of research. Burnes et al. (2012) make note of some of these gaps, "one of the most glaring absences is the need for longitudinal studies of sex worker resilience [because] without a methodologically rigorous body of research from a resilience lens, psychologists may not be able to make accurate inferences and hypotheses and develop effective treatment services for this population" (p. 142). Instead of relying on institutional funding for positively-focused research, which is unlikely due to whorephobia, longitudinal sex worker resilience studies may be made possible through mobilization and participation within the community using, once again, approaches such as PAR (Fuentes, 2023; Rodriguez, 2022). Cue sex workers turned researchers and allies committed to advocacy!

Pole Studio Education. I would like to conclude by introducing some of the education I am offering in pole dance studios to centre strippers and sex workers. My intention is to expand this existing programming with the potential to integrate research including what I have been generating into more deliverable resources. In August of 2024 at Tantra Fitness, Vancouver's largest group of pole studios, I lead a workshop titled Exotic Stage Magic: an all-level stripping masterclass.¹⁸ It was a sold-out success! The following was part of the workshop's description,

Pull back the curtain for a candid behind the scenes experience of what it's really like to

¹⁸ The word "exotic" is used here. The studio was concerned about getting censored in online advertisements when I proposed the workshop title "Stripper Stage Magic." Moving forward, I will not associate with dance classes that use the outdated word "exotic."

be a professional naked person. Learn the good, the bad and the ugly parts of the industry plus how to hustle, an applicable life skill! ...Stripper etiquette to centre safety, self care and professionalism will be reviewed with a Q&A to answer all your burning questions. Myth busting on what strippers actually do plus why we are considered sex workers under Canadian law will be part of the tea. (Tantra Fitness, Classes & Workshops)

This education initiative was spurred by my passion to share the love of what I do. Moreover, I witness misinformed and uneducated perspectives about strippers at pole studios and see an opportunity to use my position to educate.¹⁹ To return to my positionality from chapter 1, as a stripper pursuing higher level education, I am in a privileged position that is accompanied by responsibility that involves committed advocacy. Stripping for me has never been survival-based sex work and does not involve engaging in sexual acts for compensation however, I accept that under Canadian law, I am a sex worker. To reiterate, how I attempt to illustrate some of the real repercussions of the stigma associated with being a sex worker is to ask students: what has historically happened in the news when a sex worker goes missing or is murdered? How might police deal with it? What I can now explain is that studies show people have less empathy for sex workers who experience violence and assault versus non sex workers, a reality with harsh implications in the justice system and beyond (Sprankle et al., 2018). As a sex worker in a privileged position, I am compelled to provide a voice for those that are often muted.

Conclusions

In two days from when this is currently being written, I am offering the next incarnation of my stripping masterclass (see Appendix A). With my head and heart full of the possibilities

¹⁹ To restate, in conversation leading up to the workshop, one of the studio managers had no idea why strippers are considered sex workers and why this is significant.

from this generative process, I feel more equipped than ever to deliver well-rounded knowledge grounded in decades of professional experience as a stripper, now more informed by existing research. As I begin to integrate some of this process, I am asking myself the chapter 3 question, what now? What now is that I continue to do what I am doing already with the potential to expand. Last summer, I offered my first workshop at a pole studio in Kelowna, which also aimed to centre the stripper experience within the dance studio context, it was well received. Recently, I was scheduled to teach a workshop at a pole studio in Whistler. While I am interested in travelling to teach workshops in more locations, what strikes me is the need for an education package or resource for pole studios that could be shared with their entire student base. Is it a pamphlet, a webpage or an email to be circulated? Or is it a full-on book? I like the idea of a short, informative resource that acquaints pole students with the origins of their favourite leisure activity, the weighted stigma experienced by strippers and sex workers along with guidance towards advocacy. A list of organizations supporting sex workers could be useful for pole students to explore what sex worker allyship looks like in action. A list of memoirs and novels written by strippers and sex workers may also be included to amplify the voices of those that set the foundation for pole dance yet are often absent in pole studios.

As I dream into the possibilities, another option that has long been on my mind is to write a book featuring all the amazing women I have met through stripping. My stripper friends and colleagues are characters; they are diverse, dynamic, and extraordinarily resilient human beings. Some strippers are also lawyers, some dropped out of high school, all of them have amazing stories worth sharing.²⁰ The work of stripping is not for the faint of heart; it is challenging, gruelling and at its best, extremely rewarding. With me, stripper colleagues have experienced

²⁰ There are two strippers with whom I currently dance who are also lawyers. One no longer practices law as she found law firms too misogynistic and prefers stripping.

some, if not all, of the mental health benefits I have shared in this research and could contribute volumes of diverse perspectives to the beneficial aspects compiled. All of the oppressive paradigm research that was explored is disconnected from the reality that strippers are people working a job and just like anyone else, they are deserving of rights, respect and dignity. The psychological field can help affirm this through thoughtful, accurate research that includes sex worker voices and through mental health practitioners who are educated, sex worker allies. The stigmatizing, the pathologizing and the untrue in traditional sex work studies and perspectives result in real world consequences that I personally experience along with my colleagues. While there are a multitude of joyful stories worthy of celebration, I have also lost stripper friends tragically and justice was not served, likely due to sex work stigma. Several years ago when one of my colleagues was murdered, it was brushed under the rug by police and media as a mysterious “sudden death” (CBC News, 2019, para 1).²¹ Everyone close to her knew what had happened yet her public ties to sex work seemed to obscure the investigation, which was inconclusive. The lack of positive research and perspectives about strippers has devastating consequences; this must change. My hope is that in some small way, my contribution as a stripper, educator and sex worker rights advocate can impact meaningful and positive change.

²¹ Here is the article in which a spokesperson for the Kelowna RCMP states the day after her murder, “our investigators do not believe criminality was involved” (CBC News, 2019, para 6). I end with this story to illustrate the real world results of the stigma faced by sex workers. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/sudden-death-woman-kelowna-1.5106876>

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Appendix A



Exotic Stage Magic Part II with Tempest

Remixxx! Part II of this all-level stripping masterclass delivers even more strategies on how to captivate a crowd, accept tips, and deliver a dazzling stage show. Pull back the curtain for a candid behind the scenes experience of what it's really like to be a professional naked person. Gain insider industry info plus hustling "how-to", an applicable life skill!

In Part II, we will touch on lap dance and spill secrets towards money making moves. Tackle technique whether you plan to perform lap dances professionally or for fun.

Stripper and strip club etiquette to centre safety, self care, respect and professionalism will be reviewed. Let's bust myths about what strippers actually do with a Q&A to answer all your burning questions - we will leave more time for this! ;)

Finally, the moving and shaking! Best practices for performance will be shared including creation of a successful stage set with audience interaction that will leave them spellbound. Make magic with movement that expresses your uniqueness and get equipped to get tipped!!!

About Tempest

Show pony pursuing a masters degree, Tempest is a touring showgirl and award winning dancer. She has won multiple titles in pole and strip club competitions plus brings to the table a wealth of teaching experience. Tempest is passionate about performance and sharing her love of the stage by bringing out the best in others. An academic and professional in other arenas by day, Tempest is currently researching the mental health benefits of stripping.

Appendix B

Resource 4.1: Self-Examination of My History with Whorephobia (Burnes & Dawson, 2023)

Messages about sex work and the exchange of sex for money come to us from a variety of sources. Here's an activity to help you reflect on such messages:

1. Make a list of the five to ten messages that you received about sex work before you turned age twenty-one, whether all in one period of your life or dispersed throughout different parts of your life as a child, adolescent, and/or adult. Your engagement with these messages can be voluntary (you watched a movie) or involuntary (you saw an image in a store window, or an advertisement popped up on your computer).
2. Make a list of the five to ten messages that you received about sex work after you turned age twenty-one, whether all in one period of your life or dispersed throughout different parts of your life (in your work as a graduate student, in your personal life, at your workplace, etc.). Your engagement with these messages can be voluntary (you heard your boss at work say a very whorephobic comment and did not say anything) or involuntary (you saw an image in a store window, or an advertisement popped up on your computer).
3. Next, write down what you took from the message with which you engaged. What was either the covert or overt messaging that you received when engaging with this stimuli?
4. In addition to the messages connected with each image, write down one reaction you had (or still have) to the message.
5. As you reflect on these messages, think about the ways in which sex work affects you specifically. Identify two specific themes in your answers.

Appendix C

Resource 5.1: Assessment Tool with Sex-Worker Clients (Burnes & Dawson, 2023)

The following questions can be added onto (or incorporated into) an initial intake assessment. Some clinicians prefer to ask these questions during an initial session. Other clinicians weave these questions in gradually to various sessions during the assessment phase.

1. What type(s) of work do you do (e.g., full service, camming, porn acting, etc.)?
2. In what type of setting do you work (e.g., independent fee-for-service, brothel, club, group practice, etc.)?
3. How long have you been in the industry?
4. How is it to talk about your work in the industry with me? What would make it easier and/or more comfortable to talk about your work with me?
5. Have you experienced adverse working conditions (e.g., violence with police while at work, violent clients, unsafe working conditions)?
 - Have these conditions impacted you, if at all?
6. What sources of social support help you navigate difficult situations at work?
7. Do you have colleagues in the industry? In what ways do these colleagues provide you support?
8. How do you take care of yourself?
 - Exercise?
 - Health habits?
 - Mental health habits (including breathing, meditation, and regulation strategies)?
9. What part of working in the industry do you like?
10. What parts of the industry are difficult for you and/or do you not like?