

RECREATIONAL POLE DANCE

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BY

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ABSTRACT

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Pole dance/fitness is an international form of dance fitness that has become increasingly popular since the early 2000s. This thesis is an ethnographic case study focusing on a specific community of people who participate in pole dance/fitness as a recreational activity in Tampa, Florida. This ethnography highlights the motivations of participants who take pole dance/fitness classes and applies theories of feminist anthropology and embodiment theory. Throughout my research I found that, with the support of their pole family, women continuously (re)created their sense of self as they worked towards their ideal self by embodying the pole community's values. These values included diminishing an emphasis on physical appearance as a marker of a women's worth and promoting self-love. Despite the stigma attached to pole dance/fitness, those who participate in it continue to do so because of the mental and physical benefits it offers them. The pole community provides a safe space and encourages participants to explore freedom of sexual and gender expression. In this thesis I analyze the demographics, practices, and beliefs of polers. I provide a holistic understanding of one small pole dance/fitness community in Tampa, but my findings are applicable to understanding the wider pole dance/fitness community.

Introduction

Recreational pole dancing/fitness (hereafter referred to as “pole” unless otherwise specified) has seen a surge in popularity since the early 2000s (Bahri 2012:1; Felien 2015; Holland 2010; Potopsingh 2007:1) and it continues to grow rapidly. Researcher Samantha Holland reported that the number of UK pole studios had increased from “only 59 schools in the whole of the UK” in 2007 to “well over 100 (within the UK) and countless others in other countries” (2010:65). This was at least partially because pole has experienced an increasing amount of media coverage in mainstream advertising, movies, and magazine articles highlighting its benefits as a fitness activity. For example, during the 2015 Super Bowl an Advil commercial featured a male poler and in 2019 Jennifer Lopez starred in the *Hustlers* movie as an accomplished stripper who also poles. Lopez was very outspoken about her training for the role with famous professional polers. She was quoted several times explaining the hard work and dedication it takes to be a poler as well as the benefits of pole as a fitness activity. This has caused an increase in participation in recreational pole and as a result it has come to be seen as a more “legitimate” fitness activity.

Despite pole’s emergence into the world of “legitimate” dance fitness activities, the amount of published research specifically on recreational pole is limited both in quantity and scope. In this project I investigated the complexity of pole as a part of a growing international subculture made up of regional and studio-based communities by looking at the lived experiences of polers. I did this project because, as an anthropologist who has been a participant in the Tampa, Florida pole community since October of 2013, I felt I could shed some light on what it means to be a poler beyond the limited scope of those who only enter the community for

short periods of time as was the case in the majority of previous research. I occupy a position in the community that differs from those who enter it for short periods of time or only for the sake of research. I have, with few exceptions, been consistently disappointed by the research done on pole and the way the polers are represented in academic literature. I believe this is due, in most part, to the lack of authority granted to those who have been an actual part of the pole subculture concerning the poler's lived experiences. Many researchers enter the outskirts of their local pole communities, but do not make themselves enough of a member of that pole community through their continued presence over an extended period of time to gain the higher levels of trust and familiarity by the already established polers. The time and participation in the pole subculture is directly related to the depth of information the researcher can acquire as the pole community, like with any other subculture, is complex. Because most current academic research is only collected over short periods of time, their research is limited to discussing beginner-level classes, visual aspects of pole subculture, and the base level relationships that begin to form in the early stages of acceptance into the community. This is because there are certain rites of passage a poler experiences the longer they are part of their pole community; there is a waiting period in which time the hopeful members need to prove to themselves that they are willing to stick with this physically intensive and, at times, physically painful activity as well as a need by the community for the person to prove to be an open-minded and accepting individual — or at least not outwardly judgmental and overall “cunty” (a pole term used in jest to mean, grumpy, or judgmental as well a rebellion against the negative stigma of the word “cunt”).

This project was an ethnographic case study focusing primarily on a single pole studio located Tampa, Florida. It took place primarily in 2017, but further data was collected sporadically until early 2020. Information from the wider pole community in the area was also

utilized since there is a frequent overlap of students who visit several pole studios at once and therefore are part of other studio-based communities beyond the one that was the main focus of my study. The studio that I chose as my primary studio was Bad Cherry Pole Dance Studio. This particular studio specializes in recreational pole classes for women and is a women-only studio. The women who frequent this studio have created a pole community primarily centered around their home studio that subsequently branches out to incorporate, to a lesser extent, the surrounding studios. For this project I focused on how the Bad Cherry polers used the space created by pole classes to navigate and negotiate the contradicting ideals pushed on women in American culture concerning “appropriate” gender expression and their bodies. This has been a topic of discussion for feminist writers and others whose work deals with similar topics (such as women and fitness, women in sport, women in dance, and so on) who call attention to the prevalent notion that women cannot be simultaneously both “sexy and respectable”, “athletic and feminine” (McCaughey 1997), and other examples of binary contradictions that fall under the broader “Madonna/whore” dichotomy prevalent in Western culture (Donaghue, Kurz, and Whitehead 2011). During my research I saw the people who took pole classes continuously create and recreate their sense of self (i.e., the beliefs and perceptions about one’s self) and their ideal selves (i.e., who they would like to be) through the embodiment of communal pole values (such as self-love and holding achievement over physical appearance) as they were exposed to those values through the pole studio and ultimately the entirety of the pole community. This research worked with polers to explore the members’ relation to community, embodiment, stigma, and the creation (and re-creation) of the self. My goal in this project was to give voice to the poling community to talk about their life experiences within and concerning pole so they may place their voices alongside the current discourse on pole. I did not use this research to define

the position of polers as empowered or oppressed; rather, I modeled this aspect of the research after the stance Holland took in her book which “aims to allow polers to define themselves” (Holland 2010:42) thus acknowledging and respecting their rights to their own agency. What I mean by this is that I did not impose my expectations onto the women who participate in this study. Instead, I let the stories from these polers show how they see themselves. Whether they see themselves as empowered or otherwise I acknowledge their word as the final truth on the subject. It is important that I make this statement because it frames my approach to this project: I respect these women and view this project as a collaboration between them and myself. It is not my place nor anyone else’s to question their personal beliefs. As anthropologists we are here to observe, report, and analyze — not judge, which I found some researchers to do in previous studies.

It is easily noticeable that American culture is becoming increasingly sexualized to the point where overtly sexual practices and symbols (such as strippers) are common knowledge and are easily made the subject of jokes (Fensterstock 2006: 189-190; Johnson 2006: 168); for example, references to strippers regularly appear on popular cable television shows such as *Friends*, and are the main subject of more serious works such as the *Hustlers* movie. However, women are still made to feel uncomfortable in their own bodies and are overwhelmingly criticized and objectified for openly displaying themselves as sexual beings by both men and other women (Egan et al. 2006; Holland 2010). Nevertheless, interest and participation in recreational pole is on the rise despite and, to an extent, because of its historically sexual nature and the strong social stigma that causes it to still be confused for the related-but-separate practice of stripping in strip clubs (Holland 2010). In this project I sought to understand how those who participate in pole, are part of a pole community, and actively engage in the pole subculture

navigate these issues from day to day and what motivates them to do so. To this I found that part of the motivation for women to participate in pole despite the stigma attached to it has to do with empowerment, the feeling of community, and the creation of a “safe space” to explore freedom of expression through dance which positively impacts their sense of self.

In the field, participant observation and interviews were the primary source of data collection. They were utilized to collect qualitative data concerning the lives of the women who participate in pole and are active members of the community centralized around Bad Cherry Pole Dance Studio in Tampa, Florida. Demographic information about the area, the studio, and the informants is provided in the “Data and Discussion” section of this paper.

In anthropology it is understood that some of the key components in participant observation is the time spent among and immersion in the culture being studied (Bernard 2011:258). Immersion in both the physical and online realms of pole is important to understand pole on the individual, community, and cultural levels. While the web-based aspect of pole is relatively easy to access (most websites are open to the public and many social media groups only conduct a light screening process) breaking into a real-world pole community is more difficult. Due to the stigma that is attached to pole and the problems it can cause for those who participate in pole, becoming a member of a pole community requires physical presence and an investment of time in order for trust to be formed. Reading through online pole chatrooms, it is not uncommon to see polers complaining of the unfair treatment they have received from coworkers and employers, family and friends, and strangers when their participation in recreational pole was discovered. And yes, I do mean “discovered.” Many polers adopt fake names and create separate social media accounts strictly to share their love of pole in hopes that they may avoid harassment. Unfortunately, too many polers have experienced harassment or,

particularly in the case of those who work with children or have high-profile careers, have had their jobs/careers threatened or suddenly lost their jobs over flimsy reasons shortly after their involvement in pole was made public. This happens despite pole being a dance and fitness activity offered in many health clubs and gyms worldwide. Samantha Holland, author of the book *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*, commented several times throughout her work on the “wary” nature of several of her informants upon her first meeting them due to the paradoxical nature of pole classes: on the one hand it’s “good, clean, energetic fun where you meet other women and increase your self-esteem and on the other hand, something to hide from your friends and family” (Holland 2010:28). Holland concluded her book saying that even after two years of research she had “only begun to scratch the surface of the complexities of pole classes in relation to agency and pleasure” and that her research had created more questions than answers (Holland 2010:117).

Although I focused on a single pole community in this study, the broader cultural context created by location and the period in which the research was conducted was made apparent. My hope in doing this was to set an example as to the importance of cultural and temporal context, and lay the groundwork from which other studies can build.

Pole as a subculture is made up of web-based and physical platforms. Because of its presence on the internet, pole subculture is international with an intricate web of forums, social media pages and groups, blogs, and official webpages that offer a place for polers to unite from around the globe to discuss ideas, sell pole related items, share videos and pictures, ask questions, speak freely about their love of pole, and express pride in their pole or related accomplishments. Specific pole related jargon and beliefs are evident and it is through the online network that main themes spread with regional variations. Pole, like other cultures and

subcultures, looks different depending on the level of involvement of the individual: an outsider who spends some time with a new culture may understand some basic concepts and jargon, but they lack experience and comprehension for why things are said and done in a particular way, they may miss the connection between acts or ideas, and some elements may be subject to misinterpretation. Thus, the longer one stays in the field and immerses themselves in the subculture and community of pole the deeper the understanding of the polers and pole as an international subculture with its own language, customs, physical objects, forms of dress, jokes, beliefs, and so on.

In the pole subculture, like other non-ethnicity based cultures and subcultures, new people may become members, but it takes time and the individual must pass certain rites of passage. There are stages of understanding by the individual of what they can expect as a poler and what is expected of them as well as stages of acceptance by those who are already members that the individual has what it takes to become a poler. For example, pole is a high-impact activity. Bruises (lovingly called “pole kisses”) are inevitable. If the person can’t handle the beatings they put themselves through to learn most moves done on the pole as well as on the floor while doing floorwork (dance done when the body is no more than approximately three feet above the ground. It usually consists of rolls, crawls, and creating shapes with the body. It may be done in combination with the dancing around or up the pole) they will not continue to pole and instead will quit due to pain or physical appearance of the bruises. As for the community’s rites of passage, the pole community prides itself on being nonjudgmental, uplifting, and supportive of everyone so long as the person isn’t being cunt — in which case they are generally shunned until they either change their ways or leave the community. If a potential poler tries to come into the community and doesn’t adhere to those standards they are quickly put in

their place. For example, the use of the hashtag #notastripper is greatly frowned upon and never fails to cause issues within the community. It is demeaning to strippers and other sex workers because it separates them as “the other”: the thing that needs to be set apart and not associated with. It makes them sound “dirty.” That hashtag is extremely insulting because many polers either come from a stripping background, have friends who are strippers, understand that modern poling stems from stripping, or are currently or former strippers. If that hashtag is used, seasoned polers will immediately address the issue and explain why that hashtag is inappropriate to use in the pole community. The hashtag is usually used by people new to pole so there are a good amount of seasoned polers who will explain why it is disrespectful to others in the pole community. Regardless, that hashtag has generally become a sign of a “baby poler” (a person who is new to pole. They have accepted the inevitability of bruises and the pain of pole and they have taken enough classes that their face is recognized by the other members of their home studio; however, they are beginner level students and are still learning the ways of the pole community). This situation is an example that there is a degree of knowledge that the baby poler must learn in order to be accepted by the larger pole community.

Literature Review

As previously stated, recreational pole has seen a surge in popularity since the early 2000s (Bahri 2012:1; Felien 2015; Holland 2010; Potopsingh 2007:1); unfortunately, academic literature specifically on recreational pole is still rare. Research on pole as it is done in strip clubs by strippers (“stripping”) dominates the academic literature; however, that is not the focus of my

thesis and therefore will only be discussed in this project when necessary (e.g., to clarify the distinction between the two and when discussing the “stripping vs. recreational pole” divide).

The literature dealing specifically with recreational pole has had three major research trends that routinely interconnect: 1) an attempt to explore and explain the appeal of pole and the motivations of the women who participate in it, 2) whether pole is empowering or oppressive, and 3) the “stripping vs. recreational pole” divide. Researchers often apply feminist theory to studies on pole — except, interestingly, the research in the articles found in the academic journal, *Vertical Exploration: Journal of Pole and Aerial Movement Studies*, which happens to be the only peer reviewed journal written and reviewed by those active in the pole community. This exclusion of feminist theory from the *Vertical Exploration: Journal of Pole and Aerial Movement Studies* journal suggests that the pole community at large does not see itself explicitly under the scope of feminism. In fact, only one person I interviewed brought up feminism and it was to say they don’t consider themselves a feminist. This is very much unlike the literature by those who stand outside the pole community who seem intent on shoving pole into a discussion on feminism. This creates an interesting conundrum as feminism looks to be seen very differently by those outside the pole community (where it is discussed at length) as compared to those within it (where it is rarely discussed).

Since the earliest published research done specifically on recreational pole (two Master’s theses conducted in Canada at two separate schools in 2007, one by Nicola Kim Potopsingh and one by Oralia Gómez-Ramírez) the question of what makes pole classes appealing to women and why women choose to participate in them over other fitness options has been at the forefront of research. Over the years, most researchers have cited to some extent the growth of postfeminist ideology and the rise of third wave feminism in western culture which encourages empowerment

through sexual agency (Gill 2007), and as a result this has led to the normalization of what has been dubbed “raunch culture” by Ariel Levy (2005), “stripper chic” by Alison Fensterstock (2006), and “porno-chic” by Brian McNair (2002) as the catalyst for the emergence of recreational pole as a fitness and leisure activity (Allen 2011; Donaghue, Kurz, and Whitehead 2011; Griffith 2016; Hamilton 2009; Holland 2010; Holland and Attwood 2009; Pellizzer, Tiggemann, and Clark 2016; Whitehead and Kurz 2009;). The literature showed that explanations for the appeal of pole classes for women are diverse. They range from a fascination with the “other” where strippers are placed as the “other” (Bahri 2012), to the a focus on the body and fitness (Holland 2010; Holland 2009; Holland and Attwood 2009; Donaghue, Kurz, and Whitehead 2011; Whitehead and Kurz 2009), to media coverage where celebrities are shown participating in pole (Holland 2010; Holland and Attwood 2009). I explored these explanations as I spoke to the polers currently in the pole community. I also added to this list as I do not believe these current explanations fully represent the long-term polers. For example, I found that community plays is a huge factor in the motivations of the long-term polers to continue to participate in pole; therefore, that is one of the primary focuses of my study.

Previous research often argued whether recreational pole is empowering or oppressing for women. Kally Whitehead and Tim Kurz summarize the two arguments most often used when discussing the “ideological drama” caused by the “re-branding of pole dancing as a recreational activity for women” from its previous context of the strip club in their 2009 article “‘Empowerment’ and the Pole: A Discursive Investigation of the Re-invention of Pole Dancing as a Recreational Activity”:

On the one hand, this process could be conceptualized as representing a form of ‘reclaiming’, by women, of an activity previously bound to the patriarchal, objectifying, social institution of the strip club. Thus, by relocating the activity in a female-only environment that is devoid of the male gaze, one could argue that

recreational pole dancing studios are creating a space in which women can challenge traditional representations of female sexuality as passive and subservient to men. On the other hand, however, one could argue that pole dancing is 'inherently' denigrating and disempowering to women, and that its connection to patriarchal institutions may render its enactment problematic in any context, from a feminist perspective. Thus pole dancing could arguably be seen to seal particular constructions of gender and sexuality that ultimately fail to disrupt power distributions within society at large. (2009:9)

Without getting into the debate on the position of strippers and sex work within feminism, as that is not the focus of this project, it is important to note that the same empowerment/oppression argument is essentially being applied to both recreational pole and stripping, as well as other forms of "provocative" dance such as belly dancing and burlesque, that are also primarily performed by women (Regehr 2012). The common characteristic between stripping and pole, besides the obvious components of a vertical pole and dance (which, I might add, are considered harmless when discussed separately), is the presence of a woman combined with the potential for sexual agency. Therefore, an individual's position in the empowerment/oppression debate lies in their perceptions of women, femininity, and expressions of female sexuality and sexual agency. These topics are all ultimately influenced by a multitude of sociocultural factors. The extent to which sociocultural factors influence the research on recreational pole is generally overlooked by the current literature and the acknowledgement of cultural biases varies depending on the author. Regardless, the current literature ultimately tied the discussion surrounding the empowerment or oppression of women who participate in recreational pole into the broader discussion on feminism.

As you will see in the "Conflicts within the Pole Community: The Stripping Vs. Recreational Pole Divide as Exemplified by the Hashtag #notastripper" subsection of the "Stigma" section in the "Data and Discussion" chapter, some of those who participate in pole continuously attempt to separate what they do from strip clubs, stripping, and strippers/sex

workers. I think of this as the “stripping vs. recreational pole” divide. This divide occurs despite the historical ties between recreational pole and the dance done in strip clubs by strippers, and it overlooks the fact that some of the most famous and influential people responsible for popularizing pole as a fitness activity are former strippers: for example, Fawnia Mondey who is considered first recreational pole dance instructor (Felien 2015; Holland 2010). Despite the prevalence of sexual imagery (such as strippers and strip clubs) in media and popular culture (Fensterstock 2006: 189-190; Johnson 2006: 167), there is still a stigma against strip clubs, stripping, and strippers/sex workers that leaks into the perception of recreational pole (Gómez-Ramírez 2007; Felien 2015; Hamilton 2009; Holland 2010; Holland and Attwood 2009; Jenson 2015a; Jenson 2015b). The most common way for the pole industry to differentiate itself from strippers and strip clubs is to focus their advertising and language so that it emphasizes athletic ability, the predominantly female environment, and that clothing will not be required to be stripped off (Bahri 2012; Holland 2010). Selena Felien (2015) further exemplified this point when she said that according to the dominant pole industry there is a bias towards the fitness aspect of pole when it is advertised: “the ‘official history’ of pole dancing (as portrayed by International Pole Fitness Association and Wikipedia) refers to many dance forms that involve poles or pole-like structures, most commonly Maypole dancing, Chinese pole, and Mallakhamb.” This gives an unfair, and inaccurate, emphasis to the more “sporty” or “athletic” activities over the influence of exotic dance in an attempt to further separate current recreational pole from stripping/sex work. It is important to notice that the entity that has created the “official history” is a pole “fitness” organization whose main focus is the fitness aspect of pole (Selena Felien 2015). It is in their best interest to downplay pole’s roots in girly shows and strip clubs because

they are advertising to the people who are more interested in the fitness side of pole (Selena Felien 2015).

This literature on recreational pole has made a few things painfully clear: literature on the subject is dominated by the fields of sociology and psychology with only two pieces from anthropologists; there is little to no emphasis placed on the location or dates of the study by the majority of authors and, thus, context is devalued in the analysis of those works; and the focus has been on base-level participation in pole, not the deeper cultural and communal level experiences that come out of the long-term members of the pole community and subculture. I found that the cultural context these pole communities exist within play a significant role in the way these communities express themselves: therefore, anthropology stands to offer a great deal to the study of pole.

I found only two pieces of academic literature have been produced by anthropologists: Jacenta Bahri's article "'Fun, Fitness, Fantasy': Consuming Pole Dancing Classes as 'Empowering'" (2012) and Oralia Gómez-Ramírez's Master's Thesis "Swinging Around the Pole: Sexuality, Fitness, and Stripper Stigma in Erotic Dancing Classes" (2007). Neither piece was written using data from the United States.

Bahri conducted her research in Canada. Her article relied entirely on previous studies, focused on the commodification of recreational pole, and theorized that the "othering" of strippers was the result of the rise in popularity of pole. Bahri did not acknowledge the dates or locations of the sources of the studies she synthesized and therefore overlooked the importance cultural context plays on different communities. This left her speaking about the evolving worldwide social phenomenon of pole as though it is static and identical everywhere in the world.

By contrast, one of the few researchers to note the importance of context (location and the years of research) was Gómez-Ramírez. She was explicit in stating that her research took place in and focused on Vancouver, Canada, and that her understanding of pole classes is “as they evolved in the Canadian context” (Gómez-Ramírez:2007). This showed her acknowledgement that information about pole is strongly dependent on context. Gómez-Ramírez took “sixteen dancing classes in total, each lasting from one to one and a half hours” over the course of fourteen months from February 2006 until April 2007 (2007: 5). She also participated in extracurricular activities with others from her pole classes, such as student performances and watching a nation-wide pole competition, which exhibits a deeper level of interest in the community aspect of pole as well as an attempt to connect further with both the classes and her classmates.

One of the first things I noticed in the published case studies on recreational pole was that there is surprisingly little emphasis placed on the demographics of the location by the majority of researchers apart from an initial survey of the sample population of polers being studied. This is problematic as it ignores the influence of the population outside of the sample and, thus, the cultural implications that would potentially vary depending on location are rarely included in the analysis of the data beyond a passing remark. Additionally, several pieces of literature did not provide the years the data they referenced was collected.

As an anthropologist, I know that being able to compare aspects of the pole subculture and communities as it varies by location and through time provides important insight to larger social themes. Furthermore, knowing the demographics of the location of a study is extremely important in creating a holistic understanding of a culture/subculture. This allows other researchers to accurately contextualize the information so it can be correctly applied to other

research. Samantha Holland, while she didn't go into much detail about the demographics of the UK areas where her research was primarily based, did discuss the location-based differences she noticed when she conducted research outside of her usual research locations. For example, when she worked in New South Wales in Australia she noted how the warmer climate affected the pole classes in comparison to what she was used to: "Here is the opposite problem to the UK where studios are often cold, here everything is hot, the poles are slippery, frequent spraying of bodies to cool off and cleaning of poles so they don't slide off... In many of the UK classes the room takes ages to heat up" (Holland 2010: 21). Details like the climate are important because they help the researcher and readers to understand aspects of material culture and behavior that vary depending on location, time of year, and so forth.

Theory

The theories I used in my research included feminist theory (particularly that which pertains to feminist ethnography and the body), and theories based on anthropological and sociological works on embodiment with an emphasis on embodied empowerment. I believe these theories complimented my methodology, the overall goals of this project, my findings, and me as a person and researcher.

I took on the theoretical position of a feminist ethnographer for this project. Christa Craven and Dána-Ain Davis define feminist ethnography as "a project committed to documenting lived experiences as it is impacted by gender, race, class, sexuality, and other aspects of participant's lives" (2013:1). I built this project and modeled myself as a researcher after the descriptions of feminist ethnographers from both Richelle Schrock and Lila Abu-

Lughod. In the article “The Methodological Imperatives of Feminist Ethnography,” Schrock explains that:

Feminist ethnographers produce knowledge about women’s lives in specific cultural context, recognize the potential detriments and benefits of representation, are interested in exploring women’s experiences of oppression along with the agency women exercise in their own lives and feel an ethical responsibility towards the communities in which they work. (2013:58)

To Schrock’s explanation I added Abu-Lughod’s depiction of the feminist ethnographer in her article “Can There Be A Feminist Ethnography?”:

imagine the woman fieldworker who does not deny that she is a woman and is attentive to gender in her own treatment, her own actions, and in the interactions of the people in the community she is writing about. In coming to understand their situation, she is also coming to understand her own through a process of specifying the similarities and the differences. Most important, she has a political interest in grasping the other’s situation since she, and often they, recognize a limited kinship and responsibility. (1990:26)

From that position, as Coates says, “I do not pretend to be objective but acknowledge from the beginning where I am coming from” (1996:14). I tried to limit my field research to the Bad Cherry pole community in order to explore the women’s lives in the context of that specific pole community or “pole family”; however, expanding this project into the broader pole community within the Tampa, FL area was inevitable due to the mingling of the studios and the way students would move from one studio to another. Because I acknowledged the “potential detriments and benefits of representation” (Schrock 2013:58) I made sure to be transparent with the Bad Cherry community and anyone else who was represented in this project. I made sure to ask for their input throughout this project, and conducted my research in a way that both respected their privacy and told their stories. As I have said, I respect these women and believe the best way to exercise that respect was to acknowledge their right to exercise their agency in the physical execution and verbal/written discussions of their lives in a way that marks them as the authority

figure concerning that information. Furthermore, I am well aware and acknowledge that this research would not have been possible if I had identified as male because Bad Cherry had a strict women-only policy for their classes. I understand that who I am in relation to my sex, my age, what I say, how I look, my position in the pole community, and even just my presence effected my interactions with the community during my study. My interest in this research, the methods and theories I chose, and the questions I asked in the interviews all stemmed from my own experiences as a poler that was part of the Bad Cherry community so throughout this research I was not only learning about the women in the local pole community, but I was also answering questions that pertained to me.

As I discuss my years of membership in the Bad Cherry pole community I am making a declaration about my position on the issue of objectivity in ethnography that is influenced by my identification as a feminist and my position as someone who lives in the community I am researching. I hold that ethnography is strongly influenced by the life and experiences of the researcher and therefore true objectivity is impossible. Abu-Lughod pointed out that a critique of objectivity used by some feminist scholars is that “all knowledge is partial and from an embodied perspective” (Abu-Lughod 1990:15). Knowledge is inherently biased based on individual embodied experiences so having the researcher be aware and open about their biases in their work offers the readers the advantage of taking those biases into account when reviewing the research. This enables the readers to create a context for the researcher as well as the official subjects of the study. In ethnography this method of doing research clarifies some theoretical or methodological choices made by the researcher which naturally influence the outcome of the study. As a result, I felt I could better represent the subjects of the research simply through acknowledging that they and myself (as the researcher) are both of equal priority when it comes

to interpreting the data rather than insinuating an authoritative hierarchy of the researcher over the researched.

Abu-Lughod states that:

Although any attempt to define a woman's voice in ethnographic writing is highly problematic, one point can be made about a feminist ethnography. If it were an ethnography with women at the center written for women by women (...), something important would have shifted. By working with the assumption of difference in sameness, of a self that participates in multiple identifications, and an other that is also partially the self, we might be moving beyond the impasse of the fixed self/other or subject/object divide (...). What feminist ethnography can contribute to anthropology is an unsettling of the boundaries that have been central to its identity as a discipline of the self studying other. (1990:25-26)

The "boundaries" Abu-Lughod was referring to are central to the traditional perspective of anthropology. Abu-Lughod explained that "anthropological discourse, with its roots in the exploration and colonization of the rest of the world by the West, is the discourse of the self. It defines itself primarily as the study of the other" (Abu-Lughod 1990:24). For anthropology this also means "that its selfhood is not problematic" (Abu-Lughod 1990:24) because it does not address its "selfhood"; it attempts to play the objective researcher because historically the focus on objectivity has been "the ideal in anthropological research and writing" (Abu-Lughod 1990:9). This also enables "the fixed self/other or subject/object divide" to be upheld with relative ease. On the other hand, "feminism was an attempt to turn those who had been constituted as other into selves, that is, into subjects rather than objects" (Abu-Lughod 1990:25).

According to Abu-Lughod:

Feminists know how negative that kind of binary division has been for women. In both feminist and halfie ethnography, the creation of a self through opposition to an other is blocked and therefore both the multiplicity of the self, and the multiple, over-lapping, and interacting qualities of other cannot be ignored. (1990: 27)

For this project, embodiment complimented this way of doing feminist ethnography. For example, Egan et al. rhetorically asked "how feminist theories of power, sexuality, and the body

might change if they were more substantially informed by the embodied knowledge” of the participants which the theories discuss (2006:xiii).

I found my definition of embodiment by combining the anthropological and sociological discussions on embodiment found in Steven Van Wolputte’s 2004 article “Hang onto Your Self: Of Bodies, Embodiment, and Selves”, and Holland’s 2004 and 2010 books. Pole dancing is a dance and sport that utilizes the body as a mode of expression either through dance movements, feats of strength, or a combination of the two. It is also a fitness activity and thus it uses the body as an object to be trained and put through a fitness regimen like other fitness activities. Bodies (i.e., the physical and psychological aspects of the human body) cannot be separated from their lived experiences which, in turn, calls for a focus to be placed on embodiment: a way of inhabiting the world that incorporates the creation of the self as both something influenced by and affected by culture. Moreover, embodiment accounts for the fluidity of bodies in the sense that they can adapt to different social situations in a style reminiscent of linguistic code-switching. Bodies are in a constant state of building and rebuilding both physical and psychological forms of the self because of their never-ending accumulation of experiences and the changes in their social and physical environments that may require a shift in being on a physical level, psychological level, or a combination of the two.

This project used embodiment theory as a framework by which to analyze the ways these polers transformed their ways of thinking about themselves and altered their behavior to accommodate their newfound sense of self. It also used embodiment theory to analyze the influence of the pole community as a whole, paying particular attention to how the community’s psychological influence helped to alter the poler’s sense of self through encouragement and the promotion of self-love. Embodiment theory helped to emphasize the importance of analyzing the

mental as well as physical changes in the polers being studied during participant observation and influenced many of the questions that were asked in the interviews.

Methods

I focused my efforts into collecting qualitative data through participant observation and semi-structured interviews in order to gain an in-depth understanding of how women use the space created by recreational pole dance classes to navigate and negotiate the contradicting ideals placed on women in Western culture. Six polers were formally interviewed. These six polers were the instructors at Bad Cherry. Four interviews took place before or after classes at the studio, and two took place at the same time at the owner's house. The average length of these interviews varied greatly with some interviews taking only twenty minutes while others took over an hour. Participant observation accounted for the majority of the data collected. All of the names of those who took part in my project were changed to pseudonyms unless otherwise requested.

Participant observation was my main method of data collection. I did this primarily by participating in the pole classes offered at Bad Cherry with the aim to take as many classes as I could each week. Some weeks I took more than nine classes. Taking five or more classes a week is not uncommon as many students, including myself, take classes in blocks of two to three classes a day and go to the studio multiple days a week. I also took part in events both in and outside of Bad Cherry. I took part in these events with both my fellow students and my instructors. These events were held at a variety of locations for a number of reasons; for example, Bad Cherry's Second Annual Pole Camp took place both at the studio and the home of

one of the instructors, a student invited several members of her pole family to her home for her birthday party, several polers met up at a bar before proceeding to the Bad to the Chrome Pole Dance Showcase held at another larger local studio, and several students and instructors drove or flew to Atlanta and to meet up at the International Pole Convention. Participating in off-site events offered me the opportunity to engage in the research method dubbed by Geertz (1998) as “deep hanging out.” This method continuously reinforced my place within the group as well as offered me the opportunity to gather information that became available when the setting was different than the one created at the Bad Cherry studio.

Semi-structured recorded interviews as well as information gathered from casual conversations was gained by asking the people in the Bad Chery community if they would like to be interviewed or a specific question in a non-interview setting. I also utilized snowball sampling and judgement sampling. Data was collected from class participants and instructors from the Bad Cherry pole studio as well as others I met in the local pole community. Judgement sampling was used to seek out particular types of interviewees like the studio owners, former/current strippers, and women who were still part of the Bad Cherry community despite an inability to participate in physical classes (e.g., women who were recovering from an injury or had moved but still visited the studio when they could). Whenever a pointed question was asked I always made it known that I was asking in order to use it in my thesis. I never ran into any issues using this method. Everyone was very supportive of my work and happy to help me with my research.

I interviewed all six of the Bad Cherry instructors. As for data collected from participant observation with my fellow students, I gave priority to those who were most active in the Bad Cherry and local pole communities. I did this in order to explore what about pole keeps these women coming back and how long-term participation in pole has affected their lives.

Demographic information (i.e., age, race, current occupation, and miles/time it takes them to travel to the studio) was gathered from each formal interviewee at the beginning of their interview. Similar information is shared about those who did not have formal interviews. Several previous studies had claimed that pole was dominated by white women so this information was used to show the diversity within the Bad Cherry and surrounding pole communities. I wanted to show that the demographic information about the people who pole is dependent upon location and not a universal truth.

Only instructors were formally interviewed and recorded, however sometimes I would ask one or more of these questions to my fellow students in more casual conversations. The list of interview questions was a mixture of important and filler questions. Filler questions were incorporated into the interviews in order to help relax the person being interviewed. By giving them opportunities to answer questions that were less heavy it allowed them to take a breath between the big important questions. These filler questions also gave them room to elaborate on the more important questions or talk about other things that could offer valuable information about their experiences in pole. In essence, the recorded interviews were made purposely longer in order to create a greater level of comfort in the interviewee which I hoped would lead to extra useful information.

The questions that were most important were “what was your first pole class like?”, “why did you take your first pole class?”, and “why do you still pole?” (a full list of questions can be found in Appendix 1). These questions weren’t always asked in the order they were written. Rather, they were asked in a way that would best move the conversation forward and make the interviewee most comfortable.

All of these questions were the result of a mixture of information gathered from previous research and from the personal experiences I had with the Bad Cherry and local pole communities over the four years before this study began in 2017. They had been formed by conversations with specific community members and had been reinforced by the literature. For example, when I asked “have you told your friends, family, and/or coworkers about your participation in pole?”, “how long did you wait before telling friends/family/co-workers/ etc.?”, and “how did you decide who to tell about your participation in pole?” I was not insinuating that pole is something to hide or be ashamed of; rather, I was working off the years of personal stories I have heard from the overwhelming majority of those who pole. It is not uncommon for polers to discuss the lengths they go to in order to keep their participation in pole a secret, separate from their everyday lives, or from specific people within their lives. Furthermore, my level of familiarity with the Bad Cherry community and the level of trust I have been able to achieve with them because they see me as one of their own allowed me to ask such questions without the risk of sounding judgmental. Of course, interview questions were always subject to change or omission depending on the situation.

Data and Discussion

In this chapter I look at the three big questions that I feel really represent the stories of the women in the Bad Cherry pole community:

- What was your first pole class like?
- Why did you go to your first class?
- Why do you still pole?

I am starting out this chapter by giving the demographic information for Tampa, Florida and the Bad Cherry Pole Dance Studio because it is important to understanding the polers who took part in this project and the information they provided.

Demographics

Tampa, Florida, United States

Tampa has an ethnically diverse population which reflects its long history of immigration from the Caribbean, and Central and South America. According to the 2010 Census information (accessed September 1, 2017) Tampa's population is approximately 26% Black or African American, 23% Hispanic or Latino, 3% Asian, and 46% White.

The heat is very important when trying to understand life in Tampa. Tampa is a city with a warm-to-hot climate caused by a mixture of high temperatures and high humidity levels. It is not excessive to say that the heat influences almost every aspect of life in Tampa, including behavior and clothing. According to information from the National Weather Service (accessed September 1, 2017), the Florida Climate Center at Florida State University Service (accessed September 1, 2017) the average temperatures (in Fahrenheit) for Tampa range from the 60s in the winter to the 80s in summer with the average relative humidity levels ranging from the 50s to the 90s . The humidity levels make the "feels like" (i.e., the way it actually feels while standing outside) temperature hotter than the recorded daily temperature when it is calculated without accounting for the humidity. As someone who has lived in Florida within an hour of Tampa since 1990 (approximately nine years of which were spent living in the heart of Tampa) this means that on any given day (with the exclusion of possibly about two months surrounding New

Year's) the temperature outside usually feels "warm" to "very hot." It is not uncommon to receive "heat advisory" warnings throughout the summer. As a result, people living in Tampa have adapted their clothing to account for the constant heat by incorporating clothing that exposes more skin in an attempt to keep cool. This includes clothing articles such as shorts, skirts, short or loose dresses, short sleeved shirts, crop tops, and tank tops. Tampa is on the west coast of Florida less than one hour from the Gulf of Mexico, and offers beach areas and water-access along the closer coasts of Tampa Bay. Tampa's location close to the beaches lining the Gulf of Mexico and the water of Tampa Bay has also influenced the locals to normalize "beach apparel" into daily wear. This includes such items as shorts, skirts, short sleeved shirts, tank tops, crop tops, bikini tops, swim trunks, short or loose dresses, swim suit covers, and sandals/flip flops, all of which also tend to expose more skin.

As a result, I believe the locals have become largely desensitized to seeing bare legs, arms, and midriffs on women, and bare legs and chests on men. Since one of the common topics mentioned about pole dance is the amount of exposed skin (Allen 2011; Bahri 2012; Griffith 2016; Hamilton 2009; Holland 2010; Holland and Attwood 2009; Pellizzer, Tiggemann, and Clark 2016), Tampa's climate and the way the locals have adapted their clothing actually works in favor of pole.

Tampa locals have long boasted that the city holds the title "Strip Club Capital of the World." An article from 2019 by the *Tampa Bay Times*, discredited that claim, but stated Tampa houses over "20 of the area's nearly 40 strip clubs" and the most popular club, Mons Venus, is famous across the United States (accessed October 30, 2020). Using Google Maps, I was able to count 38 strip clubs/gentlemen's clubs in the Tampa area as of October 2020. I am including the number of strip clubs here to elaborate that those living in Tampa are used to the existence of

strip clubs as a normal part of the city atmosphere in contrast to some regions of the United States where they are rare or not permitted. This information is relevant because of pole's persistent association with stripping/sex work due to its importance in the history of pole; if strip clubs are rather normalized as just another part of the Tampa atmosphere then presumably that nonchalance also carries over to strip club-esque endeavors, like pole.

As of September 1, 2017, also using Google Maps, I counted four pole studios dedicated primarily or exclusively to teaching pole within the Tampa city limits as well as another three in the neighboring area of St. Petersburg. There was a Shapes Fitness (a chain of gyms that cater to women's fitness) branch located in Wesley Chapel (the area just north of Tampa) where pole classes were offered (accessed September 1, 2017). There were no pole studios dedicated to teaching pole in that area. That Shapes offered "pole fitness" classes and made sure to make the distinction from "pole dance" classes. I would not have known about the existence of the pole fitness classes at the Wesley Chapel Shapes Fitness had one of my fellow students not mentioned it in a casual conversation.

Bad Cherry Pole Dance Studio

Bad Cherry pole studio is located close to downtown Tampa and Westshore (the central business and financial districts), two higher-end malls, the airport, the MacDill Air Force Base, is less than six miles from Ybor (a historic neighborhood known for its prominent Cuban heritage, "gay" entertainment such as gay clubs and drag queen shows, and high population of immigrants, artists, and nightlife) and is within fourteen miles of two large University campuses and several college and community college campuses. It is conveniently located off Interstate

275 by the Howard Frankland Bridge (which offers relatively easy access to those living in St. Petersburg), State Road 60 (which leads to Safety Harbor and Clearwater), and the Veterans Expressway (which allows those living as far away as 50 miles north to make it to the studio in under an hour).

The location of Bad Cherry is relatively accessible to women living within about a 50 mile radius thanks to the interstates and highways which can bring travel time to under an hour. I believe this combined with the proximity to the university/college campuses, downtown Tampa and Westshore, and Ybor make it a prime candidate to explore the variety of reasons women from a mixture of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds choose and continue to participate in pole.

According to their website, the studio has been open since 2007. In 2017 there were three main instructors, including the owner, listed on the website with short biographies introducing each of them. Two additional instructors were not listed on the instructors' webpage, but were listed on the class schedule and sign up webpage. The instructors not listed on the website taught either once a week, every other week, or worked as instructor substitutes when one of the main instructors was unable to teach a class.

A single class costs \$30. Deals are offered for first timers to the studio and classes are offered in a variety of package deals or through a contract option (See Figure 1). Inside the studio there are seven poles available for use by the students: five 50mm chrome static poles and two 45mm chrome static/spin poles. This shows the age of the studio as 45mm poles are now the industry standard. Class sizes are small and each student usually gets their own pole use. The classes offered and the prices change depending on the factors that influence the way the owner has to conduct business.

Figure 1: Bad Cherry Class and Contract Prices

FIRST TIMER SPECIALS

\$15 - 1 Class (save \$15) Add to Cart	\$79 - 2 weeks unlimited classes Add to Cart
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CLASSES

\$75 - 3 Classes (save \$15) Add to Cart	\$30 - Any Single Class drop-in Add to Cart
\$230 - 10 Classes (save \$70) Add to Cart	\$100 - 1 week unlimited classes Add to Cart
\$400 - 20 Classes (save \$200) Add to Cart	\$300 - 1 month unlimited classes Add to Cart
\$1,100 - 6 months of unlimited classes Add to Cart	\$2,000 - 1 year of unlimited classes Add to Cart

ROCKSTAR PASS: \$215

Take as many classes as you want per month.

\$215 auto-deducted once a month.

Requires a 4-month contract.

[Add to Cart](#)

At the time of this study two to three classes (depending on the time of year) were offered per day, Monday through Saturday. Occasionally additional afternoon classes were offered during the workweek. The classes that were consistently offered Monday through Friday took place in the evening generally between 5 p.m. and 9 p.m. Saturday classes took place in the morning starting around 9 a.m. and lasted until about noon. Classes ranged in length from 45

minutes to an hour and fifteen minutes, but most were one hour long. The focus of the classes varied depending on what they were (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Bad Cherry Pole Studio Class Type and Skill Level

<u>Class Title</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>Level</u>
Dance Foundations/ Pole Dance 101	Dance	Beginner
Floor Flow/ Sexy Floor Dance	Dance	Beginner
Sexy Chair Dance	Dance	Beginner
Sexxy Pole Dance	Dance	Beginner-Intermediate
Pole Dance 201	Dance	Intermediate
Pole Dance 301	Dance	Advanced
BEGINNER Pole Tricks Foundations	Trick	Beginner
INTERMEDIATE Pole Tricks Foundations	Trick	Intermediate
Advanced Pole Tricks	Trick	Advanced
Pole Dance Mash Up	Mix	Beginner
INTERMEDIATE Dance & Trick Flow	Mix, More Tricks than Dance	Intermediate
Strength & Stretch	Other	Any
TWERK-EXOTIC – Brandi’s Booty Technique	Other	Any
Private Lessons	Varies depending on student	Varies depending on student

“What Was Your First Pole Class Like?”

The purpose of this section is to give the reader a feel for some of the individuals who took part in this study by sharing the experiences a few of them had with their first pole class. I want to start with this because I think hearing these women’s stories will set the groundwork for the information and discussions that are to come. For this section I focused on the women who had their interviews recorded. All of these women were instructors and their information can be found in Appendix 3.

Neesheta

Neesheta’s first ever pole class was part of a five week series of class that she described separate from her first non-series pole class. The five weeks series was for beginners where the same students took the series together the entire time. About that series she said “it was the same group of girls every week. So it was like you all just got really close and stuff like that.”

When she was asked to describe her first class that wasn’t part of the series she said the following:

First class was intro to pole and was right after sexy floor. Women were in amazing leg warmers, sparkling outfits, heels. Sarah (Sarah Jade. Not interviewed) is doing some flippity dippity stuff and I’m like omg I want to go back to my session class. Oh no I can’t do this! But I got there early and Sarah (Sarah Jade) was like ‘come in Neesheta, come in!’ and so I’m just watching them like omg like I don’t know if I can do this. I just completely shot myself down. Um but I still went anyway and the more and more I did it the more I realized no, they were just every day girls. Just super. Having fun, and super cute. Dressed up. And I can do it too. So it was my expectation was I’m gunna come in and see these hot super strong girls AND I DID SEE THEM but it wasn’t like I could never be that once I started taking more classes I realized oh I can. I can do it. The hot super strong (more advanced) girls were super nice too cus I felt like they were just gunna be like... you know you walk in and they are, they look so like they’re oozing

confidence and you're just like omg she's going to be so mean to me you know and then she comes and is like HIII! And you're like oh ok she's nice ok good! (laughs) so it was all in my head of what I really expected it to be and then it ended up just being... fine. (laughs) (Neesheta)

For the discussion later in this section it is also important to note that earlier in the interview Neesheta had said part of her motivation for starting pole was, "(I) was just really down. I had just gotten out of a really bad relationship."

Jordan

Jordan didn't start her pole journey with series classes. It was unclear whether or not series classes were an option at the studio Jordan went to at the time as not all studios offer series classes. Classes offered vary by studio. This is what Jordan had to say about her first class.

I was really nervous... about what I would look like. Cus I have...um...body image issues, probably is a good way to describe it. So I was a little nervous especially when you see cus I-I don't think I took classes with Brandi my first class but the instructors always looked very... fit... and really pretty and I didn't feel like that so when I first walked in it was very intimidating and I was pretty nervous. I'm like I look stupid. Am I doing this right? That kind of stuff um...lotta nerves. (...) For me when I walked into the studio, the one I first went to, it was a lot of that. I just felt real nervous and very intimidated by the situation. (Jordan)

Michelle

Michelle, like Neesheta, also started her pole journey with a series class.

A friend talked me into it... and then she didn't show up for class! (...) I was here by myself. (...) I had signed up for a 6 week class series so it was suck it up and take it or lose my money (laughs) so I sucked it up and took it and decided I loved it. (...) I thought it would be a lot more stripper-ish. A lot more bump and grind than actual work. By the time I walked out I was sweating and thinking, I'm going to get a good exercise out of

this. Um. My arms were dying cus she already had us trying to climb and pole sit that first night. (Michelle)

Sara Amelia

Sara Amelia was the only one to say she didn't enjoy her first pole class and was also the only one to really focus on the fitness aspect of pole. She was also the only one to acknowledge the stigma against pole and discuss the fear she had because of it due to her job. As described later in the "The Stigma" section of this chapter, this fear is not uncommon and can be warranted depending on the poler's line of work.

I remember I would just stare at the website. And at that time it was April (the previous owner) and a handful of her instructors all doing these really cool moves. I was like I'll never be able to do that. But we showed up and I was in baggy shorts, baggy shirt, and tennis shoes because we had to wear rubber shoes rubber sole shoes so we walked in in tennis shoes ... umm. No I still remember the very first night and Kim was the instructor I still remember the lady teaching it. (...) I hated it (the first class). I felt stupid and awkward especially when I was in the tennis shoes and you came in everyone was like half-dressed and it was like kinda an advanced class. Everyone was kinda like half-dressed, they were all in their shoes... and we couldn't watch the class. We. Um. That back room was actually a waiting area. There was chairs set up in the back room and we went back there and there was cubbies where you put your stuff and you read over everything and we were kinda giggly and I was stupid nervous about it. A... and part of it too is there is that stigma associated with it and being a lawyer I was concerned... there was a certain level of concern for me if it was somehow going to be used against me...um... I didn't know how or if like the ethics there be an investigation or something like that that would be ridiculous but still. I-I just I was nervous about it and I don't feel like a sexy person anyway. Like I said. Baggy baggy clothes and tennis shoes. And we walked out and I felt totally stupid in the tennis shoes. But they were wearing them too. And we learned I remember learning 2 spins. There was a... and at-at first I didn't feel sexy at all and then the 2 spins was a fireman and ...a... reverse like tuck. I think ga-what I call goddess. I think people combine goddess and gorgeous but your back knee is tucked behind. And I couldn't do ANYTHING. And... I do now looking back I don't think I had as great of instruction as I probably could have on it to have been more comfortable with it. But I couldn't do it at all and I was like this is stupid. I wasn't sore. I didn't break a sweat. Um I didn't feel like I got a workout or anything and it was like whatever ya know? I played on the pole. (...) well so then it was funny cus I went home and my boyfriend who's actually now my husband at the time a... he... was like so what'd you learn? And I mean he was kinda being teasy about it. Oh yah and we learned like body waves like I was awkward with the body waves I couldn't do any of this stuff

um... and I actually pulled out the vacuum and showed him a dip-squat around the vacuum. I remember being like I learned this! Um... and so I had fun showing him that and the vacuum's not very sturdy I'll tell ya that. (Sara Amelia)

Brandi

Brandi's first experience with pole dance was at an open house for Impulse Pole Dance's Saint Petersburg, Florida location. She described this instead of the first class she actually paid for. She seemed to deem this experience more important.

When I first walked into the open house there was already some girls on the dance floor. They were on the poles. The music was going. And I believe that these were instructors that Sarah (Sarah Murry. Not interviewed) the studio owner had worked with before because they were just beautiful. They were like these... amazing creatures of grace and sensuality and they were doing like fireman spins and dip squats but to me that was like ... holy shit. So it was like ... I was just entranced. Just everything. The lighting the music. The way they were moving. And I was just watching them like oh my god. Oh my god! And then came the demo where the newbies had to go out onto the poles and like try some things and it was So. Hard. to do a fireman spin. I will never forget that. Ever! Evereverever forget that. (Brandi)

Heidi

Heidi, like Neesheta and Jordan, explained that she "wasn't in a good place" when she decided to start pole and that it was in fact her main motivator for deciding to try it.

I just remember wanting to be in the back of the room. And as far into the corner as I could be. Because I told ya I wasn't in a good place. So I was like you had these lights and then you have all these you have an instructor whose hot and you're like ahh my god ok. I can't do this. I can't do this! And then... and then at the end of the class I did it and I remember telling her (the instructor, Brandi) I was like you made me feel so comfortable in my own skin. Like I didn't I wasn't paying attention. Ta ta anything else. I wasn't paying attention to how I looked. I wasn't paying attention to how anyone else looked. I was just focused on trying to do whatever we were trying to do. You know. I-I was so nervous I don't remember what we were trying to do, but I remember how I felt. You know. And there were a couple of people who had probably been doing it before, in class. So. There were some people who... kinda knew what they were doing. (Heidi)

“What Was Your First Pole Class Like?”: Discussion

These stories (with the exception of Brandi’s) all followed a similar theme: nervousness. With the exception of Brandi, all the women talked about how nervous they were walking into the first class and several compared themselves in a negative way to the women they saw at the studio that first day. Even Michelle, although she did not explicitly say she had been nervous, hinted that she remembered being nervous that first day with the inflections of her voice, her laugh, and her dramatic pauses as she told her story; however, Michelle’s nervousness was not the same as type of nervousness that had been experienced by Neesheta, Jordan, Sara Amelia, and Heidi. Being nervous was the usual story I heard when people would discuss going to their first pole class. While nervousness is a normal reaction when attempting something new, especially when it puts the person out of their comfort zone, the usual type of nervousness that was normally discussed when talking about a pole’s first class was primarily tied to physical appearance. Neesheta, Jordan, Sara Amelia, and Heidi all described their fear that they would “look stupid” as they compared themselves to the other more “fit” looking, more advanced, women in the studio.

This idea of “fit” is embodied by women who take fitness classes as a way to alter their bodies or health in such a way that it is closer to the American ideal. Balsamo said,

The body becomes... the site at which women, consciously or not, accept the meanings that circulate in popular culture about ideal beauty... The female body comes to serve as a site of inscription, a billboard for the dominant cultural meanings that the female body is to have in postmodernity (1996: 78)

Because of this Neesheta, Jordan, Sara Amelia, Heidi, and most others I spoke to compared themselves to the women at the studio who they felt represented the ideal beauty they saw depicted in popular culture. Neesheta noted that she had put on weight and was seeking to find an activity to help her lose it, and Jordan said she had body image issues; before ever setting foot in the studio these women viewed their bodies as inferior to what was considered the societal standard of beauty. Having a “fit” instructor and seeing women who were already comfortable in their bodies, thus exuding confidence, was intimidating because they were taught by popular culture that these women were higher on the social ladder than they were: they had already achieved society’s standard of ideal beauty. To be put in the same room or class as them was frightening because they didn’t believe they had the right to be there. Later, as they embodied the alternative values of the pole community over the general standards of popular culture they moved past the nervousness they felt that first day because they would come to see themselves on the same level as those they had once put on a pedestal.

The women in these interviews who had compared themselves to the women they saw in the classes before theirs all said the classes were more advanced classes or made up of people they, as new students, would consider more advanced than themselves. The meaning of “advanced” in this context consists of both physical strength and confidence. While the Sexy Floor class mentioned in Neesheta’s recount was not explicitly said to be a more advanced class, Sarah Jade doing “flippity dippity stuff” implies it. “Flippity dippity stuff” highly suggests it was a class made up of people who weren’t beginners because moves that would be described as such would probably consist of more strength based moves such as shoulder stands or moves involving more complex body movement. While I do not know for sure what kinds of moves Sarah Jade was doing, the description Neesheta gave leads me to believe that, whatever she was

doing, Neesheta felt like she would be unable to perform the moves which caused her to be intimidated by the “stronger” woman. About the women in the classes Neesheta said, “they look so like they’re oozing confidence” which is intimidating in its own right to any woman who is lacking in her own self-confidence. This is because the body is a symbol that not only represents itself physically, but also as a way to represent the right type of attitude where the attitude is also set against a societal standard (Bordo 1993: 195). Thus, the person who is lacking in confidence will see themselves as lesser than the person who has the confidence because it is something they themselves do not possess. “Willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to “shape your life”” (Bordo 1993: 195) are all things that are highly valued in American society. The body and the confidence it exudes is seen as a symbol of those things. Therefore, to show confidence (whether real or fake) is another way the body is scaled according to society; it is another way for women to scale themselves against each other. For the women who entered their first class with low self-confidence, the confidence “oozing” from those in the more advanced classes was just another thing to make the new students nervous.

For Neesheta, the sense of intimidation seemed to have eased a bit when Sarah Jade enthusiastically greeted Neesheta which leads me to believe that the greeting changed her label from “intimidating” to “friendly” in Neesheta’s mind. As you will read throughout the rest of this study, the pole community as a whole seeks to promote values that create a welcoming, empowering, self-loving, familial, and overall happy atmosphere. Sarah Jade was promoting these values when she made Neesheta feel welcome and tried to ease her anxieties as soon as she walked into that first class.

Another thing that leads me to believe the classes were more advanced is that usually there is a period of time before polers begin to dress up when they come to the studio. That is not

always the case, but from my experience people who are brand new to pole don't tend to come in wearing "amazing leg warmers, sparkling outfits, heels" or are "half dressed." Even if the floor class mentioned by Neesheta was labeled as an all levels class, it is more than likely that the class was made up of women who had been going for a while as it usually takes at least a few classes before someone is comfortable enough to dress up. As will be discussed later, the pole community promotes self-confidence which is directly tied to an increase in a more positive body image which was something Neesheta, Jordan, and Heidi all lacked at the time. I have found that an increase in a person's positive body image is directly related to the type of clothing they wear to the studio. For example, Sara Amelia no longer wears "baggy shorts, baggy shirt, and tennis shoes." She now wears form-fitting clothing and will wear Pleasers (the name brand of the most popular platform high heels that are often worn in pole. They are so popular the name is usually used in place of "high heels" or "platform heels") depending on the class. I've seen this transformation many times during my time as a poler, including in myself. Samantha Holland also discussed this phenomenon in her book *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment* in the section appropriately titled "From baggy shorts to hot pants" as she stated that pole classes contradict the idea widely held that normal gym activity causes anxiety and can promote negative body image as one compares themselves to other gym patrons. Holland supports my claim when she said, "pole classes contrast these (ideas) with their findings that the participants become more confident about their body shape and size, more willing to wear shorter shorts or crop tops, as the weeks went by" (Holland 2010: 82). Because Neesheta, Jordan, and Heidi lacked this type of confidence their nervousness was increased when they saw the women who were acting more confidently.

Their lack of confidence implies that they had embodied a sense of feeling lesser than the other women because rather than describing their nervousness as linked to feelings of excitement they had linked it to feelings of inferiority when they compared it to the other women at the studio. At that point their sense of self was far from their ideal self. The ideal self is “the self-concept the individual would most like to possess, upon which she places the most value for herself” (Rogers 1959:200). Current sense of self and the ideal self are directly linked to self-esteem and confidence. The further the two are from each other the lower the person’s self-esteem. As discussed earlier, they manifested their low self-esteem into nervousness (and possibly a level of jealousy because the women at the studio had something they did not: confidence) that was caused by the presence of the other, more advanced, women at the studio, and their feelings of inferiority they had brought with them from their everyday lives. As you saw in the cases of Neesheta, Jordan, and Heidi their sense of self was a product of the past trauma that had damaged their self-esteem. They, themselves, were “in a bad place” at the time they took their first pole class and that influenced their behavior and way of thinking for that first class.

Nervousness is also a symptom of societal pressures. By taking the first step to accomplishing the freedom of expression they were searching for they were rebelling against the societal norms placed on women. As a woman I can say that allowing yourself to acknowledge that you are unfulfilled with staying within the parameters imposed on you by the society you live in is a hard thing to accept. As a pole dancer who also went through the nervousness these women did I can say that taking that first step to claim my sexual agency was just plain scary. Neesheta called pole “taboo” which expresses the way in which society views the act of a woman openly expressing their sexuality. By exploring aspects of gender that are extremely feminine, such as

the wearing of sexy outfits, full makeup (many women choose to go to dance classes with makeup on in order to get “in the mood”), and moving in ways that accentuate her hips, butt, and breasts poleers are performing an act of rebellion against the constraints imposed upon them during their daily lives. By taking that first class those woman were experiencing a life-changing event. Even if they had not stick with pole, the sheer fact that they were taking actions to exercise their agency was a step towards liberation from the pressures they face as women on a daily basis.

Brandi was the only one to stand out in her response among this group of women. She remembered being more enthralled than nervous. Even as she reminisced she had the same look as someone in awe of an event. She was more interested in talking about the open house event than her actual first pole class so I didn't push to talk about her first actual class in a classroom setting. The feeling she gave off implied that she had been more excited than nervous so it is entirely possible that she never actually experienced the same nervousness the others had and had a sense of self closer to her idea self. Very few people that I spoke to over the last few years were like Brandi and failed to mention a feeling of nervousness when going to their first pole class. When looking at Brandi's personality, Brandi has always been a person to extrude high amounts of confidence and feminine empowerment through her attitude and posture so her response to the question was not entirely surprising.

“Why Did You Go to Your First Pole Class?”

In this section I want to explore some of the motivations of poleers for deciding to take their first pole class. This is important in understanding the mindset of these women that led them to pole.

It's Fun! And I Hate the Gym.

Sara Amelia and Michelle both credited pole's reputation as a fun alternative fitness activity as the reason behind their initial interest in pole.

In her interview Sara Amelia explained how she and her friends had decided to try pole:

There was 3 paralegals and myself we got we were pretty friendly with each other. We started doing things and hanging out. I don't know how it started (...) We started doing these mon week-weekend outings um... we did like Tree Hoppers we went and did the tree obstacle course. We went and tried we would go to the Hard Rock and just like hang out in the spa um we would just started doing random stuff and we would meet up for brunch and then one of the girls is really big into crossfit and its funny I actually think I'm the one who suggested it. I said have you guys ever heard of like pole dancing for exercise or something and they said yah I think Shannon she was the one who did the crossfit said yah I actually want to try it and the other two were like we we'll totally try that. (Sara Amelia)

While Sara Amelia found pole while searching for a fun weekend outing with the girls, Michelle explained in her interview that she simply preferred alternative forms of fitness over more traditional fitness activities like going to the gym. She explained: "I like doing *different* things (...) I've done hula hoop, I've done burlesque, I've done nia, I've done belly dance ... um... I've done yoga, hated yoga ... um, but if it's different, if it's not the gym, I'll at least try it." Michelle's participation in recreational dance activities like burlesque and belly dance showed her tendency to prefer more sexualized recreational activities. Her saying this showed that she already had a certain level of comfort concerning her body and her sexuality. She was one of the few people who I spoke to who went into pole with that level of body positivity.

Throughout my time with Michelle she has always promoted body positivity and openly expresses her appreciation for her body, and would own her sexuality through her love of burlesque. Whenever possible she would add aspects of burlesque style strip-tease into the routines she taught.

Michelle was not the only one who was simply looking for a fun alternative to the gym and other traditional exercises. I heard several of the same explanations. For example, Justyce, a black woman in her 40s explained that she “used to work out with a group of women. We ran and stuff. But I was looking for something more fun.”

Jessica, a quiet white woman in her early 20s who suffers from social anxiety, said she went to her first pole class because she didn’t like the atmosphere of traditional gyms. She was convinced by a family member to try pole because, “it’s not like normal gyms. People don’t stare at you. Or grunt at you. (laughs)” When she explained how her family member went about convincing her to try a class she disclosed that she went in part because she didn’t have many friends in the area. Her family member was insistent that she would like the people at the studio because they were open-minded, non-judgmental, silly people that Jessica would feel comfortable around and pole was a “different” type of workout. While at the time Jessica did not particularly care about the dance aspect of pole, she was persuaded to go because of the promise of a fun time with non-threatening people while working out doing things she saw as more fun than going to a traditional gym.

Working through Mental Trauma

Added onto the general dislike for the gym and traditional exercise, many polers also mentioned that they were looking for something that would help them get over some form of mental trauma; that they “wanted to do something for themselves” that would make them happy. Three of the six people from the formal interviews, plus many others, said they decided to try pole to help them work through some kind of mental trauma.

Several polers explained that one of their motivators for trying pole was because of a bad romantic relationship that had caused them to feel the need to do something that would make them feel better about themselves. In Jordan’s interview she’d called attention to just how common starting pole because of a bad relationship is. Her reason for starting pole was, “dumbest reason ever, such a cliché, I had my heart broken.” By calling it a cliché, Jordan was acknowledging that she was one of many who started pole for the same reason.

Neesheta felt down on herself because of the mental ramifications of the bad relationship she had left. She elaborated more on this when I’d asked her about her reason for deciding to try pole:

I had gained a looooot of weight. And was just really down. I had just gotten out of a really bad relationship um... and I was already with Juan, my husband (boyfriend at the time) um... but I was still like not... ya know... I was still like down on myself and very ugggh and I was like I just want to do something and I’ve always danced, not like professionally or whatever, but you know like playing around dancing or whatever. (...) so... um... I was like I just want to get back into something fun. (Neesheta)

Arianna, a boisterous white woman in her early 30s, credited having gone through some mental trauma caused by her husband as her reason for starting pole. He had cheated on her while she was pregnant several years earlier. From what Arianna, and several other women said, the wounds left by an unfaithful spouse never fully heal even after time passes so they search for something that will help fix that pain. The pain she carried around because of that contributed to

her “hating on” her body and wanting to feel sexy again which ultimately helped bring her to her first pole class.

In a non-recorded semi-structured interview a woman named Gwen, a white college student, told me that she started pole because her mother had always made her feel ugly which had caused long-term damage to her self-confidence.

Growing up my mom would make comments about my weight and always did shit like buy me XL shirts even though I was probably a medium. She tried to force me to wear pink even though I hate it and was just never happy with how I looked. So I became a tomboy because fuck it. If she was going to hate how I looked I was going to make her REALLY hate how I looked. (laughs) But I never got to feel like a girl. I never wore dresses or skirts or any of that stuff. No makeup... and later when I did she made fun of me for it... But then one of my friend’s mom’s started doing it. She lived out in Nevada and a big group of us were out there visiting, but we got on the pole and were acting stupid and it was just fun so me and two friends started looking into it and it just looked I don’t know... like it was this thing I was never allowed to do (be feminine) and I was so nervous but I wanted to be a girl really bad and I figured this was my chance. Like if I wasn’t alone maybe it would be ok. (Gwen)

“Why Did You Go to Your first Pole Class?”: Discussion

When asked why they went to their first pole class the answer always involved that it looked fun: a fun way to meet likeminded people, a fun alternative to traditional fitness activities, and it was a fun way to do something for themselves and, in some cases, mentally recover from past traumas. So why did pole look like so much fun?

Fun is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “what provides amusement or enjoyment” and “to engage in banter or play” (accessed May 12, 2020). Something about the idea of dancing around a pole appealed to these women as a fun activity. Holland (2010) said that “an exercise form called ‘dance’ appears to have more appeal to non-exercising women

because of its connections of creativity, glamour and gracefulness. Dance appears to appeal to non-exercising women because it can offer more possibilities for feeling of abandon or liberation.” Feelings of “abandon and liberation” are connected to feelings of enjoyment, or “fun.” Hearing these polers say they were looking to do something for themselves means they were looking for liberation from some aspect of their lives while engaging in some sort of activity (in this case, fitness); whether it be the feeling that they should be doing something health related, the feeling of loneliness, or freedom from the negative feelings caused by some sort of mental trauma they were seeking freedom from something that was negatively affecting their lives.

Looking at pole studio websites and social media, it is easy to see that happiness and fun are the main modes of advertisement along with getting fit and exploring femininity. Pictures of instructors and students on their websites and/or their social media pages depict a variety of appealing situations that advertise “fun”: big smiles, groups of polers who look like they’re friends, polers dressed up in sexy or fun looking clothing, polers doing tricks, and so on. The websites and social media pages are set up to visually emphasize the happiness that could be achieved through pole. In opposition to most traditional gyms, most studios also advertise their students and instructors as having a variety of body shapes. This is also appealing because it makes the potential to feel sexy more obtainable to those who don’t fit the stereotypical look of those who work out or of “sexy” as it is usually advertised in western culture. This type of advertising explicitly says, “you are not expected to be tall, thin, and toned to have fun doing pole.” The things advertised on the websites and social media do play into body image issues, but rather than shame the viewer into wanting to look like the fit person advertised on a gym billboard, the studios that have pictures and videos of polers of all shapes and sizes are saying

“you are fine the way you are. We accept you for who you are. You can do this too.” By advertising like this they are creating a place of inclusion. From the get-go the pole studios are creating a place where the people within belong, are members of a likeminded group, and are safe. There is a “common structure” (Mead 1934:163) within which the members can unite. Mead said “we cannot be ourselves unless we are also members” (1934:163) and in this case that means the people within the pole community are members of a group that is like them in their pursuit for a safe place to have fun and express themselves, in this case, through dance.

Reischer and Koo said that “striving for a body in direct opposition to that ideal (societal) body is tantamount to civil disobedience” (2004:302). In the case of the way the pole studios are advertising towards all body shapes, the civil disobedience is in the acceptance of bodies that are not society’s “ideal body.” As previously seen, many of the people interviewed reported having some sort of issue with their body so the idea that they would look like others while working out and feeling sexy adds to the appeal of pole classes; it advocates the pole classes as a safe space in which an individual can be themselves and push the boundaries of what is considered “beautiful” or “sexy.” Candi, a plus-sized white woman in her late 20s, exemplified this idea when she said “I love learning from women that look like me cus it makes me feel like I’m okay the way I am like I don’t have to be all thin to climb the pole and look HOT AS FUCK! If they can do it so can I!” I would like to note that Candi is an avid promoter of self-love no matter someone’s body size or shape. She is very proud of how she looks and is extremely outspoken in her love for her body and being plus-sized. Candi is a prime example of a member of the pole community who is actively rebelling against societal norms when it comes to the body. In this way she, and others like her, are promoting the inclusiveness of all body shapes within the pole community making

the community as a whole an act of resistance against the restrictive social constructs placed on the body.

For most of these people the ability to tap into their feminine or sexual selves and feel “sexy” looks to have pushed them towards pole because, as we all know, pole has such a strong connection with strippers and strip clubs. As you saw in the “What Was Your First Pole Class Like” section of this chapter, most of the people assumed the classes and atmosphere would be more “strippery.” The promise of mental liberation while being allowed and encouraged to explore their sexual nature is a very appealing prospect to those who are searching for a way to feel sexy (i.e., free of the social constraints that dictate their sexual freedom). The fact that no one interviewed could say the word “sexy” without smiling further reinforces that the idea of getting to be sexy was connected with the idea of having fun.

“Why Do You Still Pole?”

Throughout my time working on this project it became apparent that people continued to pole for three main reasons which all interlock to create an atmosphere these people wanted to continue being in: the community and its mental benefits (two reasons which are too closely intertwined to attempt to separate), and the physical benefits.

Community and Its Mental Benefits

Community was always listed the top reason polers continued to pole. This emphasis on a tight-knit community is where the term “pole family” comes from. The term is primarily used to

describe a group of polers that go or have gone to the same studio that feel “close enough to be family.” Depending on the situation, pole family can also be used to describe studios who are friends or the entirety of the international pole community. I have even heard polers call polers from another studio “pole cousins” or “extended pole family.” There is actually a saying that I think demonstrates this. I’ve heard many times over the years and it continues to ring true: “You come in for the fitness, but you stay for the family.”

Michelle demonstrated this idea when she said, “I’ve discovered that there’s a whole group of people out there that are accepting and wonderful and just family oriented and they don’t care what you do or who you are you know as long as... as long as you’re you. And so pole has opened me up to that entire world.” In this statement Michelle refers to the entire pole community as “family oriented” which exemplifies the closeness of the community and the closeness it strives for.

Another example is from when I went to a pole performance event at a large studio in Tampa, Florida. While I was there I was introduced to a poler who went to that studio by a mutual friend as, “This is Morteica (my stage name). She’s like our extended pole family.” The woman who said this was obviously excited by the event and the opportunity to introduce polers from different studios to each other. While I am a shy person by nature, I later realized that being introduced as part of their “extended pole family” had made me feel more compelled to talk to the person I’d just been introduced to. In realizing this I can see that the “family” aspect of the pole community is something that is heavily promoted because it helps people feel more comfortable in what can be an intimidating environment. As we saw in the “What Was Your First Pole Class Like” section of this chapter, many polers are intimidated and nervous coming into pole. A sense of nervousness can extend to even seasoned polers when they are put in an

environment that is unfamiliar, such as a new studio or a big pole event. For example, at events “pole stars” (a poler that is well known in the pole world for their poling abilities) usually mingle with the crowd during the show. I believe the emphasis on family makes these people more approachable because it creates a common ground. This common ground is much like meeting a distant relative at a family reunion: you may not know the person and you may be nervous to meet them, but they are family so you share a type of bond that can in the very least makes the person more approachable.

That was not the only time I have been introduced as a pole cousin or in a similar way (I’ve also been called a “pole sister” regardless if the person went to my home studio or not) and I have also introduced polers to one another that way simply because at this point it almost seems customary in some situations, especially between studios that are close friends.

In the formal interviews I posed the question “why do you continue to pole?” to which Neesheta responded,

The community so I’ve ...a... gone through many phases with pole dancing. At the beginning it was... I continued to do it because it made me feel good ... and um... and it was something kinda taboo so it felt like kinda like OooO I do that (laughs) like that was cool. Then it became the community and just the support and I think that at the time because I mean it still is this way now too because people still see it as taboo um... I think at the time once everyone was together it was like oh we’re all doing this thing that’s scary outside but we all can do it together and have fun. So it felt like safe and the community was super tight. (...) Now I feel like I do it purely just because everything about it makes me happy. The community, just dancing, rolling around on the floor, do tumbling whatever it just I like every part of it now. (Neesheta)

I want to note that Neesheta also brings up the topic of pole being appealing because of its taboo nature. More on that will be discussed later in this chapter under the “The Stigma” section.

In Sara Amelia’s interview she also mentioned the community support as well as made a very good point about the diversity of the pole community: “it’s nice to have a support group or

just a group of women you can talk to. Even if you don't have other things in common like religion or politics or family views you have pole in common and like you can always have that common ground.”

On that note, I would like to talk about the types of friendships I have seen within the pole community. I saw many strong friendships formed during my time at Bad Cherry that continued outside the studio as well as many friendships I would consider “unlikely friendships” due to the vastly different people involved, all of which came together through their shared love of pole. Notes on the next three cases were taken in 2017 so the ages of the people described below were their ages in 2017, but all of these friendships have lasted until the time I am writing this in 2020 and after witnessing the construction and perseverance of these friendships I wholeheartedly believe they will continue to last long past the time this project is completed.

The first friendship I would like to talk about is one between two women who have a large gap in age between them. One of the youngest students at Bad Cherry, a white woman in her early 20s, became extremely close friends with a woman 16 years older than her. Their friendship formed in the studio after realizing they had shared many of the same experiences in their lives (such as cheerleading), they share the same tastes in style, and hold a lot of the same beliefs. The older woman has, in a sense, taken the younger woman under her wing and helps her work through many aspects of her life as she grows up. Those two are still incredibly close despite one of them moving to Washington D.C. about one and a half years ago.

My second example is of a woman in her late 40s who became friends with a woman in her early 30s. They are both sassy, but in different ways. The younger one could be described as a very posh individual while the older woman is, in her words, a “stereotypical black woman.” They lovingly harass each other constantly and although the younger one has recently taken a

break from pole to pursue other goals they still meet up often. According to them, their friendship has only grown stronger as they spend more time together outside of the pole studio.

My last example is of a group of five women, varying in age from 25 to 41, forming a pole dance troupe that has at this time in 2020 been together for three years. They have performed in several shows in the Tampa area as well as at the 2018 Orlando, Florida International Pole Dance Convention and the 2019 Denver, Colorado International Pole Dance Convention. They report that they talk every day through a Facebook chat group and all of them said they consider the group to be extremely close: as close as “sisters.” Currently, one of them lives in another state, two are in graduate school, one has opened up her own pole dance studio, and one is a mother of two young children. Among them, one works for the U.S. government, one is a pharmacist, two are small business owners, and one is a cartographer. Two are extremely extroverted while the other three are more introverted. One introvert jokingly described the beginning of her friendship with one of the extroverted women as “I was perfectly happy just fading into the background of the class, but she kept talking at me until I started talking back (laughs).” Of the five, three were cheerleaders in high school while two were self-described “social outcasts” in high school. I am offering these random facts about them to exemplify their differences. Without pole it would be very unlikely for these women to find each other, yet here they are with a lasting bond that now extends far beyond pole.

Beyond friendships, it was also frequently discussed how the community builds a level of confidence and inner strength that polers carry with them into the world outside the pole studio. About this Sara Amelia said, “I find that women really find their confidence with it (pole)... um... I mean I usually I’m more confident with certain things I remember when I first left after a couple pole classes I was like ‘I pole’,” which she said in a confident tone while sitting up

straighter, “like I had an air about me and I didn’t care about anything else. Like there’s some kind of confidence building with it.” Polers use this inner strength to give them the confidence to do things like go after a new job, further their education, leave bad relationships, and other such things that require a higher level of courage. Below you will find several examples of the Bad Cherry pole family positivity influencing each other by building each other’s confidence in other arenas outside of pole.

Mary is an ex all-star cheerleader. In 2018 she was in her early 20s. She is a cartographer by trade and in 2018 she was working for her first company outside of college. She was unhappy with the way the company was treating her and was considering quitting. However, she was experiencing the guilt many young people have when they consider leaving their first big job straight out of school. It has been my experience, and something that was talked about many times at the studio by the older women, that young people tend to stay in an ill-fitting job longer than needed because they don’t understand their worth; they lack the confidence in their abilities and deny themselves worker’s rights because of their age. Companies often exploit this and that was what was happening to Mary. Thankfully, the older generations at the studio explained to her that other jobs were out there and there is no need to feel loyal to a job that is asking you to do more than what is actually part of your job without adequate compensation. They strongly urged her to send out resumes to other companies so she could leave a workplace that was taking an obvious toll on her mental wellbeing. Mary credited the encouragement and wisdom of the older generations of women at Bad Cherry for sharing their wisdom and giving her the confidence to send out resumes, and get a better job that she is still in as of the year 2020.

Gwen gives a lot of credit to the Bad Cherry community for giving her the confidence to apply for graduate school. After being “hounded” by her pole sisters she’d applied.

It was crazy. I made an off handed comment about thinking about going and then they (the people in the class) were all on it. My other friends and family were supportive... but I seriously wasn't expecting them (the people at Bad Cherry) to be so pushy about it! (laughs) So I applied and I got in and then they cheered! Like *literally cheered!* It made me so happy! (laughs and smiles big) (Gwen)

When she got in everyone in the class had cheered and even those who were not in the class she initially announced it in congratulated her as word spread through the studio.

One woman commented that she will now “walk taller” (i.e., walk with more confidence: shoulders back, head held high, ready to take on the world) because of the confidence she has gained from pole. She credits the pole community’s empowering and supportive nature as well as her increase in confidence due to the physical aspects of pole (which will be discussed further in this section).

Another way the confidence and mental strength offered by the pole studio helps polers is during their mentally difficult times. The way the community provides an atmosphere of comfort, supportiveness, and safety cultivates confidence and mental healing. For example, two of the six women with recorded interviews explicitly said they had just come out of bad relationships when they decided to take their first pole class because, as Jordan said, she “decided to do something for herself.” As I have said before, starting pole because of some kind mental trauma caused by a bad relationship is a common occurrence. Of the women who mentioned starting pole because of bad relationships, they said they stayed with pole because of the way it empowered them and helped them mentally recover by building their confidence back up and giving them a sense of self-love that had “been taken away” from them.

Both Jordan’s and Neesheta’s experiences exemplify this. As seen in the “Why Did You Go to Your First Pole Class” section in this chapter, both started pole because they were looking for something to help them mentally recover from bad relationships that had ended prior to

starting pole. The fact that they have since stuck with pole long enough to become instructors (a job that is not given lightly as pole is a dangerous activity where someone can literally die if they fall and land in the wrong position) and cited the importance of the pole community for cultivating self-confidence attests to the way the pole community helps its people mentally recover from traumatic experiences and give them the safe space to recreate their sense of self into something that more closely relates to their ideal selves.

As well as helping polers recover from bad relationships that have ended, it also helps polers get out of bad relationships. For example, a tall blonde woman in her mid-30s named Susan was in a troubled relationship. She would go back and forth about whether or not she wanted a divorce. Ultimately, after several long talks at the pole studio with her pole sisters about the pros and cons of staying in a relationship that she eventually disclosed was extremely unhealthy she finally got up the courage to file for divorce. Upon finding out about the severity of Susan's circumstances Kiara, a black woman in her mid-30s, exclaimed "O HELL NO! Girl you gotta get out of that! That shit ain't healthy. You can do better. Girl you DESERVE better!"

Comments like that helped to build Susan's sense of self-worth due to the positive validation from outside sources, many of which were older than her and had come from a variety of backgrounds. Susan trusted the women at the studio to give her their honest opinions and put her well-being over the concept of staying in a marriage "until death do us part." She seemed to feel that since many women at the studio were either divorced or had left similarly bad relationships in their past they would be an unbiased group to ask advice from and that the studio was a safe place in which to ask for it.

Susan was not the only woman who wound up getting a divorce with the full support of her pole sisters. Several other women also got divorced after hearing about the healthy

relationships their pole sisters were in — many of which had already gone through divorces or abusive relationships. Having access to women who are older and have already lived through certain experiences has shown to be incredibly beneficial for others, especially those who are younger, in the community that was created by Bad Cherry. After visiting other studios and experiencing the same empowering and supportive communities in them I would say the small communities created by individual pole studios allows younger polers a rare opportunity to reap the benefits of having open communication with people who they may not have the opportunity to seek advice from outside the of their pole community; they share a common ground and feel safe discussing their problems. In this way the variety of women is a crucial component of the pole community as they help to better one another which promotes a sense of solidarity and empowerment through shared appreciation and trust.

From the examples listed above it should be obvious how the pole community is mentally beneficial to those within it. I think Lin, a second generation half Chinese woman in her early 30s, expresses how polers feel about the mental benefits of pole and the pole community.

Pole ignites something inside you, more than what a viewer would see. You're dancing for yourself. To make you feel alive. It's helped me in a way that no other form of therapy, exercise, or medication could ever help. When life has felt the hardest, pole dance has always found a way to make me feel glorious. The added bonus are all the wonderful people that I've met through pole. It sounds like a cult right but it's just you and a space and all the natural ways your body wants to move (...) Through relationships, weddings, losses, two babies, a car accident pole still makes me happy. (Lin)

The reference to therapy is also a thing that has a saying attached to it: "it's (pole) cheaper than therapy!" This expression exemplifies how widely known the mental benefits of pole are among polers and it gives them a humorous way to express it. It also draws parallels between the safe space created at the pole studio and the safe space within a therapist's office where it is accepted that it is safe to discuss heavy topics without judgement.

The Physical Benefits

The physical benefits of pole are obvious. It is a full body fitness activity that builds strength, endurance, and overall physical health (Holland 2010; Nicholas, Dimmock, Donnelly, Alderson, Jackson 2018). Instructor Sara Amelia, for example, talked extensively throughout her interview about her love of the fitness aspect of pole. She said that besides the community, the physical work out combined with spending time with her friend and eventually the people at the studio is what kept her going back even though she did not enjoy her first class. When Jordan talked about the physical benefits of pole she had, like many polers, joked about her age by comparing her current health to herself at a much younger age: “It’s (pole) fun. It’s good exercise. I love what it does for my body. Like I’m stronger than I’ve ever been. I’m 38 years old and I’m in better shape now than I was at 25.” When Michelle was asked “why do you continue to take pole classes” her response was “self-empowerment. I feel better about myself knowing I can climb and sit and hang upside down and it’s me doing that, not some magical something. It’s actually me doing it and I feel confident in myself.”

The physical benefits of pole include an increase in muscle strength, however “pole does not offer the danger of ‘butching up’” (Holland 2010:74); rather, “muscles are toned and lengthened” (Holland 2010:184). In fact, from my observations, pole will either tone the body or not change ones physique almost at all; however, it does recreate a person’s perception of themselves as they embrace their body for what it is despite what society tries to tell it to be.

In pole muscles are not considered a “masculine trait” and the definition of muscles is something that is strived for. For example Arianna, who lives in remission of Anorexia Nervosa, said about the muscles in her arms:

I used to want to be able to wrap my fingers around my bicep, but now I flex in the mirror and I'm like yah baby! Look at those muscles! I like how defined they are. Like I'm strong as fuck and I want to show it... It's weird how what you want from your body changes after you start pole... I used to think being small was oh so sexy but now I like my curves. And look at these guns! (flexes to show off her taunt defined muscles and laughs) (Arianna)

While at another studio I met a man who reportedly "halved himself" from just doing pole. He told me, "I haven't changed my diet at all. I still drink beer and everything. I haven't changed anything... except now I pole." He then showed me a picture of himself before pole when he was overweight and it was true; he was about half the size he had been before he had started pole which had been only a year before I had spoken to him. While his muscles were apparent, he did not have a body builder's physique. Instead his muscles had a more lengthened, toned look. After observing other male pole dancers I can conclude that pole tones the body rather than bulks it up in both men and women.

On the flipside, Cellie, a larger black woman in her early 40s who I've poled with for about 6 years, never looks to change her physique no matter how much time she spends poling; however, she has gained enough strength to be able to take intermediate level tricks classes. Candi is another poler who is plus sized who I've poled with for a long time. She never looks to get any thinner or more toned despite being able to do more and more strength based moves the more she poles. Neither of these women ever make negative comments about their weight. In fact, they are both avidly opposed to conforming to society's ideal body shape. They say they are happy with how they look and want to help other women to accept their bodies like they have.

“Why Do You Still Pole?”: Discussion

My research shows that the community combined with the mental and physical benefits of pole is what keeps people coming back to pole. The community is uplifting and builds confidence, polers credit pole for increased mental health, and the physical benefits of pole also promote a sense of self-love through increased strength which leads to a sense of accomplishment. I have yet to hear a poler describe their experience with pole without talking about how it has enhanced their life.

Pole strives to be an all-inclusive and uplifting recreational activity. As discussed earlier, it is a breeding place for lasting friendships through the “pole family” and enhances self-confidence. As you saw, the community creates strong kinship ties that are reminiscent of the ties Kath Weston saw during her work with gays and lesbians in the 1980s. Weston (1995) noted that “kinship ties were, by definition, ties that endured” even though the “family” in question was not a traditional biological family; there are fixed connections that cause the permanence of a very special and unique sort of social relation.

One of the ways this type of kinship is reinforced is through a seamlessly endless amount of compliments and cheering from both the instructors and others in the pole community. This cheering and encouragement creates a sense of familial love and closeness among those in the community. I say the pole “community” in reference to the entirety of the international pole community because pictures and videos of accomplishments posted on social media are also met with compliments and cheering from those within the international pole community. On a more micro scale, the community within a studio is even more prone to giving compliments and cheering due to the closeness of the polers. I have found that this is particularly prevalent within

small pole studios where the whole class will stop what they're doing to cheer for someone. Compliments are given for everything from someone's outfit or hair, to the beauty of someone's pirouette, to the elegant execution of a trick. Cheering is usually reserved for special event like the completion of personal milestones no matter how small they may seem. Occasions for cheering range from nailing a trick for the first time when someone has been working hard to get it, to someone finally feeling comfortable to lose themselves in their dance (a feat that is much harder than it sounds), to someone buying their first pair of pole shoes.

I make a distinction between compliments and cheering because they look to cause different reactions that result in different expressions of happiness. Compliments are often met with calm "thank you"s and a smile. This creates a calm sense of happiness. Cheering is more boisterous and often involves one or more people jumping around and cheering loudly. Cheering often also includes using pole jargon like "Yasss" or "Yes Mam!" where compliments do not. As a result of the higher energy that is produced by cheering the happiness that it creates is more based on a sense of achievement and the dopamine that is produced by physical activity. According to Psychology Today, "dopamine happiness is triggered when you receive a new reward" (accessed May 12, 2020). In this case, the reward is the cheers from one's pole family and the sense of accomplishment that comes with that. In the article "It's our little secret... an in-group, where everyone's in": Females' motives for participation in a stigmatized form of physical activity" this is called "confidence through accomplishment" and is a key motivator for polers to continue to take pole classes (Nicholas, et al. 2018:109). The focus on accomplishment also works to override the idea that a person's worth is tied to their physical appearance because when accomplishment is the thing being rewarded and the accomplishment has nothing to do with physical appearance the weight physical appearance has when that person is building their

sense of self is drastically lowered as it is overshadowed by the thing that is being rewarded (i.e., the accomplishment that is the cause of the cheering is more important than physical appearance which is not being cheered for).

The common denominator here is that the compliments and the cheering both come from the social setting created by the community. In her book, Holland (2010) discussed how the range of things that help to produce the feelings of happiness and an increase in self-confidence (e.g., the wide range of reasons that create a reason for compliments and cheering) are more beneficial than strictly working out in order to change one's body. In the case of the pole studio, the "motivation is primarily social" (Holland 2010:117) meaning the hunt for the mental rewards offered by compliments and cheering is dependent on the inclusion of the pole community.

Body positivity plays a significant role within the pole community. The thing that sets pole apart from many other fitness activity is its lack of emphasis on losing weight. While studio websites advertise fitness the majority do not explicitly advertise weight loss; weight loss is simply assumed because it is often paired with the term "fitness." However, in the pole community acceptance of one's body is stressed over losing weight and perusing the thinner looking body that is what is usually strived for in popular Western culture. Learning to relish in the accomplishments of what the body can do over the way the body looks is emphasized within pole studios and throughout the entire pole community. This promotes empowerment through accomplishments rather than having the physical appearance of the body be the main focus. I have yet to be in a pole studio where negative talk about one's body is allowed. It is discouraged to the point that the instructor will put a stop to negative talk immediately. Fellow students will also try to stop the negative talk by offering compliments and emphasizing what the person can

do over what they look like. To a woman complaining about her weight I heard another student say in a joking manner, “Shut up. You can do an ayesha” (an Ayesha is an intermediate/advanced level pole trick that is dependent on a high amount of strength and skillful balancing. It is often used as a benchmark when a poler wants to take intermediate/advanced level tricks classes and workshops). This emphasis on what the person can do reminds the person that physical appearance isn’t actually a thing of importance when evaluating ones worth, especially in the pole studio where the traditional western ideas of beauty have been altered by the community to accept a range of body types. This kind of thing was also seen by Nichter (2000) in her work with black girls. She found that their refusal to conform to stereotypical ideas of the “perfect” body by refusing to diet stemmed from community traditions (or values) which created an alternative set of rules by which they governed their bodies (Nichter 2000). In the case of the women at the pole studio, the values of the pole community creates a community that values ability over appearance which gives the women a new way to evaluate themselves and create their sense of self.

Reminders like the one above are not limited to doing difficult tricks; they are personalized so the person needing them can appreciate what their body is capable of thus reinforcing empowerment through self-love. In focusing on what the body is capable of it promotes a love for the body: its accomplishments are your accomplishments. If what the body can do makes you happy then you love your body for that and feel empowered — especially if the people you surround yourself with are more focused on you as a person rather than what you look like. In essence, small communities like the pole community “are not cordoned off from their wider contexts, and yet they emphasize core meanings and practices that are arrayed against otherwise pervasive norms, which grants the groups in question a solid otherness” (Gremillion

2005:17). As I have pointed out before, this “otherness” creates the group in which these women have become members which brings the closer together. This otherness also helps to promote the values of the pole community as they are part of what being part of that community is all about.

As I stated above, the physical benefits of pole are obvious as it is a full body fitness activity. “Participants did comment on the way in which pole dancing covered all aspects of fitness, meaning they only had to commit to pole dancing classes rather than participating in a range of activities to accrue the same benefits,” (Nicholas et al. 2018:110). I found this to be true. Leah, an ex-personal trainer, said she had stopped going to the gym completely because “it was pointless” since she got the same full body workout from pole and “it’s more fun.”

“Fun” was a word I heard repeatedly throughout my research; during participant observation, in interviews, and in the material I read on pole. I already discussed the “fun” in the “Why Did You Go to Your First Pole Class?” section, but I wanted to touch on it again because the fun described as part of why a person starts pole is different than the fun described as part of why a person stays with pole.

In particular, more than once I heard doing pole compared to acting like a little kid. Both the article ““It’s our little secret... an in-group, where everyone’s in”: Females’ motives for participation in a stigmatized form of physical activity” by Nicholas et al. and Holland’s book *Pole Dancing, Empowerment, and Embodiment* discussed how pole can be described as acting like a child. Nicholas et al. reported that one of her participants described it as ““swinging around like a little kid”” (Nicholas et al. 2018:109) while Holland stated that she heard “over and over again” that pole “reminded them of being a child; swinging on a rope over a stream or climbing monkey bars in the playground at school” (Holland 2010:74). I also heard this from Gwen when she said “It’s like when I’d play on the jungle gym in elementary school. I get to

climb and go upside down and just you know.... act like a kid. Where else can we get to do that?" Additionally, many polers will actually play on playground equipment when given the chance. Poling outside the studio or home on pieces of landscape (e.g., on playground equipment, trees, flagpoles, street signs, boulders, and basically anything that could potentially support a pole trick) is called "street pole" or "urban poling." Alexandra (Alex), a thin woman in her late 20s, made the association between urban poling and acting like a child: "I used to climb all over stuff when I was a kid you know like trees and the monkey bars. I was that kid who would get on top of them (laughs)... but it's (urban poling) like that." Lin and Arianna both have children that they bring to the park to play on the playground. They both said they play on the playground with their kids by performing pole tricks. "It's hilarious how the other parents look at me! I was hanging upside down with Ashley (her 7 year old daughter) and I just felt them watching. I dunno if they thought it was funny or if I was a bad mom or what, but who the fuck cares? It's fun ya know?" Arianna said and then went on to say how much she enjoys the time she spends poling with her daughter because it's something they can bond over, "she's a little monkey. I can barely keep up with her!" By allowing themselves to play like children they are allowing themselves the type of freedom many of us deny ourselves. It is well known that "play" or the participation in enjoyable recreational activities is important in improving ones mental state.

All of the things I have talked about in this chapter support the claim that pole gives those who participate in it a more joyful outlook on life; it helps the people who embody the pole values to be empowered by accepting and loving themselves. In this way their sense of self takes on more positive aspects that improve their lives. Holland wrote, "pole classes are not going to 'mend' the lives of everyone who tries it. But the people I spoke to believe it had, to whatever

degree, restored something in their lives and this, to a great extent, explains why they continue to attend classes” (Holland 2010: 75). Throughout my research I heard pole talked about as a thing based in encouragement which empowered polers and stayed with them to help them improve their lives. I’d like to end this section on a quote from a woman in her early 40’s named Hana which I believe exemplifies this: “I feel like the supportiveness has really opened my mind. I see beauty more where I might not have before.”

“Sexy”

Repeatedly I heard the word “sexy” in during my research. “Sexy” by itself is a very general term and it is thrown around as though it has a universal meaning. However, each person has their own idea of what sexy looks like and in the context of this project it is always used as a way to say the person wants to feel good about themselves by exploring their own sexuality through empowerment hinged on their chosen feminine or masculine traits. I have already touched on the sexual nature of pole and how it is attached to sex work; now I want to talk about it as a way to exercise freedom of expression within a safe space, empowerment that leads to a more obtainable and personally empowering sense of self, and why that is appealing.

The woman mentioned earlier, Arianna, was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) not long before starting pole. She is also a long term friend of mine who I had fallen out of touch with prior to starting pole. She credited several reason for starting pole and came back to the idea of “sexy” several times while I talked to her.

I really liked stripping. It was fun. I really liked dancing around and feeling all sexy and stuff. Then I saw you doing it (recreational pole) and then you messaged me at the exact perfect time and I remembered stripping and I was kinda in a bad place and I was hating on my body again and I found out I have MS and just everything... and this just looked

fun, ya know? You always looked like you were having fun. I wanted to have fun. I NEEDED fun. And I could be sexy again! I *really* wanted to be sexy again... (Arianna)

Here Arianna credited her time as a stripper, the disturbing news that she had recently been diagnosed with MS, and her continued battle with her eating disorder as her motivation for starting pole. The promise of “fun” through flaunting her sexuality with the safety of being in the company of a friend created a sense of hope that she could relive a period of her life where she felt sexually empowered through her femininity. Arianna was searching for something that would empower her through the acceptance of her body although at the time she felt as though it was failing her; her conditions were causing her to move further away from her already unobtainable ideal self. As you previously read in the “Physical Benefits” subsection of the “Why Do You Still Pole?” section of this chapter, Arianna’s ideal self changed as she did pole which contributed to her continued participation in pole. Through her experiences with pole she became more accepting of herself and actually recreated her ideal self to better represent the new sense of self she was in the process of creating. As I discussed in the ““Why Do You Still Pole?: Discussion” subsection of the “Why Do You Still Pole?” section of this chapter, she was now focusing on what her body could do and modeling her sense of self around that rather than strictly what she looked like and the restrictions her MS places on it. While in a previous quote she had still mentioned the physical aspects of her body (her muscles and curves) she used them within the context of being “sexy” which is a personalized concept that depends on each person’s unique style.

As mentioned earlier, Gwen’s mother had caused long-term mental damage and had severely damaged her self-confidence. However, she explained to me that the prospect of tapping into her femininity, and being allowed and encouraged to be “sexy” she was able to begin to work through the damage her mother had caused. Gwen said, “(pole) makes me feel like I’m

allowed to be a girl. It's okay to be sexy. It took me a long time for me to want to take a dance class. About a year. I just took tricks (...) Then it took me a long time to let myself be sexy, like actually feel kinda sexy instead of some kind of robot, but it's (letting yourself be sexy) kinda freeing, ya know? It's fun... Fuck her." In Gwen's account she equated tapping into her sexual side with being free of the constraints her mentally abusive mother had put on her.

Pole offers a unique experience because it can be so many different things which gives the individual options. Options are a good thing when the person is going outside of their comfort zone or the person is nervous, which, as we saw in the "Why Did You Take Your First Pole Class" section of chapter, most of these women were for their first class. The reason for perusing the feeling of being sexy is a personal one and the type of sexy the person chooses to portray (i.e., sexy, raunchy, cute, flirty, etc.) is up to the individual. Even in a choreographed exotic style pole dance class (and most pole dance classes in general) the dancer gets to choose how they want to perform their dance by choosing how they want to execute their body movements and their facial expressions. This type of freedom makes it easier for an individual poler to portray their personalized version of sexy (or their version of the dance choreography in general) which is appealing to someone looking to feel sexy (i.e., good about themselves).

This can be held against more ridged styles of dance like ballet where an individual is expected to follow very exact choreography with set facial expressions. Recreational pole in a classroom setting simply isn't like that in the vast majority of cases. The only time I saw strict choreography was when it was performed at a show by a group. Usually choreography is given in a dance class, but the students are not expected to follow it exactly because they each have a different set of limitations, are different skill levels even within the same level class, and they are not professional dancers so they may or may not be able to remember the choreography.

Michelle would say in her classes, “this is my choreography and your dance” meaning that the instructors were giving their students the bare bones of a routine and it was up to the student to put their unique spin on it. I believe that the freedom of expression offered by pole is part of what makes it so appealing, especially when it comes to expressing one’s personal version of their sexuality.

The Stigma

Not all of pole is sunshine and rainbows. Pole is tied up in some very real issues concerning stigma (or “taboo”) in relation to the non-pole world as well as conflicts within the pole community itself.

Pole will forever be connected with strippers and sex work. Before diving into this, it is important to know the difference between these things and recreational pole. As previously discussed, pole’s official cannon within the pole community is that pole as we know it today started in strip clubs. The main difference between strippers and polers is the flow of money, and the ability to perform pole moves correctly and safely. Not all strippers are polers and not all polers are strippers. In a monetary aspect, strippers are paid to strip as their job while polers are not. Usually polers, unless self-taught, pay a studio to learn how to pole which may or may not include the artful removal of clothes. Whether or not they are self-taught, recreational polers are not getting paid to strip. Of course, there is overlap. Since strippers make most of their money by standing out amongst the other strippers at their job many have adopted learning to pole at a pole studio in order to train for work to give them a leg up. Learning to perform tricks at a pole studio also reduces their risk of injury because they will learn how to execute tricks correctly.

Strippers are a type of sex worker. They are tied to the sex industry and therefore suffer all of the same persecution as other types of sex workers. Because of pole's history with stripping, recreational pole often gets lumped in with actual sex work even though the flow of money does not dictate them as actual sex workers.

Conflicts with the Non-Pole Community

While stripping and exotic style dancing are in fact a part of pole, it is only one aspect of it — and even stripping and exotic style dancing are broken down into sub-categories within the pole world. However you cut it, the stigma centered around sex work, in this case mainly stripping as seen in strip clubs, does carry over into all of pole.

For some the stigma caused by pole's ties to sex work creates a very real sense of fear, especially when they first start pole. When Sara Amelia first started pole she was afraid of other people finding out because “there is that stigma associated with it and being a lawyer I was concerned... there was a certain level of concern for me if it was somehow going to be used against me...um... I didn't know how or if like the ethics there be an investigation or something like that that would be ridiculous but still. I-I just I was nervous about it.”

Over time Sara Amelia overcame this fear and now proudly tells people that she “knows or has met in person” that she poles. She said everyone at her work knows and the two women she took her first class with are actually paralegals at her firm. About her bosses she jokingly said, “being the pervy men that they are we actually had a stiletto day. Like we all wore our Pleasers one Friday with our jeans (...) And I encourage everyone who starts working at the firm (to do pole).”

The joking, off-handed, nature of Sara Amelia's comment about her "pervy" bosses shows that while she acknowledges the stigma against pole and the sexual nature in which it is viewed, it no longer bothers her. This is particularly interesting since, as I demonstrated in the earlier chapters, Sara Amelia is more interested in the fitness side of pole over the dancing and sexual sides of it. Sara Amelia says she describes pole to those who don't pole as:

I call it pole fitness um I usually I say like if I say I teach it I say I teach pole fitness. And then I usually encourage them to come. And say you know like... you don't have to be sexy you don't have to feel sexy. Um. I usually say that. You don't have to know how to dance. It's a lot of strength based training and it's a lot of fun (...) because I was uncomfortable with the sexy side of it. Um... I just tell people it's fun, engaging, you meet a lot of cool people and it will strengthen you (...) I won't tell them that they have to dance. I think that's partly why I don't call it pole dancing. I think when people are dancing its I think that's scary. (Sara Amelia)

The overt sexualization of pole no matter the style by those who do not participate in it has become normalized to Sara Amelia and overrides her own feelings about pole even though she actively promotes the fitness side of it because the dancing and sexual side of pole she perceives as possibly "scary" to newcomers since it had made her uncomfortable when she started. Sara Amelia's overall style of dancing is still not sexually based.

While Sara Amelia was eventually able to overcome her fear of people finding out she does pole, not all women are able to openly discuss their participation in pole. Many polers create social media accounts using fake names just so they can share their pole dancing while keeping their identity hidden. This is also an example of how their sense of pride in their pole accomplishments manifests itself. It would be easy for these people to simply never speak of their involvement in pole and never post anything about it on social media. However, they acknowledge that pole dancing makes them feel good and they want to share their accomplishment because they are proud of themselves. They know from the supportive atmosphere within the pole studio that those within the larger pole community will also be

supportive. The support the pole community readily gives to each other helps build self-confidence so even polers who want to keep their pole life separate from their daily life will often times use social media under the guise of their fake names to share pictures and videos so they can be cheered on by the wider international pole community. Over time many polers who initially hide behind fake names take ownership of their involvement in pole and merely keep the fake name as a “stage name” even though they may never actually perform.

Unfortunately, others are forced to either hide behind a fake name forever, not post anything on social media, or discuss their involvement in pole with most people in their lives because there is a very real possibility they could be fired from their job. Although this is not legal there have been many cases of polers suddenly being let go over ill-defined reasons. It is not uncommon to read in pole Facebook groups that polers have had their jobs threatened for various reasons relating to their involvement in pole. Most often this happens when the poler works with children. During my time at Bad Cherry we had a woman who worked with autistic children who could not post any of her poling on social media despite her desire to do so. About the subject she said, “I am afraid of what the parents will say. Some of them are so judgmental and I don’t want them to cause shit.”

Sometimes the urge to participate in group activities like performances will eventually overpower the fear. For example, the same woman mentioned above eventually performed two years later as part of a large pole troupe based out of another studio. She performed at Pole for a Purpose, a charity event held at the David A. Straz, Jr. Center for the Performing Arts (known as The Straz) in Tampa, Florida. She never posted on social media and requested not to be tagged in any photos to protect her identity. That request is not an uncommon one so everyone was very

careful not to tag her or discuss her involvement in the show around the people the woman knew who were not part of the pole world.

Referring back to Pole for a Purpose for a minute, events like the Pole for a Purpose charity event at The Straz exemplify another element of the stigma against pole as it relates to the non-pole world. Generally speaking, since pole is so closely tied to the image of a stereotypical strip club interior that is what most non-polers believe all pole studios and events look like. The Straz is the biggest and most famous performing arts center in Tampa, Florida. It houses such famous shows as *Wicked*, *The Sound of Music*, *Cats*, and so on. For a pole event to be held in such a place is breaking the stereotype of the kind of places in which pole takes place. Furthermore, since stripping is linked to monetary gain and pole is linked to stripping, the fact that pole-centric charity events like Pole for a Purpose not only exist, but are actually quite common is helping to break down the stigma against pole because these events are undoubtedly doing good. This is not to say that these events do not incorporate the exotic dancing style of pole into some of their acts. Usually several acts embrace exotic style dance and use the stage as a place to show their pride in their sexuality through dance. By doing this large pole events, especially charity events, are simultaneously embracing and breaking the stigma; they are showing that there is no shame in embracing and being proud of themselves as sexual beings, that they are proud of their bodies no matter what they look like (because, as mentioned before, polers come in all shapes, sizes, and colors), and they are doing all of it by taking something that is generally frowned upon (being openly sexual) and flaunting it.

Some women at the studio never told more than a handful of close friends and their spouses about their involvement in pole. Maria, a Puerto Rican woman in her early 40s, only told her husband, sister, and a few select friends. When I talked to her about her situation she said she

was worried her children would find out as well as the friends and families of her children. She was afraid of being judged by all of them. When I spoke to her at length about her fears, she mostly talked about her children. She was afraid it would negatively affect her relationship with them, especially her oldest who had just entered middle school and was beginning to go through puberty. All of her children were in Catholic School which she said would have made the conversation just that much harder if she were to have it. Instead of talking to her family about her involvement in pole she would tell everyone she was going to yoga. She would often turn it into a joke saying, “It’s kind of the same thing. We stretch here too!” This apparently is not an uncommon alibi. The article ““It’s out little secret ... an in-group, where *everyone’s* in”:
Females’ motives for participation in a stigmatized form of physical activity” by Joanna C. Nicholas et al. (2018) also reported a woman they interviewed using the same story.

There is a tendency for polers to hide their involvement in pole for a varying amount of time before telling their friends and family. Most commonly, when a poler tells their parents, other family members, or friends/acquaintances they believe might judge them that they pole they do so using a video or picture that is sportier or fitness based such as a picture of a trick that shows the strength aspect of pole. This is an attempt to take the focus off of pole’s association to sex work and reinforce it as a fitness activity and legitimate sport.

The taboo aspect of pole does however make it appealing to some. Part of the reason Neesheta said she has continued to pole is “it was something kinda taboo so it felt like kinda like OooO I do that (laughs) like that was cool.” Here Neesheta was describing the appeal of being part of a stigmatized group. Optional distinctiveness theory offers one explanation for this behavior as it claims there is a need to be part of one group where a common interest is shared so the person may feel included while remaining separate from another group (Nicholas, et al.

2018). This separate-ness from one group theoretically reinforces the inclusion in the other (Nicholas, et al. 2018). In the case of pole, the inclusion and the desire to be included in the stigmatized (“taboo”) pole group is balanced by the exclusion of the larger group which looks down on pole as something that is “dirty.” “This stigmatized, non-mainstream, activity was driven partly by the stigmatized nature of the activity itself” (Nicholas, et al. 2018: 112).

Therefore, the exclusion from the group that looks down on pole only makes the inclusion in the pole group more appealing as it offers a smaller niche group to be a part of. This creates an “us against the world” mentality that strengthens the bonds of those within the pole community as they stick together against the negative stereotypes placed on them by the other, larger, group. This also reinforces the kinship bonds I spoke about earlier; the connections these women make over their shared love of pole and the inclusion in the niche group increases the value they place on the pole family.

One thing that helps to perpetuate the stigma against pole is the clothing aspect of its material culture. Pole clothing reveals more skin by necessity since polers are literally sticking to the pole with their skin in order to do tricks. Most pole clothing looks like a decorative sports bra with bikini bottoms that have extra fabric in the crotch region to prevent any “slippage.” “Slippage” is the term used by polers to describe the slipping of private parts out of clothing while dancing. Most women’s clothing such as bikini bottoms and bodysuits have inadequate coverage in the private region so some polers have created companies to manufacture clothing that looks like the desired clothing (bikinis, lingerie, bodysuits, and the like), but is specifically made to fix the problem of slippage.

This clothing is often made to look more like a dancer’s performance costume to help get the poler in the mood to dance and boost their confidence. Wearing clothing like that also

reinforces to the other polers that their want to wear pole clothing (clothing that is more revealing) is allowed and encouraged. Some polers do wear sexier clothing like decorative bras and panties that are found to have adequate crotch and breast coverage, but the reason why remains the same: they are putting themselves in the mood to dance and/or perform tricks at the pole studio. They are “dressing the part” of the style poler they want to be on that particular day. As you can see here, the psychological and social impact clothing has on an individual is, as Weston said, “quite comparable with anthropological studies of how people use ritual, work style, and dance to culturally specific notions of gender and self-hood. (Weston 2016: 215). Furthermore, the wearing of pole clothing is often done to preserve a level of modesty which in turn is in opposition to the type of clothing it is assumed polers would wear.

Conflicts within the Pole Community: The Stripping Vs. Recreational Pole Divide as Exemplified by the Hashtag #notastripper

Like with any community, there are internal conflicts. In the pole community the biggest conflict centers around the desire for some polers to separate themselves from strippers. The best example of this is the use of the hashtag #notastripper on social media. This hashtag never fails to cause an argument. Because of pole’s history and the inevitability of meeting current strippers or people who had been strippers in the past, the hashtag is offensive. The reason it is considered offensive in the pole community is because it causes an “us vs. them” situation. The person using the hashtag is trying to separate themselves from part of the pole community by turning strippers into “the other.” This is offensive for several reasons; most notably, by making strippers “the

other” it sounds like they are something not to be associated with, like they are “dirty” because of what they do for a living.

Instagram photos by polers using the hashtag #notastripper usually portray pole tricks (which many strippers do) or dancing which often times mimics the exotic dance style done by strippers. As I have previously discussed, modern pole has its roots in stripping and exotic dance, yet, these facts are ignored. The posts on social media that use this hashtag are serious posts from polers showing off things they have learned. Why do people feel like it is okay to separate themselves from a group of people who share the same interests, perform the same moves, and also frequent pole studios and events in such a serious way?

It is because of the stigma against sex work. Sex work is often seen as a lesser job because it involves “lustful” things and things that are considered taboo like baring large amounts of one’s skin and desiring to be looked at. There is also a misconception that sex workers don’t like what they do, that they are forced into it because they are “single mothers trying to make ends meet” or “suffering from a drug addiction.” I had the opportunity to talk with several polers about their experiences with stripping. I will share two quotes with you; one from a woman about her past job as a stripper and another who strips occasionally as a side job to her massage therapist career.

Arianna is a former stripper and now owns half of her family’s business. She stripped while in her early 20s. In a casual conversation she said:

I miss it sometimes. It was fun. I mean, there was some bad stuff but I did have fun. It’s like any other job, ya know? Good days and bad days. I had my regulars and I liked dancing and stuff... There was one guy... o man he had a thing for my feet. I mean, I do have nice looking feet (laughs). If my life had gone in a different direction I might still be doing it. Hey! We should go do an amateur’s night sometime! We’d make bank!
(Arianna)

This conversation shows that this woman did not just think of stripping as something she had done in her youth, but also as something she would still enjoy even as a stereotypically successful woman. She also makes the connection between stripping and any other job; she does not set it aside as something to be ashamed of or as something she “had to do” because of a negative reason.

Furthermore, this woman is a mother. That is significant information because her enthusiasm at the idea of participating in an amateur’s night reinforces that she does not view stripping as something to be avoided simply because she has children. As discussed earlier, women have limitations put on them based on their age, body shape, race, whether or not they have children, and so on. By ignoring these socially imposed limitations this woman is rebelling against societal norms that deem stripping (and pole by proxy) as something to be looked down upon. She is fighting the stigma.

Anna is a white woman in her mid-thirties. She strips occasionally as a side job. About stripping she said, “I really love dancing in the club. I love being looked at like that.” Anna acknowledged that the reason she keeps stripping is because she enjoys being looked at in a lustful way. By being so open about it she is expressing her agency and power to embrace what she wants and her right to revel in her own appearance by participating in, and making money while doing, an activity she enjoys despite the stigma surrounding that activity.

My Influence on the Project

I don't believe this project would be complete without a discussion about the role I played as the researcher. Who I am within the Bad Cherry community (both as an active member and my sex) undoubtedly played a part in this project.

For one, I would not have been allowed in the studio had I been male since Bad Cherry is a "women only" pole studio. As Abu-Lughod (1990) discussed, I was attentive to my gender (and sex) in the way I was treated by and in the interactions I had with the people I was studying; I did not deny that I was a woman and that that made be able to use my own experiences as a woman to relate to these polers.

Secondly, the information I received during both the participant information process and the interviews was greatly influenced by my status at the studio. As a long term student and obviously dedicated to the Bad Cherry pole family I was trusted by my peers and respected as someone who had put in the time and effort to raise through the class ranks. My presence in classes, in the studio's secret Facebook group, and on studio outings was never questioned. I was always invited to things and would be lovingly harassed to take part in all studio activities. This level of studio involvement dubbed me as a trusted part of the pole family and I was allowed to be part of intimate conversations about the lives of my fellow students. For example, I was told about the severe sexual, physical, and mental abuse one of the women suffered as a small child at the hands of her family members. I was also part of conversations about alcoholic and/or mentally abusive spouses and parents, conversations where women revealed that they were going to be getting a divorce, a conversation where one devastated woman had just been told she has Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) and might not be able to have a baby, and other such

private matters. I held many of my pole sisters as they cried and took part in many a group hug. Because of how long I'd known these women and how well I knew them, my advice was sometimes sought out. I, too, shared intimate parts of my own life with my pole family because I trusted these women and valued their opinions and wisdom.

As such a long time member of the Bad Cherry pole family and because I'd proven myself to be a trustworthy person, I was also trusted with some information about the personal lives of my instructors. Once I was even invited out to lunch and a bit of shopping with the owner and her two instructor friends. It was because of these experiences as well as past experiences with the community that I, as Schrock (2013) predicted, felt ethically responsible to accurately represent the pole community.

However, as a student I did face limitations when it came to interviewing my instructors. Sara Amelia was the only one to explicitly state her hesitance to discuss certain matters because I was a student. When I interviewed Sara Amelia her response to one of the questions was, "I can't. I don't want to tell you that! (laughs) (...) No I can't I mean you're a student here! (...) I'm not thinking of anyone in particular, just so you know." As you can see, my place in the pole studio made her hesitant to answer. After reminding her that she didn't have to answer any question that made her feel uncomfortable she decided to respond, but she chose her words more carefully than I'd noticed her doing previously in the interview. She also made sure to state that she wasn't "thinking of anyone in particular" when she gave examples in her response. When she did this she was protecting the identity of her student which reinforced her status as a trusted confidant as well as reinforced the line between instructor and student.

By saying that she didn't want to divulge some information because I was one of her students and may figure out who she was talking about it really made it known that there was a

distance the instructors kept from the students. The statement Sara Amelia made let me know without a doubt that I was still going to be seen as a student even though I was also a researcher and that there may be things that others said that might be exaggerated in order to keep me happy as a student or left out completely.

Sara Amelia was the second person I interviewed so that confirmation so early on got me to listen more closely to the inflections of the interviewees' voices, their body language, the use of laughter, and the silences which implied that there were things left unsaid.

Conclusion

Through this project I was able to demonstrate that community has a large influence on a person's sense of self, particularly when it pertains to empowerment. This was seen through the noticeable transformation these women went through between their first pole class to when they became established members of the pole community. The stigma surrounding pole is influenced by the stigma against sex work and a general fear of the expression of a person as a sexual being. While this stigma hangs over their heads, the women who participate in pole found that by tapping into their sexual side they felt empowered. The opportunity to tap into their sexual side was both a motivator for starting pole and a reason they continued to pole. The only thing that was seen as a greater motivator for continuing to pole was the supportiveness and love given by the polder's pole family and the larger pole community. Furthermore, demographics collected show that pole communities differ based on location when they are compared to previous studies.

There is a joke in pole that you have to be a little crazy to do it, and like many jokes there is a bit of truth to it. These woman ARE crazy. And brave. Every day they live with a stigma hanging over their heads that they choose to put there because the very thing that is stigmatized is what makes them feel, in their words, empowered. They will not apologize for being women or for being sexual beings with a body they have learned to own and take pride in despite society's constant attempts to make them feel lesser. Societal norms place restrictions on them that they can push aside while in the safe space created by the pole studio and with the encouragement of their pole family. While at the studio they are free to let the parts of themselves that they would normally keep hidden out into the open where they are accepted by their pole family. That acceptance and encouragement to embrace their true selves gives them inner strength to go alongside the physical strength they gain from pole, and that strength they gain from accepting themselves they take with them out into the world.

Inside the pole studio these women experiment with aspects of their personalities they were originally afraid to explore because they were told all their lives by society that they weren't allowed. I saw women from all walks of life coming together to quite literally dance with happiness because they were allowed to be their true selves and that made them happy. All of the women I came in contact with through the pole studio expressed that they poled because it made them feel fulfilled and empowered. There were many ways the studio fulfilled these women; community, acceptance, encouragement, and having a safe space to re-create their sense of self into something closer to the ideal self they had modified to better suit who they were as a person.

While this began as a case study of a single pole studio it quickly grew to encompass the experiences of polers from outside the studio as I became more and more included in the wider

pole community. Many polers would float between studios so I was able to easily access information about the larger pole community which gave me a better understanding of these people and the motivations behind why they started pole and why they stayed.

Going into this I knew, for the most part, what I would find. Not because of things I'd read or heard about, but things I myself have lived. The stories I have collected are just examples of what I already knew: that pole changes people for the better and they carry that with them into the "real world," that there are shared reasons for why people stay with pole, and that polers use the safe space created by the pole studio and the pole community to express their true selves — their true selves complete with "imperfections", insecurities, past traumas, and aspects of their lives that the "real world" may frown upon.

I would like to end this with a phrase I often hear polers use variations of when they need to amp themselves up to accomplish daunting tasks. In fact, I have said it to myself many times throughout the course of this project. I feel that it in itself says more about pole dancing and the people who do it than any written paper ever could. I will quote it from a woman at the studio who I feel put it the most eloquently, "I can do it. I'm a motherfucking *POLE DANCER!*"

Appendix 1

Interview Questions

- How long have you been taking pole classes or been learning to pole dance?
- Why did you take your first pole class?
- Did you come alone or with friends?
 - If you came with friends the first time, do they still take classes?
- How did you first hear about recreational pole classes?
- What was your first pole class like?
 - What were your thoughts coming into your first class?
 - What did you think the other people in the class would be like?
 - How did the actual class hold up to your thoughts coming into the class?
- Why do you still pole?
- How far do you travel to take classes?
- Do you do other types of fitness?
 - If yes: what kind?
 - Did you start doing it before or after you started pole?
 - If after: why?
- How does participating in pole make you feel?
- Have you told your friends, family, and/or coworkers about your participation in pole?
 - If yes: How long did you wait before telling friends/family/co-workers/ etc.?
 - What was their reaction?
 - If no: why haven't you told them?
 - Do you plan to eventually tell them?
 - If yes: why wait?
 - How do/did you decide who to tell about your participation in pole?
- Would you bring others to pole classes or would you tell others to try pole?
- How do you describe pole to people who don't pole?
- How has participating in pole classes affected your daily life?
- Is there anything in your background that you think contributes to your interest in pole?
- How long have you been teaching pole?
- How long after you started pole did you start teaching?
- What motivated you to become an instructor?
- What did you have to do to become an instructor?
- Is there anything I have not asked you about that you feel is important to better my understanding of or anything else you would like to talk about concerning pole?

Appendix 2

Pole Jargon	
<u>Term or Phrase</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
	*All terms and their meanings are from my experience as part of the pole community. They are not universal.
baby poler	A person who is new to pole. They have accepted the inevitability of bruises and the pain of pole. They have taken enough classes that their face is recognized by their classmates and most of the people who go to the studio. They are beginner level students. They are still learning the ways of the pole community.
cunty	Joking way of saying not to be mean, grumpy, or judgmental. Rebelling against the stigma of the word “cunt.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used in a sentence: “Don’t be cunty”
dork side/ bad side/ dark side	The opposite body parts of the side that the poler feels comfortable using. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Example: using your left hand for a move that you are more comfortable using your right hand for.
floorwork	Dance done when the body is no more than approximately 3’ above the ground. Usually consists of rolls, crawls, and creating shapes with the body. It may be done in combination with the dancing around or up the pole.
floor trick	A strength based move performed on the ground. May be touching the pole, but the overall weight of the body is on the ground.
home studio	The pole studio a poler frequents most often.
knee pit	The area behind the knee. Used in several moves to grip around the pole like someone would with their hand.
pole	A versatile word in the pole dance/fitness subculture. Its intended meaning is based on context.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noun: The long, slender piece of metal that pole dancers dance with and climb on. Usually has a chrome, stainless steel, titanium gold, powder coat, or brass finish. Common diameters are 50mm, 45mm, 40mm, and 38mm. Can be removable or permanent fixtures. It is a piece of fitness equipment in this context. • Abbreviation: Shortened version of “pole dance” or “pole fitness.” Often used to replace “pole dance” or “pole fitness” in a sentence. Especially when the sentence could refer to either or both. • Adjective: using the abbreviation of “pole dance” or “pole fitness” used to describe a noun being used within the pole dance subculture. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Examples: She is my pole sister. Those are my pole shorts. I’m going to pole class. • Verb: the act of using a pole to dance or perform a trick. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Examples: I’m going to go pole. Lucy poles on the weekends. I was poling yesterday.
poleaversary	Combination of the words pole and anniversary. Used to indicate the anniversary of a person’s first time poling. It is usually a celebrated event where the poler will announce their poleaversary to pole friends and often over social media.
pole brother	A male member of a poler’s pole family. Used as a term of endearment. Much less common to hear than pole sister.
pole cousin	A member of a poler’s extended pole family that does not share the same home studio. Used as a term of endearment. Somewhat uncommon term unless used between studios that are friends.
pole clothing	Clothing made with the needs of pole dancers in mind. These clothes are either fitness clothing or clothing made to represent pole pride. The fitness clothing is usually more decorative and usually has

	<p>interesting patterns or are made in decorative styles. The fitness clothing is made to avoid “slippage” while the poler is poling.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fitness clothing examples: sports bras and pole shorts. • Clothes to represent pole pride examples: a tank top with a pole related phrase on the front.
pole dance studio	Term used to specify a studio that focuses on the dance aspect of pole. Appeals to a specific market.
pole family	A group of poles who consider themselves as close as family and will participate in group activities outside the studio. Generally it is a large group. For most studios it encompasses the entire studio. Used as a term of endearment.
pole fitness studio	Term used to specify a studio that focuses on the fitness and trick aspects of pole. Appeals to a certain market.
polegasm	Combination of the words pole and orgasm. Used to express the overwhelming feeling of joy and satisfaction a poler gets when they accomplish a hard pole move, accomplish a personal pole goal, are proud of a pole dance/ pole performance, etc.
pole journey	The “journey” a poler embarks on during their time poling. This includes the mental and physical challenges, accomplishments, changes, etc. they go through because of pole the longer the amount of time they spend poling.
pole kisses	Bruises left on the body by the pole.
pole mom/ pole momma/ studio mom/ studio momma	A female owner of a pole dance studio. They are considered the “mom” of a pole family. They are also considered a pole sister. The terms are interchangeable depending on the situation. Possibly no male equivalent for male pole studio owners.
pole party	The gathering of pole friends to dance, train, teach one another, and generally have fun.
poler	Person who poles. This is a blanket term that does not discriminate between those who focus on the dance or the fitness aspects of pole.

	Strippers are not referred to as polers unless they also practice recreational pole dance.
pole shorts	A type of pole clothing. Shorts specifically made with pole dancers in mind. There is more coverage in the crotch area to avoid “slippage.”
pole sister	A female member of a poler’s pole family. Used as a term of endearment.
pole star	A poler that is well known in the pole world for their poling abilities.
pole studio	Term used for either a pole dance or a pole fitness studio. Some people differentiate between a pole <i>dance</i> studio and a pole <i>fitness</i> studio to appeal to different markets.
poling	A poler in the act of using the pole. May also refer to how long a person has been pole dancing. Example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She’s poling on the corner pole. • I have been poling for four years.
sex work	Work that involves the buying and selling of sexual goods and services.
sex worker	Someone who works in the sex work industry. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Example: stripper/exotic dancer.
shoe bang or heel clack	Making loud noises using the platform of a platform high heel either against hitting them against one another or against the floor.
shoes / Pleasers	Refers to the platform high heels often worn in pole. Heights are measured up the back of the heel and often shoes are referred to by their height. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Example: “I just got a pair of 8s” Heights generally range from 6” to 10” heels. The most popular heights are 7” or 8” heels. The most popular brand is Pleaser and pole shoes are often referred to simply as “Pleasers.” Also may refer to a style of class where shoes are required to fully perform the moves being taught.

slippage	The slipping of one's private parts out of their clothing while poling. This is a somewhat common problem that is remedied by wearing clothing specifically made to avoid the issue.
spin	A designated movement around the pole without touching the ground. A poler can move around the pole without it being called a spin, a spin is a move all in itself.
spin pole	Pole that is attached to a floor/ base and most often times to the ceiling. The space in between has an inner and outer cylinder where the outer one spins easily around the inner one. This allows the poler to rotate around the pole simply by holding on and they do not need to make their own momentum to execute a spin move.
static pole or stationary pole	Pole is stationary. Poler must move themselves around the pole in order to rotate around the pole and must make their own momentum in order to execute a spin move.
stripper / exotic dancer	Person who takes off their clothes for money usually in a strip club. Not all strippers are pole dancers.
Sunday bumday	Social media posts of people showing off their buttocks or "bums." It is done extensively in the pole community by women and men, usually in very small bottoms or in the nude so as they may display their bums to the full extent of their personal comfort level. It can be seen as a rebellion against the puritanical social norms that attempt to restrict a person's expression of sexuality and pride in their body.
trick	A strength based move performed on the pole.
twerk	Style of dance that focuses on a person's rear end and hips moving in ways that make the fat in the area jiggle. It is traditionally defined as being sexually provocative; however, it is often done more for fun and as a cardio exercise. It was made popular by black women, but can now be enjoyed by anyone usually without backlash. Some controversy does still linger over whether or not it is cultural appropriation, but that usually does not come from within the pole community. Instructors from a variety

	of ethnicities readily teach twerk. There is a Twerk Certification offered by the pole dance studio, Vertical Joe's that is open to everyone.
urban pole or street pole	Poling on poles or pole-like structures not in a designated poling area. Examples: jungle gyms, street signs, lamp posts, trees, etc.
yasssss / yes mam!	Used to express happiness, agreement, encouragement, excitement, etc.. Very common across the United States.

Appendix 3

Recorded Interview Interviewee Information		
*All data from 2017 interviews		
Brandi (Owner and Instructor)	Age	38
	Race/ Ethnicity	White
	Travel Time/Distance	1.5 miles
	Years Poling	7 years
	Years Teaching	Unknown. Owned studio for 5 years
	Where 1 st Class Was Taken	Impulse Pole Dance during their open house for their St. Petersburg, Florida location
	Career/Job	Owner of and instructor at Bad Cherry Pole Dance Studio
Neesheta (Instructor)	Age	32
	Race/ Ethnicity	Puerto Rican and Guyanese (very proud of her heritage)
	Travel Time/Distance	20 minutes
	Years Poling	9 years Including 2 years at home before going to a studio.
	Years Teaching	6 years
	Where 1 st Class Was Taken	Bad Cherry before Brandi bought it.
	Career/Job	Between jobs
Sara Amelia (Instructor)	Age	33
	Race/ Ethnicity	White
	Travel Time/Distance	Under 10 minutes
	Years Poling	6 years
	Years Teaching	Not positive. 5 – 5.5
	Where 1 st Class Was Taken	Bad Cherry before Brandi bought it.
		Lawyer
Michelle (Instructor)	Age	44
	Race/ Ethnicity	White
	Travel Time/Distance	1 hour minimum
	Years Poling	7 years
	Years Teaching	Since January 2017
	Where 1 st Class Was Taken	Bad Cherry. Then went to Buttercup Pole Dance for 5 years before going back to Bad Cherry.
	Career/Job	Workman's Comp and Safety Specialist
Jordan (Instructor)	Age	38
	Race/ Ethnicity	White
	Travel Time/Distance	
	Years Poling	6 years + 1 year learning at home

	Years Teaching	6 months. Started around the same time as Michelle
	Where 1 st Class Was Taken	Not Bad Cherry. Didn't say what studio.
	Career/Job	Manager at her family's manufacturing company
Heidi (Instructor)	Age	34
	Race/ Ethnicity	White
	Travel Time/Distance	35 minutes
	Years Poling	4 years
	Years Teaching	1 year
	Where 1 st Class Was Taken	Bad Cherry after Brandi bought it
	Career/Job	Didn't say

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