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A Black Feminist Approach to Recreational Pole Dancing

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Abstract

This research examines why Black women pole dance and how their participation contributes to building self-confidence and self-efficacy. This study demonstrates how Black women resisted and created spaces for Black women to be empowered and see themselves represented within the pole community. This research explored the ways and to what extent Black women can explore their sexuality through pole dancing as they oppose societal perceptions of Black women as hypersexual beings. I analyzed whether academic literature on Black families aligned with how family members of Black pole dancers received and accepted their involvement.

Introduction

"Oh, you pole dance? ... So that means you're a stripper? ... Can you do a little dance for me?" is the first response I receive from men after their astonishment and arousal passes from them hearing that I am a pole dancer. By the time I tell them that being a pole dancer is different from stripping, they are dumbfounded. Unable to grasp the idea that women use pole dancing to reject male objectification and to reclaim their sexuality, these men and some women claim that pole dancing and stripping are the same because strippers are sexual with a pole too.

As a young Black female pole dancer, I have encountered this situation many times and wonder why men and some women are convinced that I can only be a stripper on the pole. To distance myself from such hyper-sexualizations of my body, I further suppressed my own exploration of sexuality and sensuality by avoiding sexual forms of pole dance.

Without taking away from the hard work and physical and emotional labor of strippers and acknowledging that pole dancing originates from strip clubs, this research paper asks two things: Why is stripping given such a negative association and tied inherently to the image of the hypersexual Black female body and how do other Black women contest this negative image?

There is a long history of the sexual exploitation of black women. During slavery in the United States, white slave owners justified the rape and sexual assault of their Black female slaves under the assumption that they were "wanton creatures who were sexually immoral" and promiscuous, seen as fundamentally different from white women (Bell 2004: 372).

Thus, for white men and women to control Black women's sexuality and the exploitation of their bodies, the image of the "Jezebel" became central to the portrayal of Black women during slavery. The Jezebel was framed as a "whore" or "sexually aggressive woman" having "excessive sexual appetites" which was used to justify the numerous sexual assaults on Black women (Collins 1990: 77). As Black women, the color of their skin alone served as an invitation for white men to sexually abuse them. However, they were also masculinized and "desexed" through image of the "Mammy." The Mammy was depicted as an "unsuitable sexual partner for white men" because of her overweight and undesirable dark, African features (Collins 1990: 78). With whiteness as the standard of beauty, anything that negated from this standard was deemed ugly and barbaric. Furthermore, their bodies were hypersexualized: they were deemed simultaneously ugly and desirable.

In addition, Black women's sexuality has been understood in relation to white women. White women represented the true cult of womanhood by their skin color and relegation to the home; therefore, Black women stood as the "antithesis of the American conception of beauty, femininity, and womanhood" (Hunter 1998: 520). Although white women's sexuality has been historically repressed, the feminist movement in the United States has challenged women's sexual agency and allowed them to freely explore their sexuality. In contrast, contemporary representations of Black women's sexuality remain the same, which restricts Black women's ability to explore their sexuality through different modes of expression, such as pole dancing. With the image of the mammy and jezebel salient, Black women struggle to be seen on the pole as someone who is desirable beyond the extent of their bodies.

My research examines why Black women do pole dancing and how their participation influences and impacts those around them. In addition, I ask in what ways and to what extent Black women explore their sexuality through pole dancing. I focus on Black women because the Black feminist movement has different origins and struggles from mainstream white feminism and because Black women have different lived experiences distinctly due to racism, classism, and sexism. My article offers some insight into the Black woman's experience of sexual liberation through pole dancing.

Literature Review

Samantha Holland, a white research fellow scholar with a focus on gender and subcultures and author of *Pole Dancing, Empowerment, and Embodiment*, is one of few researchers who have researched pole dancing and examined the various elements of pole classes and images of pole dancing. Holland (2010) argued that pole classes have become spaces where "women initiate agency and espouse liberation, and sometimes physical empowerment" take place (p. 2).

Using a feminist ethnographic approach, her study offered an in-depth analysis of pole dancing by participating in pole classes and visiting strip clubs. Her research was extensive by interviewing participants in the United Kingdom and internationally, using online questionnaires and taking field notes. Although her book does an effective job of looking at various aspects of pole dancing, it was also lacking in several areas. Holland's book only discusses race and diversity on four out of 187 pages. Her engagement with diversity was limited due to the lack of women of color that participated in her study. Her investigation of diversity remained surface level, only observing the demographics in pole classes and a

closer look at one South Asian and British Asian participants' experiences and backgrounds (Holland 2010: 93-95).

Holland's examination of race is insufficient and leaves the unique experiences of women of color, who are largely misrepresented in pole dancing, unexplored. My research seeks to bridge this gap by centering on the pole dancing experiences of Black women.

Scholars Mia Pellizzer, Marika Tiggemann, and Levina Clark have drawn from Holland's research to examine pole dancing in Australia. As in Holland's book, the demographics of their study lacked diversity, primarily focusing on white respondents. They argued that the relationship between "enjoyment of sexualization" and negative body image is not only a unidimensional construct of self-objectification, but also relates to embodiment which in turn relates to positive body images (Pellizzer, Tiggemann and Clark 2015: 35). Their study argues that "self-sexualizing behaviors," those that present bodies and persons in a sexual manner, have the potential to offer positive benefits for women to have power over their bodies and create a sense of empowerment (Pellizzer et al. 2015: 36-7). For recreational pole dancers, the enjoyment of sexualization is both positive and negative.

While recreational pole dancing produces confidence and positive body images among pole dancers, Pellizzer et al. (2015) also argued that this results in women basing their value on appearances and viewing their bodies as objects for consumption (p. 36). This view supports the notion that the enjoyment of sexualization can have negative consequences, suggesting that stripping could potentially have negative consequences as well, given that the profession involves being an object of consumption for economic exchange.

Although the authors state other negative outcomes of self-objectification relating to mental health issues and self-esteem problems, this definition does not consider a person's agency in choosing to be an object of consumption and the sense of power and authority held in such positions. Nor does this study consider race, ethnicity, culturally valued body sizes, and other factors that affect perceptions of oneself and how others may positively view being an object of consumption.

This research addresses these issues by focusing on Black women's agency and empowerment through recreational pole dancing. A Black feminist approach is best exemplified by the Combahee River Collective Manifesto (1986), which centers its commitment to combat major interlocking systems of oppression, like racism, heterosexism, and classism, to create a praxis that analyzes the multiple oppressions of women of color. A Black feminist approach values Black women and recognizes that their oppression is not

only against a patriarchal and male-centered society. By using a Black feminist approach to pole dancing, this study examines pole dancing through an intersectional lens that looks at the multidimensional racial and gendered construction of Black women. In addition, this paper offers a more-nuanced understanding of the relationship between women of color and recreational pole dancing, especially regarding sexual agency and expression. With Black feminist theorizing, these methods are able to “explore how ordinary Black women understand their social condition and by working with and through them to engender their will and agency as a force for social change” in the realm of pole dancing and sexuality (Radford-Hill 2000: xxii).

Methods

In order to recruit research participants, I gave out flyers to nine pole studios within Los Angeles County.¹ Studios were selected based on a website search, where businesses explicitly stated or displayed that they are either a pole studio or have pole dancing classes. Flyers were also shared on social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram.

The original study recruited female participants between the ages of 18 to 45 years of age who resided within Los Angeles County. Participants also had to self-identify as Black or African-American and have been recreationally pole dancing for at least six months. The extended study allowed for the inclusion of any self-identified Black or African-American women within the United States of America that was 18 years or older and had been recreationally pole dancing for six months or longer. Eleven participants participated in the study. Interviews took place over the span of January to February of 2019 from online platforms, including Skype, Zoom, and in-person. Three interviews were conducted in person and eight were done through online video or audio chat. Interviews were between thirty and seventy minutes in duration.

Respondents all self-identified as Black or African-American. Their ages ranged from 23 to 58 years, with most respondents falling within their late twenties and early thirties. Five respondents resided in California, two in Florida, and with the others living in Pennsylvania, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia.

Interested participants had to fill out an online form that was posted on the flyer to confirm their age, how they racially identify, time spent doing pole dancing, and general location. Participants were given the option of using a pseudonym. The form also included information suggesting possible in-person interview times and dates

¹ I received URCA funding for my grant proposal and Human Subjects Approval for this research study.

and an alternative option to do an online interview. The interview was initiated with questions asking why the participant started pole dancing, their favorite part about pole dancing, what pole dancing has offered them, and if their perceptions of the pole have changed over time. My questions then followed more specific topics of race that included whether participants had been treated differently by their race or believed that pole dancing was experienced differently among racial categories. Final questions focused on family perceptions and support of the participant's involvement with pole dancing.

Discussion

The results suggested that eight out of eleven participants felt that their racialized gender affected their relationship to and/or experience of pole dancing. Five participants talked about body size or image during the interview, and some explained that body size played a bigger role than race in their experience with pole dancing. In addition, eight participants reported positive overall receptions of immediate family members to pole dancing. However, two respondents stated that their immediate family did not know, while one had both positive and negative reactions from immediate family members. Several respondents came from conservative, Christian backgrounds or similar religious traditions.

The way in which respondents discussed their relationship to pole dancing suggests that it has become a unique form of healing for Black women. Many respondents expressed that pole dancing did more than just give them confidence or an avenue to express their sexuality, as Holland (2010) and Pellizer et al. (2015) argue, but, rather, acts as a bridge for these women to get in touch with their bodies. For Michelle, a 41-year-old woman who had been dancing for almost one year, the cultural pressures that told her how to view her body are contested by the way in which she viewed pole dancing as a humbling process.

“Having the choice of, okay, are you going to appreciate your body right now today for what it can do? Are you going to be mad that you can't do the thing that the other girl can do it at the next pole over? Um, and so having to make that choice of like, so you can be thankful to your body today and say, oh, thank you for stretching this way and bending this way and doing this thing...I always have to choose to be proud of what my body can do...to keep working on whatever it is, keep connecting...in some ways that like forces me out of the self-hatred, body-hatred

and shame that culture gives us...I can choose to hate myself more. But why? And for what?"

People of different ages come into pole dancing with various physical strength levels and previous backgrounds in dance or gymnastics. Since pole is an activity where competition and ability are measured against oneself rather than against others, pole dancers must learn that they cannot compare themselves to others. The healing and mending of pole dance extend beyond connecting the individual with oneself, but also to one's relation to the world. For Makeda, a 58-year-old pole dancer of eight years, pole dancing revitalized her spirit and connection to the earth:

"Pole dancing has given me my divine feminine-ity back and has heightened it and turned me into a superwoman, a super divine feminine priestess temple goddess. Pole dancing has awakened me to who I am and who I was.... pole dancing has put me in alignment with mother earth because she spins and I spin with her when I'm on the pole...pole dancing is a sacred art. We as women used to gather in temples and dance and move and sing to nurture each other and now we go to pole dance studios and dance studios and we dance and sing and move around to music and nurture each other."

Makeda's notion of healing is understood in relation to the ways that Black women's bodies have been hypersexualized. For all the participants, pole dancing provided confidence and the ability to own their bodies. Given the history of Black women not having agency over their bodies, pole dancing serves to mend this historical wound and restore a sense of power.

Makeda's final remarks offer that pole dancing has also opened her ability to connect with other women. Likewise, other respondents talked about the ways in which pole studios contained pole communities and referred to the community as a family. Moreover, these women built strong friendships with others in their studio and found a space that was encouraging, loving, and safe.²

Contrary to original expectations when designing this project, respondents reported that they received support overall from immediate and or extended family members. Parental reactions ranged from being indifferent to enthusiastic support of their daughter in the form of attending showcases to participating in trying to do

² In this context, I refer to safe as a space that is free of judgement. Interviews did not go into depth on whether participants' studios were co-ed or not. The inclusion or exclusion of men from these spaces may have influenced how participants viewed the space.

a pole trick. Immediate familial support was especially solidified through a parent's responses to other family members' negative reactions. For example, Taylor, a 24-year-old, recalls how her mother quickly responded to family friend's perceptions of her during a phone call:

"This somebody I knew like growing up calls my mom and says, 'what the hell has gotten into your daughter? Um, what does she think she is, a stripper?' My mom, my mom is awesome. She says, 'Are you really calling me asking about my grown daughter's business?'

Taylor's mother continued to express her disapproval of the person's feelings of entitlement to condemn her daughter. Her mother's reply reflected that she not only respected Taylor's maturity and ability to make her own decisions, but also that she did not feel that outsiders should be able to criticize and impose their personal feelings and assumptions on her or her daughter. Even for other families, the parents felt and shared the importance of pole dancing for their daughters. For example, Bree, a 28-year-old pole dancer of over two years, explains her parents support of her pole dancing:

"They're supportive of it. My mom, when we launched the blog [about pole dancing], was like crying and was like saying how like I really changed her perception of pole because she, yeah, she thought of it only one way as well. But like seeing all the work that we've done with the blog and like how much we love it. Like she's like, it's just amazing to her and she's even come to like pole class with me and stuff and then she'll come like if I have like a pole party, like she'll come and then my dad has said, he was like, 'Well I have no choice but to look at it different now cause my daughter is doing it.' So I think even for him, he's like, yeah, like kind of try to see it differently."

Respondents' participation in recreational pole dancing forced some families to change their ways of thinking and viewing pole dancing. As a result, many parents were able to see pole dancing as something more than the dominant image of stripping. This shift in understanding is significant to note among the respondents' fathers because of the sexualized associations of pole dancing to stripping. Fathers, like Bree's dad, negotiated previous beliefs of pole dancing, although many displayed signs of awkwardness

or discomfort over seeing their daughters do more exotic styles of pole dance.

Although a majority the respondents' family members were supportive, three respondents expressed mixed reactions from family members or stated that they had not told their family. Among the respondents who had not told their family or received mixed reactions, many pointed to religion and conservative values as the reason. Evelyn expressed that "pole dancing does not align with Christian values," which accounted for some of the pushback from family. This reasoning coincides with the other two respondents' decision to not share their activities with family members. Especially for Rhea, the role of religion from a West Indian context had created a more intense tension. Out of all respondents, Rhea's family appeared to be the most closely tied to traditional religious values, although other respondents identified their family upbringing as somewhat similar in conservative values.

Even for respondents who do not identify with a religious background, they commented on the role of religion within the Black community. Bree, a non-religious respondent stated:

"Just tradition, culture, society. I mean if you see a Black woman being sexual in the media, it's usually she's in a strip club, she's shaking her ass or she's a hoe or she's getting raped on TV or something like that. So you don't really see a lot of images of like positive sexual representation of Black women expressing themselves, sexually embracing themselves sexually. Then you have culture that tells you pole dancing is devil worship, you know, having sex and demonic, you know, like it's evil. So you have that like cultural side of things. Um, from a traditional standpoint."

In this statement, Bree references Black religious culture. Bree highlights an important point that exists in religious contexts and within Black culture: controlling images of Black women's sexuality within society and the Black community. Within both spheres, Black women's sexuality has been routinely policed and scrutinized if they deviate from respectability politics (White 2001). Even though religion and Black culture continue to express the same sentiment, this cultural expectation did not permeate as deeply into how family members responded to and accepted these women doing pole dancing.

While my research questions were focused on discussions of race, roughly half of the respondents talked about body size and im-

age as being a defining aspect in their pole dance journey. Within the pole community, the presentation of body types doing pole dancing is limited to slender, white bodies. For “curvy girls,” a term expressed by Ebonynitro, a 37-year-old pole dancer of eight years, very few curvy girls are well-known in the pole world and even fewer are instructors or students of pole classes. Both Lana, a 26-year-old pole dancer of two years, and Michelle posed the notion of body type as being a more pressing issue than race. For Michelle, like the other respondents who discussed body size, she found it more challenging to see her body type represented and accommodated for in the studio:

“Maybe even more than race, body type as an issue. Like, I did check before I went to the studio to see if they had any kind of big girls, 'cause I would, I consider myself plus size, um, pretty solidly a size 14, sometimes 16. Um, and so, um, I wanted to know there were big women...but I do get frustrated sometimes because I feel like there isn't an accommodation. I just do my own accommodations being a bigger person. But I sometimes feel like that's not as taken into account... And the way I deal with it is my Instagram feed. Like the people I follow on Instagram, I've basically only follow plussize, women of color, um, and older polers. Those are probably, those are like my main criteria to follow you on it.”

Especially for building a sense of empowerment, seeing one's body type represented in class and online is important. However, large women are largely underrepresented. Images of women in the pole industry typically promote young, slim, athletic/muscular white women. This marginalizes women of color and women of various body types from being represented in pole dancing, which many women contend is troubling. Despite this setback, women like Michelle have creatively made new ways to see themselves represented in the pole community by using social media filtering. Other respondents had also filtered their social media accounts so that only pole dancers that represented their body type, age, and race could be accessible. This filtering out process resists dominant images and, instead, creates an alternative vision of what pole dancing may look like for these women. Going further, Makeda, Bree, and Evelyn, have all taken agency and contributed to re-visioning pole dancing through hashtags, blogs, and Instagram pages that are meant for Black women. By moving beyond online spaces that are dominated by one image of pole dancers, these women have made new spaces for Black women and other

groups of pole dancers to feel empowered by building a community that represents and reflects them.

Conclusion

My results contradicted my original expectation that family receptions to pole dancing would be negative. Academic literature has supported views of the conservative Black family, especially in relation to the “politics of respectability”, a term coined in 1993 by Afro-American Studies Professor, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, to talk about Black women’s occupation with preserving respectability within the race. Historian E. Frances White (2001) talks about Higginbotham’s analysis of the politics of respectability as an explanation for the notion that a “politically active woman was consonant with a respectable black woman; it was her duty to uplift the race” (p. 36).



Image 1: Here is a visual example of empowerment from pole dancing by Ebonynitro, one of this study’s participants.

With the Black family being intrinsically tied to the values expressed by Black churches, respectability politics hold Black women accountable to resist behaviors and actions that may perpetuate negative racial stereotypes. Other literature also assumes that the display and objectification of Black women’s bodies in strip clubs and rap videos means that “Black women [have] allowed the white women to be the opposite: Black ‘whores’ make white ‘virgin’ possible” (Collins 1990: 176). Since pole dancing is oftentimes seen as stripping, it becomes problematic for those who attempt do recreational pole dancing. Although some respondents had family members who held a “white gaze” over others within the

family to deter and oppose so-called deviant behavior that would hurt "the race," many parents did not hold onto this view.

Furthermore, my findings support my expectation that women would discuss positive aspects of pole dancing around the enjoyment of sexualization theory. The positive aspects for the Black women in this study extend beyond the ones stated by Pellizzer et al. (2016). In fact, the benefits to self-sexualizing behaviors tap into what Black feminist Audre Lorde (1978) calls "the erotic" (p. 87). "The erotic" refers to a "resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feelings" (Lorde 1978: 87). For Black female pole dancers, pole dancing has given women the opportunity to access "the erotic" and empower themselves from a strength held within.

As a result, participants gained not only confidence, but also the opportunity to mend the severed gap between their "erotic" and their body and begin the healing process of the body through pole dancing. My findings are significant to developing a more nuanced understanding of pole dancing and the potential benefits that it offers for Black women and other women of color. This study contributes to research on recreational pole dancing by extending it to include discussions of race and embodiment in relation to women's experiences with pole dancing.

Future research should explore how pole dancing affects other women of color, queer people, and men. Since pole dancing has attachments to femininity, further research should explore how men and queer people navigate masculinity and/or femininity in these spaces. Women of color, queer people, and men are all sexualized in different ways, which may influence their experience to pole dancing.

In conclusion, pole dancing is more than a "little dance" meant to entertain others. My research is important because of its contribution to race in discussions of sexuality and sexual liberation for women with pole dancing. The pole has previously symbolized Black women's economic status, sexual aggression and objectification, and moral status. Today, pole dancing has become a reinvigoration for Black women to have sexual agency and to embrace their bodies. Throughout time, Black women's bodies have been reduced to sexual objects for exploitation and consumption.

As a form of resistance to this controlling image of Black female sexuality and their bodies, Black women have reclaimed the pole to serve a new function. Pole dancing has become a way for Black bodies to be a representation of power, of confidence, and of healing. Black women have used pole dancing to create

a new image of the Black women-one of beauty, self-love and inner-strength.

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About the Author

Brianna Robinson is an undergraduate student at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) majoring in Sociology with a minor in Feminist Studies. I will graduate in spring 2019 and plan on possibly pursuing a master's degree in public policy or law. I have been doing pole dancing for over a year and hope that this research helps to dissipate stereotypes and presumptions of pole dancing. As a Black woman, I did this research because I had done a paper over summer on pole dancing and could only find research on Black strippers, but not Black pole dancers. This research serves to see myself and others like me represented in academic literature and expand perceptions of Black women being only strippers.

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