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THE PRACTICE OF POLE DANCE AS A LEISURE ACTIVITY IN DENMARK

Andorra Jensen

Abstract: The aim of this study is to explore the how pole dance is practiced as a form of leisure activity in Denmark. The methodical approach is qualitative and inspired by ethnography. I have conducted a field study where I have observed and participated in the pole dance culture in Copenhagen from May to October 2014. Furthermore, I have conducted five interviews with pole studio owners and 14 shorter interviews with pole dancers.

The study showed that the pole dance culture is complex; there is more than one way to practice pole dance both in terms of movements, attire, and attitude. This article addresses the difference between a focus on dance and a focus on tricks in pole dancing as well as it examines the different opinions pole studio owners have concerning ‘sexiness’ in pole dance and how this affects the way pole dance is practiced.

Keywords: Pole Dance, Denmark, Copenhagen, Leisure, Ethnography, Spradley, Aesthetics

Pole dance as a research area is a fairly new field of study, and not much research has been done on pole dance as a form of leisure activity. No research has been done in a Scandinavian context, which is why I set out to study pole dance in Copenhagen, the capitol of Denmark, where it has been possible to do pole dance as a form of leisure activity since around 2007. The research was conducted for my Master’s Thesis,¹ and this article is a reworking of some of my findings. As there was not a lot of prior research to build on, the study started with a very open focus on trying to describe and understand the practice of pole dance as a form of exercise/leisure activity. During the process of analysis several interesting themes emerged, and this article deals with the different ways in which pole dance as leisure activity is practiced.

Background

Previous peer-reviewed research on pole dance as a leisure activity has primarily been conducted in the United Kingdom and Australia.² Non peer-reviewed research has also been

¹ Andorra Lynn Jensen, *Pole Dance in Denmark—Body, Gender, and Culture*, (Master’s thesis, University of Copenhagen, 2015).

² Samantha Holland, “Preparation and Determination: Three Vignettes of Gendered Leisure,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 18, no. 1, 2009, 35–45; Kally Whitehead and Tim Kurz, “‘Empowerment’ and the Pole: A Discursive Investigation of the Reinvention of Pole Dancing as a Recreational Activity,” *Feminism & Psychology* 19, no. 2, 2009, 224–44. Samantha Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Kerry Louise Allen, “Poles Apart? Women Negotiation Femininity and Feminism in the Fitness Pole Dancing Class,” (PhD diss., University

carried out in the USA and Canada.³ All of the peer-reviewed literature on pole dance was published between 2009-2011,^{4,5} and as this research was carried out almost simultaneously, there is not a high degree of intertextuality.

Researchers have found that pole dance, which used to be something only practiced by strippers in strip clubs, started becoming a mainstream form of leisure activity from around 2003, particularly in the western world and especially for women.⁶ Pole dance as a form of exercise and/or leisure activity is described as a form of grassroots movement run by women for women,⁷ and is thus not run as a business run by large corporations, as many other forms of leisure and exercise activities. The participants are typically in their 20's and 30's, but studies include pole dancers ranging from 15-55 years.⁸

Researchers Samantha Holland and Feona Attwood define pole dance as follows: "Pole dancing is a form of erotic performance composed of a series of spins, climbs and other moves around a vertical pole which is attached to floor and ceiling".⁹ Not everyone agrees with this definition. Firstly, Holland herself in a later publication writes that the image of pole dance is changing towards being more athletic instead of sexual.¹⁰ Secondly, other researchers describe pole dance as a form of exercise, which is not performance based,¹¹ and which is not done in front of an audience.¹² Yet while poledance does have something performative inherent in the movements, which running or fitness doesn't,¹³ the actual training is not glamorous, according to Holland; she describes a pole class as being a room full of sweaty women who curse and laugh and give deep sighs of exhaustion.¹⁴

of Nottingham, 2011); Ngairé Donaghue, Tim Kurz and Kally Whitehead, "Spinning the Pole: A Discursive Analysis of the Websites of Recreational Pole Dancing Studios," *Feminism & Psychology* 21, no. 4, 2011, 443–57.

³ Donna Killingbeck and Chadd Powell, "Poles Apart: Pole Dancing Gone Mainstream", in *Conference Papers - American Society of Criminology Annual Meeting*, 2006, 1-1; Oralia Gómez-Ramírez, "Swinging around the pole: sexuality, fitness, and stripper stigma in erotic dancing," (Master's thesis, The University of British Columbia, 2007); Meghan Hamilton, "The Poles are in: Exploring Women's Sexual Identities and the Rising Popularity of Pole-dancing Fitness," (Master's thesis, The University of Guelph, 2009); Samantha Holland and Feona Attwood, "Chapter 10. Keeping Fit in 6" Heels: The Mainstreaming of Pole Dancing." In *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 165–81; Jacenta Bahri, "'Fun, Fitness, Fantasy': Consuming Pole Dancing Classes as an 'Empowering' Gendered Leisure Practice," *Journal of the University of Manitoba Anthropology Students' Association*, 30, 2012, 1–11; Louise Owen, "'Work That Body': Precarity and Femininity in the New Economy," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56, no. 4, 2012, 78–94.

⁴ With the exception of an article from Japan from 2013, which is not used in this study, as the cultural context as well as scope of the article is too far from the focus of this article. Joshua Paul Dale, "The Future of Pole Dance," *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* 2, no. 3, 2013, 381–96.

⁵ The non-peer reviewed literature was published between 2006 and 2012.

⁶ Holland and Attwood, "Chapter 10. Keeping Fit in 6" Heels"; Killingbeck and Powell, "Poles Apart"; Owen, "'Work That Body'"; Whitehead and Kurz, "'Empowerment' and the Pole".

⁷ Owen, "'Work That Body'".

⁸ Allen, "Poles Apart? Women Negotiation Femininity and Feminism"; Gómez-Ramírez, "Swinging Around the Pole"; Hamilton, "The Poles are in"; Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*; Holland and Attwood, "Chapter 10. Keeping Fit in 6" Heels".

⁹ Holland and Attwood, "Chapter 10. Keeping Fit in 6" Heels", 165.

¹⁰ Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*.

¹¹ Hamilton, "The Poles are in".

¹² Donaghue, Kurz and Whitehead, "Spinning the Pole".

¹³ Whitehead and Kurz, "'Empowerment' and the Pole".

¹⁴ Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*.

According to Holland and Attwood, poledance is frowned upon by many due to its origin in the strip club environment, but many have attempted to rebrand poledance, for example by branding it as a form of fitness. Some pole dancers are even trying to get pole dance accepted as an Olympic discipline.¹⁵ This effort seems to some extent to have succeeded, as they also find that pole dance is becoming increasingly accepted as a form of exercise/leisure activity.¹⁶ Yet, the issue is discussed in all of the research on pole dance, and the literature presents several parameters on which pole dance as a leisure activity differs from pole dance in a strip club: 1) When training pole dance as a leisure activity the clothes stay on,¹⁷ 2) It is a leisure activity and not a job - the pole dancers pay to train, they don't get paid to dance,¹⁸ and 3) The pole dancers dance for their own pleasure, not for an audience.¹⁹

Both Kerry Louise Allen, Oralia Gómez-Ramírez, and Holland find that there are different ways of practicing pole dance as a leisure activity, represented by different attires (including shoes) and different content/structure of the classes.²⁰ Holland describes an analytical division in two versions of pole dance: *pole dance* and *pole exercise*, where pole dance is more inspired by strip tease with feather boas and high heels, and pole exercise takes place bare foot and it takes a high degree of distance to the origins of pole dance.²¹ Gómez-Ramírez describes a similar distinction between *erotic/sensual pole dance* and *pole fitness*, but she also points out that these two do not necessarily exclude one another.²²

Methods

Hermeneutics

The epistemological standpoint of this study is hermeneutical. Hermeneutics means interpretation. This study uses the hermeneutic circle, which implies that understanding demands an interaction between the parts and the whole, where the parts can only be understood in light of the whole and vice versa.²³ The circling movement takes place between the researcher and the object (e.g. the observation or interviewee), and meaning is created in the meeting between the two and can only be understood in the light of the researcher's own context and situation.²⁴ Therefore, as a researcher I play an active role in the research process and thus it is important to mention my pre-understanding of the field, as this is my framework for understanding and interpreting the empirical material. In qualitative research it is never possible to intercept all details of the explored, and my pre-understanding has guided me in the selection of material both during the collection and analysis of it.²⁵

¹⁵ Ibid.; Holland and Attwood, "Chapter 10. Keeping Fit in 6" Heels".

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Bahri, "'Fun, Fitness, Fantasy'"; Gómez-Ramírez, "Swinging Around the Pole".

¹⁸ Hamilton, "The Poles are in"; Whitehead and Kurz, "'Empowerment' and the Pole".

¹⁹ Donaghue, Kurz and Whitehead, "Spinning the Pole"; Hamilton, "The Poles are in".

²⁰ Allen, "Poles Apart?"; Bahri, "'Fun, Fitness, Fantasy'"; Gómez-Ramírez, "Swinging Around the Pole"; Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*.

²¹ Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*.

²² Bahri, "'Fun, Fitness, Fantasy'".

²³ Norman Denzin, *On Understanding Emotion*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984).

²⁴ Ibid.; Henriette Højberg, "Kapitel 9: Hermeneutik". In *Videnskabsteori i Samfundsvidenskaberne. På Tværs af Fagkulturer og Paradigmer*, (Roskilde: Roskilde Universitetsforlag, 2004), 207–32.

²⁵ Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz and Linda Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy, *The Cultural Experience, Ethnography in Complex Society* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1972).

Pre-understanding

Prior to the study I had tried pole dance at a few pole studios in Copenhagen, but I had not trained regularly, and my knowledge of the culture was on a superficial level. My background in gymnastics and dance made me curious to try pole dance as I was already familiar with working with an apparatus and dancing to music and felt I had a suitable bodily foundation of strength, balance, bodily awareness, and sense of rhythm. I recognized the aesthetic to be similar to gymnastics and dance (for example in regard to the straight lines of the body, the pointed toes, and the expression of effortlessness).

A cultural insight may, according to Lars Tore Ronglan, be an advantage for the researcher, especially in a context of physical activity, where it is possible to share bodily experiences with the observed.²⁶ I experienced this both in terms of easier access to the interviewees and observations, more meaningful communication with the participants, and more precise interpretations of the observations. It was especially helpful in the interviews, where the studio owners opened up to me and elaborated more in detail because they assumed I understood, and they knew I had tried it on my own body.

Ethnography—A Field Study

My research design was inspired by James P. Spradley's classic ethnographic methods, which is why I have done a field study using a combination of observations and interviews.²⁷ The field I emerged myself in was the pole dance culture in Copenhagen. From May to October 2014 I did field work in six pole studios. I chose to visit several studios instead of focusing on one based on my experience with pole dance, which told me there was a difference in how the studios practiced pole dance. The fieldwork consisted of participating in and observing pole classes and the activities in the studio before and after class, formal and informal conversations and interviews with participants, instructors and studio owners, as well as following the studios on Facebook and their web pages.

The selection of pole studios to visit was made partly based on my prior knowledge and a professional estimate based on their web sites and partly based on availability.²⁸ At the beginning of my study, eight pole studios offered pole dance classes in Copenhagen. Two studios closed during my study while another opened. The pole studios have all been anonymized.

Observations

As an observer my role ranged from *passive participation* to *complete participation*.²⁹ Due to my own age and gender (I am a woman, mid-twenties), I had easy access to the field

²⁶ Lars Tore Ronglan, "Kapitel 3. Idrætsforskerens Engagement: Om Hvordan man Arbejder sig "ind og ud af Feltet"". In *Metoder i Idrætsforskning* (København: Munksgaard, 2013), 38–55.

²⁷ Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*; Spradley, *Participant Observation*.

²⁸ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design. Choosing Among Five Approaches*, (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2013).

²⁹ Spradley defines five levels of participation when observing: *non-participation* (the observer has no contact with the observed), *passive participation* (the observer has only a minimal amount of interaction with the observed), *moderate participation* (the observer balances between being an insider and an outsider in the

and the role as *active participant*, where I took part in the classes alongside the others. This was very beneficial as this is how I disturbed the least and got the closest to the participants and their experiences.

Interviews

My primary informants were the pole studio owners. The reason I chose them was because they have comprehensive knowledge of the activity and the participants and they are deeply involved in the culture and have been so for a while.³⁰ All the studio owners are still active as pole dancers and/or instructors. They actively take part in shaping the pole dance culture in light of the way they run their studios, which is why I chose to interview them. I interviewed five studio owners (the last one didn't have time) – all women between the ages of 29 and 36.

I also did shorter interviews with 14 participants (some of which turned out to also be instructors) from four of the studios. All but one of the participants were women, their ages ranged from 21 to 41, and their experience with pole dance ranged from three weeks to five years. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and all informants are anonymized. The interviews were semi-structured and the themes discussed were inspired by observations as well as my pre-understanding of the field.³¹

Strategy of Analysis

As the study started with a fairly open question, the empirical material guided my research.³² I started analyzing whilst collecting empirical material, and this continuously expanding horizon triggered new questions, which led the process forward.³³ In my analysis of the empirical material I used *coding*, which is assigning a key word or phrase to a segment of the empirical material in order to group together text with the same theme.³⁴ Based on my initial coding I wrote a “clean” ethnographic description without analysis, as suggested by John W. Creswell and Spradley.³⁵ Based on this description, as well as discussions with peers and theoretical considerations, several themes were chosen for further examination. Using the hermeneutical method – alternating between a focus on the whole and the parts – the process of analysis was also guided by creativity, intuition, and qualified assumptions.³⁶ The themes presented in this article only represent a small part of the total study and are based on the codes concerning comparing the pole studios and dealing with prejudice against pole dance.

culture), *active participation* (the observer becomes part of the group), and *complete participation* (the observer observes in an environment where he or she is already a part of the culture). Spradley, *Participant Observation*, 58-61.

³⁰ Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*.

³¹ Lene Tanggaard and Svend Brinkmann, “Interviewet: Samtalen som Forskningsmetode”. In *Kvalitative metoder. En Grundbog* (København: Hans Reitzel, 2010), 29–54; Lone Friis Thing and Laila Susanne Ottesen, “Kapitel 4. Det Individuelle Kvalitative Interview”. In *Metoder i Idrætsforskning* (København: Munksgaard, 2013), 74–89.

³² Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*.

³³ Spradley and McCurdy, *The Cultural Experience*.

³⁴ Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013).

³⁵ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*; Spradley, *Participant Observation*.

³⁶ Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*; Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*; Søren Kristiansen and Hanne Kathrine Krogstrup, *Deltagende Observation. Introduktion til en Forskningsmetodik* (København: Hans Reitzel, 1999)

Findings

Not unlike Allen, Gómez-Ramírez, and Holland,³⁷ I found that there are different ways of practicing pole dance. First I will present two parameters in regard to the practice of poledance, which emerged during the analysis of the empirical material. These two parameters stood out as being important to the pole dance culture in Copenhagen. The first parameter deals with the main focus of the actual training – is the focus on tricks or on dance? The second parameter deals with the relation between pole dance and its roots in the strip club environment – do the pole studios distance themselves from the strip club image or embrace it? Afterwards, I will discuss how these findings can be used to help classify and understand the different ways of practicing pole dance and also which consequences the different opinions of pole dance within the pole dance culture itself may have.

Pole Dance versus Pole Tricks

The pole classes I have observed and participated in have mostly had a focus on learning tricks, but there are also classes that focus on the element of dance. There is a big difference between the two in regard to purpose, feeling, and atmosphere. In the dance classes, pole dance is about expression, presence, feeling the movement, and daring to let the body express itself – as opposed to in the trick classes where the focus is on daring to do a dangerous move, which involves a physical risk. The balance between the two – tricks and dance – is a hot topic in the pole dance culture, both in Denmark and internationally. It's both a matter of how to train, but perhaps especially about how to perform poledance, which is indicated by the following quote from Studio Owner C: "I would ten times rather see someone who maybe hasn't done pole for very long but has found some creative, beautiful, graceful angle to it and does a few simple tricks that are stunningly beautiful than I want to see some Russian gymnast – not that there is anything wrong with gymnasts, but who does 'Chinese pole' and does a thousand strength based tricks in a row. I don't know, my eyes get like tired - it doesn't do anything for me."

On the 6th of December 2014 Alex Shchukin, an international pole dance star, posted a blog post titled: "How to Break Your Neck and Have no Result,"³⁸ where he voices his opinion that there is too much focus on doing as many tricks as possible and that dance and expression are not prioritized in pole dance competitions. The post was shared on Facebook by several studio owners from Copenhagen with positive comments. It is a subject, which the pole dancers and studio owners have different opinions on, and the balance between tricks and dance varies in the studios I have visited.

Focus on Tricks

Half of the studios I visited seemed to primarily focus on trick based pole dance classes. The studio perhaps most committed to this is Studio A, which primarily offers trick based classes. They only offer one pole dance (choreography) class a week. The studio owner's

³⁷ Allen, "Poles Apart?"; Bahri, "Fun, Fitness, Fantasy"; Gómez-Ramírez, "Swinging Around the Pole"; Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*.

³⁸ Alex Shchukin, "How to Break Your Neck and Have no Result." <http://alexshchukin.com/index.php/en/articles/item/261-how-to-break-your-neck>. Site accessed 5 August 2015.

experience is that dance is not so popular among her students: "People are afraid to dance down here – I think it's because our marketing is so centered on the fitness aspects, so the girls we have attracted don't really like dancing that much." But even though dance doesn't have a high priority in Studio A, and the students are not so interested in it, Studio Owner A tells me that the dance elements (e.g. pirouettes) and the smooth transitions between tricks is something that is practiced in the trick based classes.

Studio B, like Studio A, has a focus on the strength based tricks, but they offer a few pole choreography classes each week. I did not interview Studio Owner E, but their online schedule shows that they only offer one choreography class a week, similar to Studio A. But also like Studio A - and maybe even to a greater extent (based on my observations) – dance is a part of the trick based classes, especially on the higher level classes, which their website also reveals in the description of the trick based classes: "Here we will also focus on the ability to 'dance your tricks'. This means learning the tricks in a combined flow with transitions to music. We will also practice improvising to a whole song as well as learning to do tricks on counts. But this is a trick based class – not a dance class" (Studio E, website).

So even though the students may not actively choose the dance element at Studios A, B and E, the studio owners prioritize that dance is part of the training. This fits well with a statement from Studio Owner D, who experiences that even those who distance themselves from the feminine, sensual, and dancing expression in pole dance have become aware of what role the dance element has for the complete aesthetical expression in pole dance: "It is changing again – people have realized that what is actually cool and looks good is to connect the tricks, so they have returned somewhat to dancing because even those fitness-girls have found out that one thing is being able to do tricks on the pole, but it is actually also about the flow – and suddenly they were all talking about flow, and I was like: "But" (laughs)."

Focus on Dance

Studio Owners C, D, and F are all personally very passionate about the dance element of pole dance. Studio Owner D is very fond of dancing and lets the other instructors take care of teaching the tricks: "I've almost never taught any of those technique classes – well a couple, but I always end up dancing anyway. So we have our sporty spice to take care of those classes." She also categorizes herself as "artistic ... where it is more about dancing and the dance expression," and she says that her concept is "not so much a fitness pole concept as it is a dance studio – we care about the dance." Furthermore, she explains how flow and transitions are important to her:

It's something that I have gotten a lot of comments about, and of course it depends a lot on which studio you train at, but a lot of them are very sports oriented; they don't teach the landings, they do a trick, down, boom, and they don't go properly into or out of the different tricks and that's something I have gotten a lot of comments about. People are like "wow" because when it comes to the transitions, it is important to me that it is all organic and that's because I have a background in dance and have danced on stage and it all needs to look good, so that's a thing that is very important to me – that there is flow in everything they do from the beginning.

Studio Owner C also feels that dance is the most important part of pole dance: "For me it's a pole dance thing and not a pole fitness thing, definitely, when it comes to prioritizing." She believes that if you "dare to go out of your comfort zone, then you have the possibility to grow a lot," and explains further: "I believe that you can really feel when you are truly present, that's when you move forward." She also realizes that not everyone enjoys training like that: "They say: 'That whole dance thing, that's not really me', because suddenly it gets too close and very naked and very like you have to produce something yourself. It is easier when someone tells you: 'Four of those and do this figure and that', and that's just fine, and sometimes I also need to train like that, but if you are going to be creative and feel that thing, which I think it feels like when it is most awesome, then it has to be something that is not as controlled."

Studio Owner F, who feels that her studio is "founded more in a modern dance approach," shares Studio Owner C's opinion about the special qualities of dance: "F: And we focus on dance more than fitness and that's why I employ more and more dance teachers. I: Why has it changed? F: Because it's what interests me the most and that's where I can see that I can move people the most."

Pole Dance is Both Dance and Tricks

The quotes above taken into consideration it is not strange that several studio owners describe pole dance as "a combination of acrobatics and dance" (Studio Owner D). Pole dance consists of both dance and tricks, and it seems that it is difficult to completely separate the two. The question then becomes: How is the balance between them? While the studio owners' opinions on the matter is one thing, another thing is the interests of the students. It seems that different kinds of pole classes attract different kinds of students, as Studio Owner D explains: "But of course, the sporty classes attract the more 'umph' girls who just want to rumble and aren't afraid to get bruises, while the choreography classes may attract the girls who don't really like getting bruises and who don't think it's awesome to climb around a lot on the pole, but still want to be hot and learn to twirls around it, and then there are all those in between, you know." So it is also a question of different interests; different people are attracted to different qualities of pole dance and are looking for different outcomes. Some may be interested in the self development dance is said to cultivate, while others are motivated by the concrete goals and the adrenalin kick the trick based training offers.

Sportified versus Sexualized Pole Dance

Another parameter where the practice of and attitude towards pole dance differs is when it comes to the sexy elements of pole dance. Like Gómez-Ramírez and Holland,³⁹ I found two distinct opposite opinions on what pole dance is and should be in regard to this matter. One opinion is that pole dance is inherently sexy and feminine, while another group wishes to desexualize pole dance, thus creating distance from the image of a pole dancing stripper, and they do this by emphasizing that pole dance is a type of sport or fitness. These two opinions can be seen as different ways of managing the stigma against pole dance, which I, in line with the international research, found that pole dancers in Denmark also experience to some extent.

³⁹ Gómez-Ramírez, "Swinging Around the Pole"; Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*.

Sportified Pole Dance

The term *sportification*, might not be the most accurate, as it covers turning something into a sport, and while some people are working on getting pole dance into the Olympic Games, others rely more on positioning pole dance as a type of fitness or exercise. Studio Owner C explains the tendency I have observed in both pole dancers and studio owners: "Of course, the more prejudice people have towards it, the more one has the need to call it training or sport." For example, Studio Owner A uses the term sports pole dance: "Sports pole dance is what we call it, also because people are so prejudiced against it, as you know, so it's just nice to have something which puts a label on it, like listen up, it's acrobatics and it's hard work, and it's not just – we turn it into a workout."

Studio Owner B generally uses the term *pole fitness*, and she draws on other forms of training on bars to legitimize pole dance: "So I'm the type who says: 'This is what you think and it's what everyone associates it with, but that's not what I want you to see'. So I like being contrary, and I want to explain that if you've seen all this 'bastard bars' and 'crossfitting' and so on, where you work on bars, whether it's outdoors in Miami on those – yeah they are called bars, well this is just a vertical bar. So it's many of the same tricks, many of the same things that you have from there, and then you just have all the feminine stuff as well."

While drawing on associations to sport or fitness is a way of legitimizing pole dance, it is also an attempt at getting people to understand that it is "hard work", like Studio Owner A says. They try to get people to see pole dance from their perspective and understand how they experience it – as being no different than a tough workout at a crossfit gym or a gymnastic practice.

Another element of this parameter concerns the use of high heels, as they to many are a symbol, which is associated with the strip club. Both Studios A and B completely ban training in high heels. Studio Owner A explains that it has something to do with their attempt to disassociate pole dance from strip tease: "What we do differently is the signal we send – marketing and all that. We don't want to be associated with strip and our policy is that there are no heel classes here; there has never been, and there never will be. I think most studios have tried it, but it's not going to happen here. We are very focused on it being a sport and that's what we communicate on our website and via the pictures we use." Like Studio Owner A, Studio Owner B also bans heels with the hope to change the common view of pole dance: "For example stilettos and stuff like that, I don't want it. Many places offer classes with heels, and I think that's fine, and it's very common when we go out to perform, people will say: 'We want that'. I usually refuse to dance in heels because I want to move away from that view on pole dance." Studio C doesn't allow heels either, but the reason for this is only practical – it has to do with not ruining the floors.

Sexualized Pole Dance

As opposed to the opinion described above is a group of people who believe that you neither can nor should separate pole dance from the sexual, sensual, and feminine, and they believe that women have the right to feel and express sexiness. Studio Owner C explains: "But also because sometimes, especially in those flow classes and dance classes, you do some movements that are erotic, and they just are, and they are supposed to be, and they are allowed

to be.... The women who come here, they should be able to feel like women. They should be able to feel sexy and everything.... I think it's a woman thing, it is a beautiful thing, and it's an expression thing, and it's sexy, well, yeah."

Studio Owner D, like Studio Owner C, feels that poledance is "sensual" and "feminine" and believes that it is not possible to disassociate pole dance from its origin in strip clubs and that you should "call a spade a spade". She points out that in practice it is hard to separate pole dance from its sensual and erotic elements: "That's why I think it is important to be real about what it is, and if you try to distance yourself from it, well then you must also take a look at what am I actually doing on this pole, you know. It's not just a question of not strutting with your behind or not putting on high heels. It also has something to do with the things you actually do on the pole. Many of the tricks are actually sensual or erotic in some way, and you might not even realize when they are taken out of context."

Studio Owner F also doesn't disassociate pole dance from its roots in the strip club environment, on the contrary she says: "I think we should honor the great work they have done." She does say that she is personally not that interested in the sensual part of pole dance, but her instructors are welcome to teach it, and they also offer a *chair dance* class, which involves sexy dancing on chairs.

None of the studios I have visited engage in the sexual side of pole dance as much as Studio G, which I did not get to visit. This is very clear in their online communication, and one pole dancer who was a student there for a short while explains: "It turns out that at Studio G they have a concept where you only dance in high heels and with the poles on spin, and in addition to this their style of dance is extremely 'traditional pole dance', which means it is ... very sexy, so I got to truly experience what it was like to do 'stripper pole dance', and I really didn't like it. It was extremely over my boundaries even though I had done pole dance for a while at the time. I just didn't like it. And all the girls were like 'Yeah, let's be naughty', and the girls who sought out this environment were different from what I was used to" (Student X1).

As mentioned above, the use of high heels in the classes is linked to the attitude towards sexiness in pole dance. In Studio G they train only in high heels, which is not the case in any of the studios I visited. Studio E is the studio of those I have visited, which seems to have the most positive attitude towards high heels. They often post pictures on their Facebook page of the owner and instructors in heels, and they used to have a specific heels class, which they don't offer currently, but the instructors often encourage the students to bring heels to class, even though very few actually do. In Studio D they try on heels the last two classes of every 8 week course, just to try it, as Studio Owner D explains: "They try to put on high heels and stuff like that, but it's not something we use every day. They think it's fun to put them on for a little while, but it's not how we promote our studio." Even though Pole Studio D is the studio of those I've visited, who to the greatest extent represents the sexualized version of pole dance, the owner still says that training in high heels is not something they use in their promotion. Studio F allows heels, and a few years back they offered heel classes, but during my observations I didn't see or hear any mention of heels in the studio, on their website or on their Facebook page, and their website states "we train barefoot."

Comparing Pole Studios

In order to understand the way pole dance is practiced, I have compared the pole studios taking into consideration both above mentioned parameters, and this shows that there to some extent is a connection between the studio owners' opinions on the two matters. Studio Owner D suggests that there is a connection between some pole studios' wishes to distance themselves from the strip club environment and the way they don't allow high heels and don't focus on dance: "Many people have just completely dissociated themselves from where it came from and gone completely into fitness mode and don't allow any dancing and they just about burned anything related to high heels." The two studios that match Studio Owner D's description the most are Studios A and B, who both distance themselves from strip tease, ban high heels, and focus on sport and fitness, both discursively but also in the actual practice by offering primarily trick based classes and only one or two dance classes a week. Opposed to this are Studio Owner D and Studio Owner C, who both feel that pole dance has an inherent sensuality and both of these studio owners are personally very interested in teaching the dance element of pole dance. These descriptions fit well with the previous literature on pole dance, which suggests that there are two main genres in pole dance: one genre, which focuses on dance and a sexy expression, and one which focuses on fitness/exercise and works to disassociate pole dance from its strip club image.⁴⁰ But as it often is with analytical categorizations, the reality doesn't always fit nicely into them. While their opinion on the two matters are connected in some studios, other studio owners seem to be of one opinion on one parameter and another on the other. For example Studio E that focuses mostly on trick based classes, but during my observations I saw the instructors encourage sexy dancing in the classes, and they also offer sexy chair dance classes. In Studio F the focus is both on tricks and on dance, and while the studio owner herself isn't interested in the sensual aspects of pole dance, she allows her instructors to teach it, and she appreciates the origins of pole dance.

Two or Three Genres in Pole Dance?

The closer examination of the individual studios above goes to show that the dualistic model of understanding pole dance may be too simple. This notion is also supported by the studio owners' view of the different genres of pole dance. Studio Owners F and D give similar descriptions of the types of pole studios in Copenhagen. Studio Owner F suggests: "I know that some studios have a sporty approach, very fitness, not so much dancing. Some have what I would call a more classis pole dance approach with high heels and strutting the ass and all that. And I think we are funded more on a modern dance approach, more unconventional." Studio Owner D gives a similar description: "Well I would say there are three groups: There is the sporty type, ... who completely distances her/himself from everything [related to strip tease], and they are sports women and men who purely do tricks on the pole Then there is the artistic type ..., where the focus is on dancing and the dance expression, and then we have – I don't now how to say this in a nice way, but uhm, then we have all the stripper wannabes who go all out in latex and leather." These descriptions suggest that a model containing three overall

⁴⁰ Gómez-Ramírez, "Swinging Around the Pole"; Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*.

genres of pole dance would be more fitting: pole dance as a form of *sport/fitness*, as a form of *dance/art*, or as “*classic*”/*sexy pole dance*. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

Two genres	Fitness pole dance		Sexy pole dance
Three genres	Pole dance as fitness/sport	Pole dance as art/dance	“Classic”/sexy pole dance

Figure 1: The division of pole dance in respectively two and three genres.

The descriptions above create a distinction between an artistic form of dance and a more strip tease inspired form of dance. In making this distinction there also seems to be a distancing from the sexy version of pole dance, which is interesting, considering that both Studio Owners D and F have expressed positive attitudes towards the strip club origins of pole dance, and that Studio D in the former categorization would fall under the sexualized version of pole dance because they focus on dance and embrace the sensuality in pole dance. This model, then, adds a nuance and the categorizations come closer to the self-perception of several of the studio owners I have interviewed – e.g. studios C, D and F which did not really fit into the two previously presented categories, but the owners describe their studios as fitting into the category *pole dance as art/dance*. These categories are, of course, still only an analytical framework based on the overall “vibe” or “brand” of the studios. While some studios fit the model very well, others may combine the different genres of pole dance in one studio. The most prominent example of this in the study being Studio E that primarily offers trick based classes, but also in some classes encourages high heels and sexy moves.

Discussion

The analysis above reveals that pole dance can be practiced in many ways and the pole dance culture is complex and multi-layered. The way pole dance is practiced is affected by many aspects, some of which I have only touched lightly upon above, but will elaborate further on in the following, where some of the consequences of the different ways of practicing pole dance will also be discussed.

Dance versus Tricks—A Matter of Aesthetic Preference

The matter of the balance between dance and tricks, which greatly influences the way pole dance is practiced, can be said to be a matter of aesthetic preference. When Studio Owner C above states that she prefers a performance, which is graceful and expresses something, over someone doing “a thousand strength based tricks in a row,” she really highlights the two opposite opinions. She also indicates that the studio owners’ aesthetic preferences are based on the performance of pole dance; the way they believe pole dance should be performed affects the way pole dance is practiced in their studio. This may seem strange to point out, but there is a reason why this is worth considering. This reason has something to do with the students’ motivation. In my study I have found, like several of the other previous studies,⁴¹ that pole dance is primarily practiced for the sake of the practice. Only very few of the pole dancers in Denmark take part in competitions or perform; the vast majority only train for their own sake

⁴¹ Donaghue, Kurz and Whitehead, “Spinning the Pole”; Hamilton, “The Poles are in”.

and never perform in front of an audience. This may indicate a gap between the studio owners' and the students' preferences.

Most of the studio owners I met with mentioned that it's difficult to make ends meet when running a studio, and several of them have other jobs on the side. This may also play into the way pole dance is practiced, as the studio owners are running a business that needs to at least break even, and thus must cater to their students', or rather customers', wishes. Many of them ask their students about their wishes in regard to the pole dance practice and adapt the schedule accordingly. This brings up a question, which it would be interesting to explore further, about how they balance their own beliefs of how pole dance should be practiced with the preferences of their students/customers.

The matter of aesthetic preference affects the way pole dance is practiced, but this debate takes place within the pole dance culture itself. The matters are complicated further, when the rest of the world's view on pole dance is taken into consideration.

Sexualized versus Sportified Pole Dance—External Prejudice and Internal Conflict

The previous research on pole dance shows that many people associate pole dance with strip clubs.⁴² My research has shown that this is also true in a Danish context, even though most pole dancers feel that people over the course of the past five years have become much more accepting of it, which is also what Holland and Attwood find.⁴³ As presented above, the studio owners deal with the outside world's opinions in different ways: Some work hard to dissociate pole from strip clubs while others embrace the origins of pole dance. These two very opposite strategies of handling the prejudice of the “outside world” - drawing on the associations of sport and fitness to legitimize pole dance or voicing women's right to be sexy - are linked to the larger debate of whether or not pole dance is empowering,⁴⁴ which I will not get deeper into in this article. I mention it only in order to discuss the consequences of these two conflicting opinions within the pole dance environment.

In spite of the studio owners having different opinions on how pole dance should be practiced, they also seem to show understanding for the others' perspectives, e.g. Studio Owner B, when she states: “Many places offer classes with heels, and I think that's fine,” or Studio Owner F, who says she appreciates the versatility: “I have no doubt that our expression and our style and our relation to pole is completely different. Luckily.” But even though the studio owners say they accept each other's positions and ways of doing pole dance, sometimes their actions seem to speak otherwise. Both Allen and Jacenta Bahri have found that the different opinions of what is right and wrong when it comes to pole dance tend to create conflict within the pole dance community.⁴⁵ My research also has examples of conflicts between studio

⁴² See for example: Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*; Holland and Attwood, “Chapter 10. Keeping Fit in 6” Heels”.

⁴³ Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*; Holland and Attwood, “Chapter 10. Keeping Fit in 6” Heels”.

⁴⁴ This topic is present in most all of the presented literature on pole dance. Several studies find that the pole dancers themselves experience pole dance as empowering, but drawing on different feminist theories some researchers accept this experience while others question how pole dance can be empowering. See for example: Allen, “Poles Apart?”; Bahri, ““Fun, Fitness, Fantasy””; Donaghue, Kurz and Whitehead, “Spinning the Pole”; Gómez-Ramírez, “Swinging Around the Pole”; Hamilton, “The Poles are in”; Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*.

⁴⁵ Allen, “Poles Apart?”; Bahri, ““Fun, Fitness, Fantasy””.

owners. Both internationally and in Denmark, the studio owners have a hard time cooperating, which becomes apparent in the not so successful attempts at creating national and international pole dance federations. In Denmark it seems that the studio owners can agree on wanting the best for the pole dance culture as a whole, but they can't seem to agree on much else apart from this, which is in line with what Holland writes, when she points out that each studio has their own way of doing things.⁴⁶ These differences in opinion, then, are getting in the way collaboration between the studios and moreover, these "internal" disagreements may affect the public image of pole dance. A question this all fosters is: How can these conflicting opinions co-exist in the pole dance environment without undermining each other? It is not a question, I have the answer to, but it is a dilemma, which it would be interesting to find solutions to in order to figure out how pole dance can come together and work to change its public image and help people understand and accept the versatility of the different genres of pole dance.

Different Genres of Pole Dance—What about the Men?

During the process of analysis, several other parameters than the ones presented above were taken into consideration in order to compare the pole studios. One of these concerned whether or not the studios allow men to join the classes. This parameter ties into a greater gender issue, which is not the focus of this article, but here it will briefly be discussed how this issue connects to the different genres of pole dance.

In the studios I visited only Studio D didn't allow men. The rest allowed men, but not very many men (only a few in each studio) trained there. The argument for not allowing men in the classes is usually based on the assumption that it would make the women feel unsafe: "It is important to me to protect the girls that are here so they feel safe and okay" (Studio Owner D). This is in turn based on the assumption that men per se have a sexual interest in women and look at and judge their bodies, an assumption that many hold, which is exemplified by Student D5's statement: "We run around in short shorts and I don't think I would feel as free if half of them were men because I would wonder 'are they looking at me now?'" Following this line of argument, this parameter ties into the previously presented parameters: Studios that are trying to sportify pole dance welcome men and women equally (as in any other form of sport or fitness), while studios who believe pole dance is inherently sexy don't feel it is appropriate for men to be present while the women explore their sexual expression.

Another parameter, which ties into this one, was also considered: the furnishing of the studios. The studios that do the more sportified version of pole dance often try to show in their decor that it is a gender neutral space, as for example Studio Owner A, who deliberately avoided the color pink (which is associated with femininity): "Well it was important for me that it wasn't too girly, because it's a sport. We didn't want to do it in high heels and all that, just not too girly. We wanted it more neutral." On the other hand, the studios that represent the more sexualized version of pole dance often signal this through what is societally considered feminine including heavy use of pink colors and glitter as well as decorative candles and flowers.

The question of gender adds another dimension to the understanding of pole dance but also complicates it. In this study, Studio A and B are sportified and Studio C and F are dance/art

⁴⁶ Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*.

oriented, but all four studios welcome men, and have a neutral decor. Studio D is dance/art oriented but somewhat leans against the sexualized version of pole dance, doesn't allow men and has a feminine, pink decor. The most interesting, perhaps, is Studio E, which is focused on tricks, but encourages sexiness and high heels, welcomes men but the studio is covered in pink paint, glitter, and pink neon lights. This issue fosters more questions than can be answered in the scope of this article, but men's position in the pole dance culture and the framework pole dance provides for performing gender it is an interesting subject to study to further understand the pole dance culture.

Concluding Remarks

This study has found many similarities in the practice of pole dance in Denmark compared to the practice described in the international research on pole dance, but it has also highlighted the great versatility in the way pole dance is practiced and identified specific parameters which affects the practice of pole dance. The findings lead to a classification of three overall genres in pole dance, and while there may be many more, this still adds nuances to the dualistic model formerly presented in pole dance research.⁴⁷ While this study of the pole dance culture has added to the understanding of pole dance, it has also opened up further questions about the culture, which need to be explored in order to gain a better understanding of the complex inner workings of the pole dance environment. Pole dance is not a fixed, stable phenomenon – it is constantly developing. Further exploring men's position and opportunities in pole dance may open more doors to the understanding of certain aspects of the pole dance culture. Also the matter of how the balance between the studio owners' understanding of how pole dance should be practiced and the students' preferences will affect the development of pole dance is interesting to explore further. One studio owner in the study eerily dares to question the future of pole dance, and her reason for posing the question relates to the balance mentioned above. She feels that she is already beginning to see a tendency towards pole dance no longer being “new and exciting” and that people are getting curious about other things. She also points out that the competition is growing and suggests that it may be necessary to take action, which many studios in Copenhagen have already started to do by offering other types of classes – both on apparatus (e.g. aerial silks, chair dance, or aerial hoop/lyra⁴⁸) and off (e.g. yoga, ballet, or twerking). This is maybe not surprising taking into consideration the context of a constantly changing society, where the general trend is that the fitness industry has to constantly reinvent itself to keep up with the demand for something new and exciting,⁴⁹ and the competition for the time, attention, money of the consumers is continuously expanding,⁵⁰ but it does leave the pole culture with a challenge to find a way of maintaining the integrity of pole dance while keeping it in business - but who knows, maybe this “threat” against pole dance as a phenomenon may be a push towards better collaboration within the pole dance community.

⁴⁷ Gómez-Ramírez, “Swinging Around the Pole”; Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*.

⁴⁸ Aerial silks is a form of aerial acrobatics done in a special fabric suspended from the ceiling. Aerial hoop, also called lyra, is a form of aerial acrobatics done in a circular steel apparatus suspended from the ceiling.

⁴⁹ Roberta Sassatelli, *Fitness Culture. Gyms and the Commercialisation of Discipline and Fun* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), viii.

⁵⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000).

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Contents

EDITORIAL

- Vertical Exploration Foundation: Building Research to Support and Promote Pole and Aerial Movement Arts** 6
Jennifer Baldwin, Senior Editor

ARTICLES

- Looking for the Links: Pole Dancing as it Developed in the Western World** 12
Selena Felien
- The Practice of Pole Dance as a Leisure Activity in Denmark** 26
Andorra Jensen

REVIEWS

- International Pole Convention, Review and Future Plans** 43
Colleen Jolly
- 2015 Aerial Dance Festival, Boulder, Colorado** 47
Sarah Milosch

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

- Working Disciplinary Bibliography** 49
Jennifer Baldwin
- Call for Papers** 52
Call for Reviewers 52